

ON RACE AND POWER: TWO DECADES OF REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ‘OTHER’ IN
DISNEY 3D ANIMATION FILMS

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Abstract

The Walt Disney Company has achieved iconic status, following its widespread and sustained influence. Its products have become a major part of popular culture, attracting significant viewership from different categories of audiences around the globe. This study examined the representation of the ‘other’ (people of colour) in Disney’s 3D animation films. It adopted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of 3 Disney 3D animation films that won the Academy Awards (Oscars) in the animation film category from 2016– 2020. Findings from this study suggest that Disney is shifting from the stereotypical, prejudiced and particularly belittling representations of people of colour to more nuanced ones. The study found that characters of colour, males especially, are now being portrayed in more diverse, prominent and positive ways. These emerging patterns of representation counter earlier assertions that the film company’s negative portrayals of this category of people have not changed much over the years. However, while it would seem that people of colour are now portrayed in multiple, varied and particularly positive ways in Disney 3D animation films, traces of stereotypical portrayals, especially of women of colour were also observed. This study argues that these stereotypical representations, as well as the invisibility of women of colour, are aimed towards sustaining existing hegemonic structures. Nevertheless, the study concludes that a strong dissension is happening in 3D animation films dedicated to people of colour, as co-written and co-directed by persons of colour themselves who seem to focus on complex, non-stereotypical representations of this category of people to undermine problematic ones. To build on the emerging changes in the representation of people of colour, this study advocates for the production of more big-budget 3D animation feature films depicting both the lived and beautiful experiences of people of colour within and outside of Hollywood. It also recommends that Black women’s rights groups should advocate for more inclusion of women of colour in 3D animation films towards the achievement of gender parity on screen.

Keywords: *Disney; people of colour; power; race; representation; 3D animation films*

Introduction

The Walt Disney Company has achieved iconic status, following its widespread and sustained influence. Its products have become a major part of popular culture, attracting significant viewership from different categories of audiences around the globe (Dundes, 2019). Scholars have noted that the power of the Disney brand has heightened in recent years and have argued about the messages it conveys through its products. On the one hand, there are assertions that Disney productions are just entertaining and enlightening, helping the audience navigate through difficult situations or embrace progressive thinking (Brydon, 2009; Hine,

England, Lopreore, Horgan & Hartwell, 2018; Zurcher, Webb & Robinson, 2018). On the other hand, there are insinuations that Disney films function as tools wielded by the Western elite to shape the views of and towards the less empowered, ultimately reinforcing hegemonic power structures, especially concerning race relations (Anjirbag, 2018; Hodge, 2018; Perea, 2018).

Scholarship that has uncovered how Hollywood films, in general, serve as tools to reinforce dominance, refers to instances of negative and stereotypical portrayals, especially of people of colour. Within these stereotypes, the most recurring seems to be, for example, references to the black woman as angry or sassy or wicked jezebel; the black man as a criminal, clown, or buffoon; the Latino as a drug lord; and the Middle-east or North-African Muslim as a terrorist (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Berry, 2009; Lembcke, 2017; Terry, 2018; Edwards, 2019). Scholars have noted that, over time, negative and stereotypical portrayals can lead to the stigmatization of the people from the races so portrayed and foster negative social attitudes towards them, including stereotyping in real life (Fouts, Callan, Piasentin & Lawson, 2006; Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009; Banjo & Jennings, 2016; Turkmen, 2016).

What can be essentially deduced from the arguments on how race has been portrayed in Disney productions is the connection between representation, stereotyping, race, power and hegemony. While Representation (the act) refers to the making of meaning through signs (3D animation films in this case), stereotypes (the technique) refer to the fixed and mostly inaccurate labeling of people. In addition, race (difference) is the reason for the representation, while power is the ability to represent people or things in a certain way, and hegemony (social dominance) is the ultimate aim (Hall, 1997).

The emergence of 3D (three-dimensional) animation feature films opens a new doorway for scholarship on media representation of people of colour. Three-dimensional (3D) animation feature films are films that have been rendered in Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) where characters appear real but in captivating computer-simulated forms. These films are of interest in this study due to the wide popularity they have gained in recent times. As products of big mass media conglomerates like Disney, 3D animation films have been widely viewed around the world, have grossed highly, won numerous awards, and seem to be one of the most preferred formats for storytelling in today's media world where super-advanced computer technology holds sway. These films are also of interest in this study because they are colourful as well as exciting, making them easy platforms where negative racial portrayals can be hidden or normalized.

Notably, public discourse and studies around the representation of people of colour in films have mostly focused on non-animated or live-action films and then the 2D animation films produced during the Disney Renaissance era (a period from 1989–1999), with a few studies on 3D animation films. Stated differently, considering the recent unprecedented increase in the production and popularity of 3D animation films, there seems to be no corresponding number of research findings on how people of colour have been portrayed in this film genre, to explore what may have changed or have continued to recur over the years. This study is a contribution in this area. Underpinned by the representation theory and social constructivism, it is an attempt to empirically assess how people of colour have been represented in 3D animation films to find out what has changed over the years and what has remained recurring. This study is imperative as children can fall within an uncritical audience for whom film companies such as Disney produce many of the animation films they are exposed to. Some adults who enjoy watching may be uncritical too. It is to be noted that big animation film companies are making extra efforts to reach their African audience. Disney, for instance, launched a Disney Africa channel in 2014, bringing the popular television channel closer to its audience in Africa (Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2018). The need then arises to continually examine the content of 3D animation films produced by Disney. It is expected that human rights/ civil rights groups that have focused on the empowerment of people of colour would benefit from this study by way of gaining some insights into how people of colour are currently being portrayed in the media. Evidence of negative portrayal and underrepresentation of people of colour be the basis for advocacies and policies for positive and balanced representation.

Objectives of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to examine the representation of ‘characters of colour’ in Disney’s 3D animation films produced from the year 2016. In other words, the study is a textual analysis of the content of Disney’s 3D animation films. Therefore, the specific objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To ascertain the visibility of ‘Characters of colour’ in Disney’s 3D animation films produced from 2016 –2020.
2. To explore the dominant patterns of representations of ‘Characters of colour’ in Disney’s 3D animation films produced from 2016 –2020.
3. To compare patterns of representations of ‘Characters of colour’ in Disney’s 3D animation films produced from 2016 –2020 and in those produced earlier.

Disney and Representations of the ‘Other’

Scholars such as Hall (1997), Fu`rsich (2010) and Ayisi and Brylla (2013) opine that the negative portrayals of people of colour in the contemporary media environment find their roots in historically established racist imaginaries as found in colonial literature. The aforementioned scholars also argue that the negative portrayals can also be traced to white explorers’ narratives, for example, slave imaginary or Orientalism and other demeaning concepts, where people of colour are depicted as the ‘other’, as lower beings (fetish, lazy and primitive) and as different from people from the West.

Many cultural studies scholars inside and outside the field of mass communication followed Edward Said’s (1978) work on the historical contingencies of problematic western ‘othering’ to use media texts such as newspaper articles, television programmes, or advertisements to show evidence of this ‘othering’ (stereotypical portrayals of people based on difference). The representations of the ‘other’ by Disney, in particular, have attracted research in the tradition of critical-cultural media studies.

Findings indicate that racial and cultural stereotypes have persisted over time in the production of animation film companies like Disney films. The ‘other’, people of colour, in particular, has been both misrepresented and underrepresented. King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) argue that in such movies as *The Lion King*, for example, the hyenas who speak in an inner-city African-American dialect are presented as treacherous, and evil Uncle Scar’s mane is black. Scholars such as King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) are of the view that the attitude of big animation film production companies such as Disney towards ‘people of colour’ has not changed much over the years. The assertions of King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) were substantiated by findings from a study conducted by van Wormer and Juby (2015) to examine the portrayal of race in *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Findings from the study showed that African communities were portrayed as slim and poverty-stricken. Reference was made to a desolate dark area, where the scavenger hyenas live –an allusion of images of the American inner black-dominated cities. The study also found that the voices of the hyenas are provided by actors with urban African American and Latino accents for emphasis. Furthermore, findings from the study showed that in *The Lion King* the character Rafiki (voiced by the African American actor Robert Guillaume) acts foolish and at times half-crazed – stereotypes that have been used historically in the popular culture to demean African Americans. In addition, his main role in the film is to help preserve and restore the lions’ hegemony – or the circle of life.

In *Pocahontas*, as findings from the study conducted by van Wormer and Juby (2015) showed, native Americans were portrayed as primitive people and as people in dire need of Western civilization. *Pocahontas*, the main character in the animated feature film was also sexualized in a way that suggests that people of colour are to conform to the Western standards of beauty to be deemed beautiful. Regarding *The Princess and the Frog*, van Wormer and Juby (2015) opined that the animation film (which starred Disney’s first black princess) was an attempt by Disney to vanquish all the charges of racism leveled against it. To avoid

stereotyping and to be politically correct, the heroine, Tiana's image was not overly sexualized, and the young woman was shown to be resourceful and highly independent. However, Tiana was turned into a frog in a way that presents the African tradition of voodooism as evil. As noted by the researchers, this does not adequately represent this tradition and promotes a negative image of African culture.

Rose (2018) further points to Disney's images of the lazy, African American crows and illiterate, dark-skinned labourers in *Dumbo*; Sebastian, the work-shy Jamaican crab in *The Little Mermaid*; and the darker-skinned "evil" Arabs in *Aladdin*. Rose also refers to *Song of the South*, Disney's 1946 musical depicting happy black slaves singing with cartoon birds on a southern plantation, which was condemned by The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) for "dangerously glorified picture of slavery".

Notably, since the 2D times of films such as *Lion King* (1994) which have provided most of the shreds of evidence that have buttressed the assertions of scholars on the negative portrayals of 'the other' in animation films, there have been numerous high-grossing and award-winning 3D animation films from Disney such as *Frozen* (2013), *Finding Dory* (2016), *Zootopia* (2016), *Moana* (2016), *Incredibles 2* (2018), *The Croods: A New Age* (2020) and *Soul* (2020) to mention a few. Studies on Disney's representation of race have mostly explored the content of 2D animation films produced before the year 2001. Considering the recent unprecedented increase in the production and popularity of 3D animation films, there seems to be no corresponding number of research findings on how the 'other', characters of colour in particular have been portrayed, hence the need for the present study.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. It involved textual analysis using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an approach in qualitative content analysis. This study was interested in the meanings, contexts and intentions of the communications to be analysed, and qualitative content analysis offers a suitable tool for such analysis (Elo & Kynga, 2007). In CDA, language is seen as a discourse; a socially constructed meaning structure that delimits what can be said and what cannot be said and determines how spaces in which new statements can be made are created (Fairclough, 1989). In this study, therefore, signs (words, pictures, etc.) employed in 3D animation films in representing the 'other' were analysed within the context of the social discourses of which this representation is part of. In this process, it was expected that the ideological and power circumstances that produced the signs would be revealed.

This study focused on three (3) Disney 3D animation films that won the Academy Awards (Oscars) in the animation film category from year 2016– 2020 (*Incredibles 2*, *Zootopia* and *Soul*). These award-winning films were selected due to the finesse and resources invested in their production, earning them the Oscar Awards and the accompanying global reach, financial success and popularity.

Table 1.
Films Selected for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

S/N	Year of Release	Film
1.	2016	Zootopia
2.	2018	Incredibles 2
3.	2020	Soul

The unit of analysis for this study was the film scenes. These are the various sections of the 3D animation films showing a particular location and continuous-time made up of different shots. In going about the qualitative content analysis (CDA), the researcher looked out for certain discursive (i.e. meaning-making) elements in the selected 3D animation films. The following elements were involved: lexical choices,

presence versus absence, juxtapositions (binaries) and inter-textuality. The researcher watched the selected films to observe and record representations and the underlying power and ideological dynamics. He was aided in this process by the CDA guide. Data extracted via qualitative content analysis were thematically presented and analysed.

Synopses of Selected Films

The synopsis of each of the selected films is presented below. It is a summary of each film to give an insight into its plot and theme.

- ***Zootopia***

Zootopia is a 2016 Disney 3D film directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore and co-directed by Jared Bush. The film tells the story of Rabbit Judy Hopps from rural Bunnyburrow who fulfills her childhood dream of becoming a police officer in urban Zootopia. Despite being the academy valedictorian, Judy is assigned parking duty by water buffalo, Chief Bogo, who does not recognize her talent. On her first day on the job, Judy is tricked by a con artist fox duo, Nick Wilde and Finnick.

Later, Mrs. Otterton unexpectedly barges into Bogo's office and begs for someone to help her find her husband Emmitt, who is missing alongside 13 other animals. Judy volunteers and Bogo reluctantly agrees to let her go on the mission. However, he tells Judy that she would resign if she fails after 48 hours. After ascertaining that Nick was the last to see missing Emmitt, Judy blackmails him into helping her by secretly recording his confession about evading taxes. Judy and Nick later track Emmitt to a limousine owned by crime boss Mr. Big who reveals that Emmitt suddenly went 'savage' and attacked Mr. Big's chauffeur, Manchas. Judy and Nick visit Manchas, a black jaguar, who tells them that Emmitt yelled about 'Night Howlers' before attacking him. Manchas soon turns savage and chases the two. Later, Judy traps Manchas. She then calls the Zootopia Police Department (ZPD) for help but Manchas escapes before the policemen arrive.

Bogo demands that Judy turn in her badge, but Nick reminds him that Judy still has 10 hours to complete her assignment. At City Hall, Judy and Nick are offered access to Zootopia's traffic cameras by Bellwether. They discover Manchas was captured by wolves whom Judy concludes are the 'Night Howlers'. After trailing the wolves, Judy and Nick are able to locate the missing animals who are now all 'savages' imprisoned at Cliffside Asylum. Their capture is ordered by Zootopia's mayor, Leodore Lionheart who is trying to ascertain the cause of their strange behaviour. Bellwether later becomes the new mayor after Lionheart and the asylum staff are arrested for false imprisonment. Judy is praised for solving the puzzle and asks Nick to join the ZPD as her partner. However, Nick (himself biologically a predator) angrily turns her down after Judy is lured by a reporter to admit that predatory instinct is behind the mysterious rampage of savages. Judy's comments cause fear and discrimination against predators throughout Zootopia.

Overwhelmed by guilt, Judy resigns and returns to Bunnyburrow. At home, she learns that 'Night Howlers' are the crocus bulbs stolen by Weaselton which contain a neurotoxin that makes mammals behave like savages. Judy returns to Zootopia and reconciles with Nick. After Judy, Nick, and Mr. Big interrogate Weaselton, he admits he was working for a ram named Doug. The team finds Doug in a hidden laboratory, where he manufactures a serum made from the Night Howler to be shot at predators using a dart gun.

Later, Judy and Nick are able to obtain a serum gun as evidence, but before they can reach the ZPD, Bellwether intercepts them, revealing that she is the mastermind behind a movement that projects prey as superior to predators. Bellwether shoots Nick with the toxic serum and calls the ZPD for help. She hopes they will witness a 'savage' Nick (who is pretending to be a savage) devour Judy. However, Nick and Judy had earlier replaced the serum with blueberries she got from home. Nick later reveals he is only acting, while Judy reveals she has recorded Bellwether's confession. Bellwether and her accomplices are arrested by ZPD, while Lionheart, who is still in prison, denies knowing about her plans. The infected predators are cured and

Judy rejoins the ZPD. Later, Nick graduates from the Zootopia Police Academy as the city's first fox police officer and works as Judy's partner.

- ***Incredibles 2***

Incredibles 2 is a 2018 Disney 3D animation film written and directed by Brad Bird. It is the sequel to *The Incredibles* (2004) and the second full-length installment of the franchise. The film continues from the events of the previous film. In the opening scene, The Incredibles and Frozone fight 'The Underminer' and are able to stop him from destroying City Hall. However, they are not able to stop him from carting away with money from a bank. The failure of The Incredibles (The Parr family) gives the government a season to close a Superhero Relocation Program, denying the Parrs and other superheroes access to finance.

Later on, wealthy businessman Winston Deavor and his sister Evelyn, who run DevTech, a giant telecommunications company, propose secret missions for superheroes with the aim of recording and publicizing them to help the superheroes regain public trust. Mr. Winston chooses Elastigirl (Helen) over Mr. Incredible (Bob), her husband for the initial missions because she causes fewer damages, while Bob is left at home to take care of the children (Violet, Dash, and Jack-Jack).

During one of her missions, Elastigirl encounters a supervillain named 'Screenslaver', who displays hypnotic images on TV screens. After preventing him from destroying a passenger train and assassinating an ambassador, Elastigirl tracks 'Screenslaver' to an apartment building and unmasks him to find out that he is a pizza deliveryman who claims he cannot recall what he did.

While celebrating Screenslaver's arrest, Winston Deavor hosts a summit of world leaders to legalize superheroes. Later, Elastigirl finds out that the arrested pizza man is not 'Screenslaver' but was under the control of hypnotic goggles. Evelyn Deavor forces the goggles on Elastigirl and reveals that she is 'Screenslaver'. Evelyn (unlike her brother who believed their father died because there was a lack of superheroes) explains that she has had a grudge against superheroes since her father was killed by attackers while trying to call superheroes for help instead of hiding. She plans to sabotage her brother's summit by causing problems that would irreparably tarnish the image of all superheroes. Evelyn lures Bob into a trap and sends a group of hypnotized superheroes to subdue the Parr children who have come to help out. Frozone (The Incredibles' partner and friend) tries to protect them but is overpowered.

Violet, Dash, and Jack-Jack later escape in a refurbished supercar once owned by their father and reach Winston's yacht where the summit is being held. On board the yacht the hypnotized Mr. Incredible, Elastigirl, and Frozone broadcast a vindictive manifesto designed to paint superheroes as a threat, intending to also subdue the ship's crew and cause havoc. Jack-Jack later removes Elastigirl's hypnotizing goggles and she, in turn, frees Mr. Incredible and Frozone. The Incredibles and Frozone release the other hypnotized superheroes, and all of them collaborate to prevent the yacht from crashing into the city. Elastigirl apprehends Evelyn who attempts to escape in a private jet. Superheroes later regain legal status.

- ***Soul***

Soul is a 2020 Disney 3D animation film directed by Pete Docter and co-directed by Kemp Powers. It tells the story of Joe Gardner, a pianist and middle school music teacher who lives in New York City and dreams of being a professional jazz musician. When Joe is offered a job as a full-time teacher, his mother urges him to accept it so he can earn more money. Later, Joe gets information about an opportunity to work with jazz legend Dorothea Williams who is impressed with his piano playing after an audition and hires him for a night's show. However, as Joe heads off, he falls into a manhole out of excitement.

Joe later finds himself as a soul heading to the 'Great Beyond'. Unwilling to die, he tries to escape but finds himself in the 'Great Before', where counsellors prepare unborn souls for life with the help of mentor souls. Mistaken for a mentor soul, Joe is assigned to train 22, a cynical soul who has always lived in the Great

Before because she dislikes the Earth. When 22 discovers that Joe is in a coma at a hospital, she agrees to let him help find her 'spark' to complete her badge and then hand it over to him so that he can return home.

Joe returns to Earth but accidentally takes 22 with him, Joe entering the body of a therapy cat and 22 entering Joe's body. They later find Moonwind (at his day job as a sign twirler). Moonwind agrees to meet them later at the jazz club to help restore Joe to his body. In the meantime, 22 becomes comfortable in Joe's body, enjoying every moment, especially her interaction with Joe's friends. Meanwhile, a workaholic accountant named Terry, whose job is to count souls headed to the Great Beyond, finds out that Joe is missing. He heads to Earth to send Joe to the Great Beyond and complete the count.

As the day ends, Joe and 22 cooperate with Moonwind to return Joe to his body. However, after Joe tells 22 that her experiences were not purposes, 22 disagrees with him and flees to find her spark, while Joe chases her. As they run, Terry traps them both and brings them back to the Great Before. 22 realizes her badge is filled out, but Joe tries to convince her that it was because of his traits, arguing that she has not truly found her spark. A disgruntled 22 throws the badge at Joe and disappears into the zone. One of the counsellors tries to convince Joe that a spark is not a soul's purpose in life, but Joe refuses to believe this and uses 22's badge to return to Earth.

Joe performs in the night's show and it is a success. However, Joe is not as satisfied as he realizes that his life has not significantly changed even after fulfilling his dream. He looks at the objects that 22 collected while in his body and recalls the moments they had enjoyed together. He realises that these experiences have given 22 her spark. Joe later finds his way to the zone. He intends to return 22's badge but discovers she has become a lost soul. He chases her down and shows her a maple seed she had collected to remind her of the time she enjoyed while on Earth. He has realized that a spark is not a soul's purpose, but an indication that it is ready to live. Joe's actions revive 22 and he returns her badge and escorts her out of the Great Before for her journey to Earth. As Joe prepares to enter the Great Beyond, a counsellor intercepts him and offers him another chance to live as a reward for inspiring 22 to live. Joe later returns to his body on Earth and starts the next day determined to enjoy every moment of his life.

Analysis of Discourses

In analysing the films, the researcher looked out for discourses that emerged dominant in the representation of people of colour. The discourses, as observed by the researcher, were as follows:

- i. The discourse of white superiority
- ii. The discourse of the invisibility of women of colour
- iii. The discourse of the ideal white American nuclear family
- iv. The discourse of racial stereotypes
- v. The discourse of the good-evil binary
- vi. The discourse of the empowered person of colour

The Discourse of White Superiority

The dominant theme of white superiority emerged in the films that featured both characters of colour and white characters as analysed. In these portrayals of superiority which are reminiscent of the Disney renaissance era (from 1989–1999), in films like *The Lion King*, the whites are portrayed as superior to characters of colour. The techniques employed by the producers and screenwriters of the animation films, who are dominantly white, to propagate the ideology of white superiority include playing white characters in lead, protagonist roles.

The portrayal of white superiority is evident in *Zootopia* and *The Incredibles*, two Disney 3D animation films that featured both white characters and characters of colour. In *Zootopia*, a white character, Lt. Judy Hopps (as voiced by white actress Ginnifer Goodwin) played the lead role where she shined brightly as a

superhero, while characters of colour played supporting roles where they were relegated to the shadows of Judy's shine. Interestingly, Judy's brilliance and bravery was a brick wall against the notorious activities of characters of colour like Finnick (voiced by an African-American actor, Tommy Lister Jr.). Judy was also able to solve the crime/terror puzzle in Zootopia which had defied every effort made by Police Chief, Bogo, another character of colour voiced by African-American actor, Idris Elba. Additionally, the team of super heroes which also consisted of Frozone (a character of colour voiced by an African-American actor, Samuel Jackson) was led by Bob (Mr. Incredible) as voiced by Craig. T. Nelson, a white actor.

Racism as perpetuated in the Western world and in all frames of racial relations between whites and persons of colour is hinged on the idea of white supremacy (Ayisi & Brylla, 2013; Lester, 2010; Pellerin, 2012). Ayisi and Brylla (2013) assert that the media output of Western societies consistently constructs cinematic images of African life and society that are reductive and even offensive. They add that as a result of Africans being perceived and portrayed as inferior to Whites, there tends to be an absence of culturally affirming representations and a consequent acceptance of the images of inferiority and superiority of Whites as true over time. What the ideology of white supremacy has done over the years, as Machin and Mayr (2012) would argue, is to obscure the reality of an unequal society, preventing us from seeing alternatives. This is perhaps why the idea of a black Spiderman, for instance, would seem fascinating, and even strange, and worse still, ridiculous, because over time, the iconic superhero, has been known to be White, like most superheroes that have grazed the global media screen over the years.

The Discourse of the Invisibility of Women of Colour

Women of colour were invisible in the analyzed 3D animation films. As also observed by film critic Monique Jones (Puentes, 2018), Frozone's wife in *The Incredibles 2* is never seen, only her ranting is heard from the background for about a minute in a film with almost 2 hours of screen time. However, on the contrary, white women were visible and played important roles that tell of an empowered status. Notably, when superhero advocate, Winston Deavor sets out to legalize super heroes, he does not want Mr. Incredible or Frozone to be the public face of the movement. He wants Elastigirl. He thinks Elastigirl (also Helen as voiced by white actress Holly Hunter) will be good at catching the bad guys while keeping everything less messy. Elastigirl is able to fight crime effectively, while leaving her husband (Bob; Mr Incredible) to take care of the kids. In addition, another female white character, Edna Mode is portrayed as smart and inventive enough to solve the infinite problems caused by baby Jack-Jack. Edna is also good at designing superhero suits and is portrayed as an ideal woman who is a good baby-sitter and holds parenting in high regard, as evident in one of her lines, "Done properly, parenting is a heroic act."

The Discourse of the Ideal White American Nuclear Family

In the films analyzed, Disney seems to present the idea of an ideal white American nuclear family in contrast to other family compositions or realities. They seem to take ideological positions on what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' parenting or parameters against which every parental activity or behaviour should be judged.

It would seem that since *Finding Nemo* (2003), Disney has increased the number of films featuring young protagonists with loving mothers such as in *Incredibles 2* (2018). A critical look at mothering in Disney movies reveals a set of parameters to define what mothering should be in a culture or specific discourse, what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' mothering, and who is playing the role of an ideal mother (and wife by extension). It would seem that Disney's representations of 'good' mothering are rooted in privilege. They seem focused on the 'white' and upper/middle- class characters. Generally, the scope or expectations of what 'successful' or 'good' mothering appears to be as far as mothering is concerned seems narrow.

In *Incredibles 2*, Disney seems to focus on the complexities of modern parenting and empowered mothering in particular. The film seems to focus on the intact, white, nuclear family. In the film, Helen (Elastigirl) is given the opportunity to work full-time as a superhero while Bob (Mr. Incredible) serves as the primary

caretaker for the children. Though both parents maintain relationships with the children throughout, Helen's screen time is primarily spent fighting the villain and protecting the city while Bob's screen time is primarily spent feeding, teaching, securing, and providing emotional care for the children. For this reason, it can be argued that *Incredibles 2* is rooted in a third-wave mothering paradigm. Here, Disney's narrative is hinged on empowered mothering and role fluidity, as well as a focus on the complexities and competition associated with collaborative parenting.

As in the original *Incredibles* film, each member of the Parr family works as a co-protagonist, with a more evident partnership between the mother (Helen; Elastigirl) and father (Bob; Mr. Incredible). Bob and Helen share equitably in the screen time and fall into what Ebrahim (2014) describes as Pixar's (a subsidiary of Disney) recurring pattern in co-protagonist films where two major characters help each other in achieving a common goal. Evidently, the success achieved by Bob and Helen in saving the family and the world is hinged on gender role fluidity. Helen is able to fight the villain and help restore the dignity of superheroes because Bob is at home caring for the children.

The themes of the empowered mother, role/gender fluidity, as well as collaboration in parental care-giving capture the underlying interests in the portrayal of an ideal white American nuclear family by Disney (as also found in the study conducted by Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2018) and make sense when considering how the family of colour is portrayed somewhat contrastingly. Not only can it be assumed that Disney is trying to present what an ideal family (the good) should be, it seems to also point to what it should not be (the bad). One vivid contrast is the portrayal of Frozone's wife, Honey (In *Incredibles 2*) as confrontational and a housewife who would not support his husband in his superhero role. Honey's attitude also suggests that she may not have also given her children the liberty to be who they want to be, though Disney leaves this to the imagination of the audience by not showing Honey's children. Honey's role is in contrast with the roles of Helen (Elastigirl) in the same film— a supportive superhero wife and mother.

The Discourse of Racial Stereotypes

This study identified some stereotypical representations of people of colour which have been found in Hollywood productions. For example, Frozone's wife, Honey Best (voiced by African-American voice actress, Kimberly Adair Clark) was portrayed as a sassy black woman. The stereotypical portrayal of black women as sassy is evident in Hollywood (Terry, 2018; Gregory, 2010; Lester 2010; Moffitt & Harris, 2014; Parasecoli, 2010). Additionally, in *Zootopia*, an African-American character, Finnick is portrayed as an unrepentant criminal, a stereotype which scholars such as Edwards (2019) have also found in Hollywood. Rather than debunking the stereotypes connected with Africans, and blacks generally, Disney's representations, in the aforementioned instances, served to reinforce them. The next sub-heading, 'the good-bad binary', analyses how stereotypes can serve to assert and reinforce an ideology of white supremacy.

The Discourse of the Good–Bad Binary

The representation of a binary opposition gives insights into what stereotyping aims to achieve. Findings from this study show traces of Disney's use (in the films written by whites especially) of binary opposition and stereotype as strategies in representing 'whiteness' and 'colour'. In the *Zootopia*, for instance, the 'good' detective work of the fearless Judy (voiced by white actress Ginnifer Goodwin) is juxtaposed with the activities of the criminal and ill-tempered Finnick (voiced by African-American actor, Tommy Lister Jr.). These portrayals do not stand in isolation and that is where the meanings can be drawn from. As argued by Hall (1997), people who are in anyway different from the majority "them" or the 'other' rather than 'us' are frequently exposed to a binary form of representation. Here, as Hall would opine, the focus is on representing the 'other' using sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes, for instance, good/bad. This suggests that meaning depends on the difference between opposites. This would align with the deconstruction theory of

Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, which argues that every word makes meaning only via its opposing (negating) relation to another word (Derrida, 1997). Stereotyping is used as a tool for the symbolic fixation of boundaries, a device for maintaining a social order. It is used to create a demarcation between, as Hall (1997) would put it, 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable', normal' and the 'deviant', 'Us and Them'. It is in the sustenance of this demarcation that power or dominance is maintained.

The Discourse of the Empowered Person of Colour

However, the period between 2016–2020 marked the emergence of a somewhat preponderant portrayal of the empowered person of colour. Within this period, Disney did not only feature more characters of colour in lead roles but portrayed them positively. Prominent among these characters is Joe Gardner (voiced by African-American actor, Jamie Foxx) in *Soul* (2020), who is the first black character to play a lead, protagonist role in a Disney 3D animation film. He is portrayed as a kind, intelligent, stylish, ambitious, talented and resilient teacher and jazz musician. Another major character, Lucius, whose superhero name is Frozone (though appearing first in *The Incredibles*, 2004) plays a more prominent role in *Incredibles 2*. He was portrayed as a superhero and a reliable friend to the Parr family. When Violet Parr notices that her father, Bob was having challenges controlling Baby Jack-Jack's powers, she says, "We should call Lucius... I am going to call Lucius". This is contrary to previous portrayals of persons of colour as untrustworthy, treacherous and conniving (King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2010). Frozone also alludes to an emerging trend of black superheroes in a Hollywood film industry that had mostly presented white superheroes.

The period between 2016–2020 marked a level of deviation from Disney stereotypical depictions of 'people of colour' to more empowered and nuanced depictions in which every person of colour is portrayed as existing as an individual who is unique in his or her way. This new trend of representation serves the interest of 'people of colour' in the sense that it would give them a sense of belonging and make them feel empowered in a multi-racial society –one enmeshed in unequal power relations. It could also make people see them in a positive light, offering them the springboard to reach higher levels in a society where they had often played second fiddle.

However, this changing pattern of the portrayal of people of colour also serves the profit interest of the White dominated Disney Company. Due to the increasing calls for inclusivity and fairer treatment of people of colour, Disney seems to have shifted focus to portrayals that would appeal to a large number of audience for profit motives. Here, casting people of colour in lead roles in a film can appeal to a mainstream audience who could find 'difference on screen' fascinating, leading to the film's success. As noted by Harris (2018), box office receipts continue to indicate that audiences are ready to see, and are able to relate to people of colour on screen, as evidenced by *Black Panther* (2018) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). This study argues that the success of *Soul* is yet another evidence that the audience are eager to see a different set of people on screen. The 3D animation film drew remarkable attention, accolades and financial success. Apart from winning the Academy Awards for Best Animated Picture in 2020 (in addition to other numerous awards) it had over 1 billion minutes of watch time (between December 21 to December 27, 2020) and became the highest-grossing Disney releases in numerous countries by February, 2021 (Porter, 2021; Tartaglione, 2021). What could be deduced here is a situation where a profit-driven media industry aims at large mainstream audiences who are perceived or are found to now be interested in more nuanced portrayals of diverse characters. People of colour who are now also preferred are featured, and the need to initiate more complex representations of this category of people to undermine problematic ones now seems to be getting some focus.

Discussion

Generally, findings from this study suggest that Disney is shifting from the stereotypical and particularly belittling representations of people of colour which seemed to be the hallmark of their productions from 1989-1999 (Artz, 2004; Nelson, 2016) to more nuanced representations. First, characters of colour are becoming more visible (getting more screen time and playing lead roles) in 3D animation films. Following a series of 3D animation films focused on white characters and storylines that seem to align with their successful renaissance era (films such as *Finding Nemo*, *Frozen*, and *Toy Story 3*, to name a few) Disney shifted to 3D animation films where people of colour featured prominently from year 2016–2020. Quite notable within this period is *Soul*, Disney animation's first Black-led feature—after years of presenting mostly White superheroes and inanimate objects.

Back to the issue of the patterns of representations, this study found that characters of colour, males especially, are now being portrayed in more diverse, prominent and positive ways. For the first time in the history of Disney, for instance, there is a black superhero in the person of Frozone (in *Incredibles 2*) who actively plays his crime-fighting and lifesaving roles without being dented by negative stereotypes associated with African-Americans. This is in contrast with Disney animated films produced before the year 2001 where characters of colour were portrayed as treacherous, foolish, subservient, lazy, illiterate and low-life (King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2010; van Wormer & Juby, 2015; Rose, 2018).

Notably, the Disney 3D animation films that focused on alternative representations of people of colour are part of a stream of recent Hollywood films (like *Black Panther*) from big film production companies that seem to empower this category of people. This recent focus of prominent film production companies like Disney to change the rather debased status of 'people of colour' in Hollywood seems to be a response to calls that have culminated in social movements like 'Black Lives Matter'. These movements and the general calls against racism in all ramifications seem to have forced the industry to address its diversity and representation problems and make immediate changes. This result counters the assertions of scholars such as King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) that the attitude of big animation film production companies like Disney towards people of colour has not changed much over the years. One explanation for the positive trends surrounding the portrayal of characters of colour, as also asserted by Smith, Choueiti, Pieper, Yao, Case and Choi (2019) is found behind the camera, where screenwriters and directors of colour are emerging (for example, Kemp Powers, the co-director of *Soul* and the first African-American to co-direct a Disney animation film). The presence of creative personnel of colour can be said to have contributed to the increase in characters of colour on screen and the positive images portrayed of them.

While it would seem that people of colour are now portrayed in multiple, varied and particularly positive ways in Disney 3D animation films (especially those released from 2016), traces of stereotypical portrayals, especially of women of colour, can still be observed. The woman of colour who is still being portrayed as sassy, and often excluded entirely, seem to be at the other end (the 'bad' end) of a recent binary form of representation, as Hall (1997) would put it, where Disney suggests who an ideal wife and mother should be. The portrayal of the 'super' white mother and the absence of a 'super' black mother, as well as scenes where characters of colour play second to the whites (as in *Incredibles 2*) creatively reinforce ideologies of White supremacy and privilege (Gregory 2010; Lester 2010; Moffitt & Harris, 2014; Dundes, 2019).

'He who makes the film dictates the representation' thus sums up the situation nicely. Whites still significantly dominate the 3D film industry as screenwriters, producers and directors. This means that Whites still have the absolute power to represent people in a certain way and with a certain frequency and have done so in ways that mostly portray their kind 'Us' as superior to 'Them' albeit in more subtly and more creative ways.

However, a strong ideological contestation is happening as evident in 3D animation films like *Soul* (2020). Findings from this study showed that the portrayal of characters of colour varied with race of the

screenwriters and particularly showed people of colour being portrayed more positively in the films co-directed and co-written by people of colour. This suggests that the aim of the 3D films where people of colour played key creative roles is to deviate from a cinematic ideological conformity that sees whites as superior. However, this study argues that this ideological dissent will become more vivid when people of colour play key roles in the creation of films where both white characters and characters of colour are featured prominently in one film and not in those dedicated to only people of colour.

Conclusion

Findings from this study showed that Disney has recently presented more nuanced, non-stereotypical and empowered images of people of colour. These emerging patterns of representation counter earlier assertions from scholars such as King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodworth-Lugo (2010) that the film company's negative portrayals of this category of people have not changed much over the years. In Disney productions from year 2016, steps were made to move beyond the stereotypes used to describe and define people of colour. Disney made room for alternative lead characters and superheroes to exist. The few creative personnel of colour involved in the works of Disney within this period used their privileged positions to deviate from stereotypes in the representations of people of colour.

While overt forms of racism can be said to be on the decline in Disney's latest 3D animation films, more subtle forms of discrimination perpetuate prejudice. Here, racism, through stereotyping, in particular, functions as a combination of prejudice and power and represents modes of exclusion and inferiorization. This study shows that Disney in its representations of the 'other', people of colour, in particular, cannot be isolated as an independent actor but should be considered within the context of the nexus of interests that influence these representations. These interests constitute the ideological and power dynamics that shape the language of the representations. This agrees with the representation theory which conceives media text as a product of culture itself; as a reflection of biases and interests within society; in short as a reflection of the societal dynamics of ideology and power relations (Fairclough, 1989; Hall, 1997; Lewis, 2005; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Additionally, findings from this study further validate the social constructivism theory, which like the representation theory, view media representation of race as being a product of how the animation film companies, screenwriters, producers and directors create or construct meanings. Stated differently, racial portrayals/representations are not to be seen as just conveying reality but have in them inbuilt judgments, biases and interpretations – all located within the society's overall meaning structure.

This study concludes that Disney's approach towards more inclusiveness and non-stereotypical representation of people of colour is a step in the right direction. The emerging patterns of representation would not only make people of colour feel better about themselves but could also have a positive effect on how people of colour are treated in society. This would, therefore, help quell agitations bordering on the unfair treatment of people of colour.

Towards a Lasting Change

While there are heartwarming findings for people of colour on the recent Disney screen and behind the camera, it cannot be assumed that all representation issues have been rectified permanently. Therefore, the following recommendations are made towards a lasting change:

- There is a need to advocate for the production of more big-budget 3D animation feature films depicting both the lived and beautiful experiences of people of colour within and outside of Hollywood. Anything short of this might relegate films like *Soul* to mere cinematic road bumps or temporary distractions. By ensuring that all groups have access, are represented, and included on-screen, a film can present a reality that finally looks like the world in which we live.

- Black women rights groups should advocate for more inclusion of women of colour in 3D animation films towards the achievement of gender parity on screen.
- Animation companies must not only continue to populate leading roles with Black or Asian leads but also move to developing and producing stories that feature other people of colour like the Latinos.

Suggestions for Future Research

As a way of building on the gains of this research, the following suggestions are put forward for further studies:

- Future research should focus on 3D animation films produced by other animation film companies to compare the results presented in this study.
- There is a need for Nigerian studies that explore how the Nigerian audience make sense of Disney animation films.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest in the research that elicited the findings presented in this paper. There was also no conflict of interest in writing the paper.

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