



# Tarzan of the White Male Privilege

A close-reading of *Tarzan of the Apes* and Disney's *Tarzan* regarding racism and sexism

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## Introduction

In 1912 Edgar Rice Burroughs published his first Tarzan story in *All-Story Magazine* and after facing many rejections, his work was finally published as a novel by A.C. McClurg and Co. As a result, the work became a best-seller in 1914 (Edgar Rice Burroughs Inc.). The story focusses on a British Lord and Lady who are abandoned on the coast of Africa after an incident with the crew of the ship. The two manage to build a strong hut on the edge of the jungle but when Lady Greystoke loses her mind after a gorilla attack, their days are numbered. Lady Greystoke dies quite peacefully while Lord Greystoke is brutally murdered by an ape. Upon his murder one of the female apes, Kala, finds young Lord Greystoke in his crib and swaps the baby boy for her dead baby. Tarzan is raised by the apes but realizes that he is different from them in some ways. Years later Tarzan meets Jane Porter, to whom he feels attracted and who brings out his human side. After Jane and her father leave, Tarzan decides to follow them. The novel ends with his arrival in America. This first novel was followed by twenty-three others and became quite a success, leading to multiple film, radio and television adaptations (Edgar Rice Burroughs Inc.).

In 1999 Disney released their animated adaptation of *Tarzan*. Many children have grown up watching this Disney film, which managed to gross \$171,091,819 worldwide (Box Office Mojo). This thesis will focus on the aspect of racism and sexism in relation to the character of Tarzan in the Disney adaptation. The choices made in the Disney adaptation result in a specific representation of Tarzan. Adaptation theory is important for this research because it explains how adaptations are “aesthetic works in their own right” (Hutcheon 6), but only can be considered adaptations in relation to other works. As Linda Hutcheon argues in her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, fidelity or fidelity criticism should not be used as a focal point in assessing an adaptation (6), because it would diminish the analysis to mentioning of the differences in both plots. Adaptations involve the transcoding of a particular work, a

process of creation in which a particular work is reinterpreted and recreated, and they are a form of intertextuality as they rely on other work for their foundation (7-8). Therefore, this thesis will discuss both works as separate works which exist in relation to one another, and explore how they approach ethnicity and gender in relation to Tarzan as a character. Through a close-reading of specific scenes of the Disney film and chapters of the novel, this thesis sets out to illustrate how Disney's adaptation of *Tarzan of the Apes* reinforces the notion of white male privilege through the usage of microaggressions.

The majority of previous research on Tarzan so far has focussed on female gender roles and representations of the Other. In "Using Critical Race Theory to Analyze How Disney Constructs Diversity" Cappiccie et al. argue that Disney animations contain microaggressions, but that due to the family-friendly status of the films many viewers are not aware of this. According to Sue et al. "Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (271). In this paper, the term microaggression will be used rather than racial microaggression to include violations directed at other minorities as well instead of merely focussing on racial ones. While Cappiccie et al. expose problematic features of Disney films, they fail to explain why these appear, nor do they focus on male gender roles.

In "Images of Gender, Race, Age and Sexual Orientation Disney Feature-Length Animated Films" Towbin et al. argue that while Disney has made progress, still its films often use negative stereotypes regarding gender, race and culture. Through a thematic analysis Towbin et al. analysed the themes in 26 different but carefully selected Disney films (25). While their results did show a trend of negative stereotypes being used in Disney films, they do argue that *Tarzan* shows progress in this respect. According to Towbin et al. this becomes apparent, for example, through Tarzan's behaviour when he talks about his love for his

mother. On the other hand, *Tarzan* does confirm the stereotype of men being naturally strong and heroic, as Tarzan saves Jane from the group of baboons (29). However, male gender is only a small part of the research by Towbin et al. They also focus on ethnicity and find, similar to Cappiccie et al., that Disney has made progress when it comes to the depiction of racial stereotypes. Nevertheless, the stereotypes are still apparent. While Towbin et al. present a good overview of stereotypical themes used in Disney films, it is important to focus more on male gender roles.

Therefore, it is useful for the analysis to use theory which covers the role of the male in cinematography. The male gaze, as discussed in Mulvey, is an important concept because it sets out to explain how gender roles are often divided in films and provides insight into the desire to look from a psychoanalytic point of view. This concept will also provide a bridge between filmic elements and white male privilege.

White male privilege is another useful concept, which does not seem to have any roots in the scientific field as of this moment. However, both male and white privilege have been discussed in scientific work before.<sup>1</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines privilege as: “A right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by an individual, corporation of individuals, etc., beyond the usual rights or advantages of others”. By adding white and male the concept narrows down the individuals who benefit from this privilege.

Furthermore, this thesis will refer to racism rather than speciesism because of the process of naturalisation. In the history of racism, the differences between white and black people have often been described as natural rather than cultural. If the differences between black and white people would be cultural it would mean that black people could change, whereas if they were considered as part of their biology it would justify white people treating black people differently. Blackness (natural) became interchangeable with primitivism

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<sup>1</sup> See Peggy McIntosh's “White Privilege and Male Privilege”.

(cultural) (Hall 234). This explains why black people have been drawn as animals before and why it is reasonable to consider the gorillas in the adaptation as a representation of black people, especially considering the lack of black or coloured people in the Disney film. The definition of racism used in this thesis is:

A belief that one's own racial or ethnic group is superior, or that other such groups represent a threat to one's cultural identity, racial integrity, or economic well-being; (also) a belief that the members of different racial or ethnic groups possess specific characteristics, abilities, or qualities, which can be compared and evaluated. Hence: prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against people of other racial or ethnic groups (or, more widely, of other nationalities), esp. based on such beliefs. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

Even though there are newer adaptations, the popularity of Disney's adaptation makes analysing the 1999 film still relevant. Research has shown that the construction of youth identities can be influenced by ideas of masculinity acquired through digital media (Weber and Mitchell 30, 37, 38). It is therefore important to consider the effect this film can have, especially considering *Tarzan*'s status as a children's classic. Furthermore, it may shed light on harmful or dated messages this Disney film carries, and provide insight into developments in Disney's filmmaking. Moreover, by regarding *Tarzan* as a film which enforces white male privilege this research sets out to provide insight into a deeply rooted cultural problem.

This thesis uses apes when referring to the novel and gorillas when referring to the film because these are the terms used in both of the works.

The first chapter of this thesis delves deeper into previous research and criticism regarding Disney. The second chapter focuses on Tarzan as a character and ethnicity in the novel and film. The third chapter covers Tarzan in relation to gender in the novel and film.



## Chapter 1: An Overview of Critics of Disney

Walt Disney Pictures has been criticised for many different aspects of its success. Going into several previously published critiques of Disney, this chapter will outline why earlier research considered analysing Disney films as relevant and useful.

In 1998 Alan J. Spector described the discrepancy between the values advocated in Disney's films, which include themes as the importance of honesty, loyalty and hard work, and their often racist stereotypical representations of the Other (39). In his essay he covers multiple films and their racist stereotypical representations, but his most compelling arguments come from *Peter Pan* (1953), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) and *Pocahontas* (1995).

In *Peter Pan* the song "What Made the Red Man Red," is often considered highly racist as it: "undermines any attempt to portray Native Americans with dignity, as the equals of all other people" (45). Like *Peter Pan*, *Lady and the Tramp* also features harmful racist stereotypes in the shape of two Siamese cats. The cats speak broken English and are portrayed as evil in a way that stereotypes Asians in Hollywood (46). Another film Spector goes into is *Pocahontas*, which seems to be a good attempt at positively portraying the Other. However, the character of Pocahontas is based on a real woman and while Disney's Pocahontas lives happily ever after, the real Pocahontas was forced to go to Europe and did not live long. Disney has erased the painful racism that is present in the original story for commercial benefits (47).

Breaux, like Spector, argues that Disney erases the past of their ethnic characters to shape a story that fits their needs. In creating *The Princess and the Frog* (2007) Disney seemed to resolve the problem of a lack of animated black Disney princesses. Nevertheless, Disney failed to acknowledge a racist past and to use their African American princess to teach children about the United States' history when it comes to the way black people have been or are treated (16). Disney has put much effort into defending themselves against possible

criticism. For instance, they met with Oprah and NAACP<sup>2</sup> to discuss avoiding offensive stereotypes. However, Breaux rightfully points out that they have set the plot in a time where racism was still very much apparent without going into the troubles of African American people at that time (9). To summarise, rather than listening to the critics, Disney's main motif was to turn their critics into consumers (18).

Craven (2002) goes further into Disney and consumerism by arguing: “[t]he commodification of feminist ideas in popular culture produce strange contradictions” (123). Disney attempted to create a more feminist-friendly character with Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), however, they created a character whose happiness in the end is dependent on her marriage to a prince. The focus point of this article is the difference between Beauty, the original character; Psyche, the mythic goddess who is assumed to have been the inspiration for Beauty; and Belle. Craven argues that several aspects of Disney's adaptation discredit their attempt at a more feminist-friendly character. These aspects are: the theme of bestiality, which is only dissolved after Beast turns into a prince; the happy ending revolving around marriage; and Belle being ostracized for characteristics which the townspeople loved in Beauty (127-132). Belle may be an improvement when it comes to aspects such as pro-feminist in comparison to Disney's previous princesses (139). However, Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* still spreads the message that the happily ever after for girls involves, marrying a prince.

This list of previous research is incomplete by necessity since listing all research done considering Disney films could be a novel in itself. The mentioned researches have been selected because of the fact that they all have been conducted by scientists familiar with minority studies and have been published in magazines or books that specify in the analysis of

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<sup>2</sup> The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) is a civil rights movement for coloured people in the United States of America.

or sociology behind the treatment of minorities. This brief summary does show that microaggressions within Disney films occur more often and cannot be considered coincidences. Disney did seem to be aware of this problem, at the time of these film releases, but did not consider these offenses problematic enough to adapt their approach. As Disney films are still regularly watched today it is important to create an awareness of these problematic images. Disney's progress can be seen in its films *The Princess and the Frog*, *Frozen* (2013), and *Moana* (2016), but there is still considerable room for improvement. It is important to examine Disney's male characters and see how they relate to matters such as gender and ethnicity.

## Chapter 2: Tarzan and Ethnicity

This chapter will analyse Tarzan as a character in relation to the concept of ethnicity. First of all, it will go into the analysis of Tarzan and ethnicity in the novel. Second, it will cover the analysis of the film, which will be divided into different categories. In Appendix A there will be a selection of stills used to support the argument when necessary.

### Novel

The work of Burroughs is interesting when it comes to ethnicity as it is arguably racist. The instances where ethnicity is relevant in this novel can be divided into two categories: passages that include references to the black tribe and those that refer to the animals. The black tribe is entirely omitted in the Disney adaptation.

### *Tarzan and the Animals*

Tarzan's growing up in the novel is marked by his slow progress compared to the other apes: "Tenderly Kala nursed her little waif, wondering silently why it did not gain strength and agility from the time the little fellow came into her possession before he would walk alone, and as for climbing – my, but how stupid he was!" (Burroughs 44). Therefore, Tarzan is portrayed flawed in the novel whereas Disney's Tarzan seems perfect from the beginning. In both plots Tarzan becomes the best living creature in the jungle, both mentally and physically, yet in the novel all of his changes are subtler and less out of the blue. The transposition of medium, as explained by Hutcheon (33-35), might influence how these changes are perceived, as a film has less time to cover a plot than a novel. However, it is still noticeable that in the novel Tarzan's developments are more explained and gradual.

In the novel Tarzan is more of a savage himself. He often gets into fights and Burroughs emphasizes how growing up in the jungle has impacted Tarzan's choices. What

Tarzan knows is what he has been taught by the apes: “And he realized all this<sup>3</sup> without malice or hatred. To kill was the law of the wild world he knew. Few were his primitive pleasures, but the greatest of these was to hunt and kill, and so he accorded to others the right to cherish the same desires as he, even though he himself might be the object of their hunt” (92). Another example of this wildness occurs when the narrator tells the reader Tarzan is not familiar with the concept of brotherhood (92). Furthermore, Tarzan sometimes kills for fun as humans do. At that point, before meeting other white humans, Tarzan is not fully aware of what it means to be a human being rather than an ape. While Tarzan is still depicted as better than the apes in the novel, his representation is different and more thought-through. Tarzan becomes the leader of the tribe when he defeats Kerchak (108). Tarzan earns his respect when he saves Kala and kills Tublat (72). Tarzan shows how mighty he is when he kills Sabor (105). While these moments are still problematic, due to their unlikeliness, they are plausible because Tarzan is flawed in other ways. Burroughs still depicts Tarzan as superior but his superiority takes more time to accomplish. Tarzan is not per se stronger but he is smarter: “But there was that which had raised him far above his fellows in the jungle – that little spark which spells the whole vast difference between man and brute – Reason” (114). This can be considered as racist because Tarzan has never been taught to use his reason and therefore should be akin to the apes who raised him. It is improbable that Tarzan is able to figure out that reason is what sets him apart from his tribe. Especially since Burroughs emphasizes that all Tarzan knows is what he has been taught by the apes (92).

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<sup>3</sup> This quote refers back to Tarzan’s reasoning that “the fierce wild brutes of the jungle left no opening for any thought that these could be aught else than enemies” (92). The “wild brutes” refers to the other animals inhabiting the jungle

*Tarzan and the Black Tribe*

The novel truly becomes problematic in reference to the black tribe that disrupts the normalcy of Tarzan's tribe. When the reader is first introduced to the black tribe, the description is quite neutral. They are referred to as "black warriors" (81). When the narration delves deeper into the introduction of the black tribe, the tone changes: "Their yellow teeth were filed to sharp points, and their great protruding lips added still further to the low and bestial brutishness of their appearance" (82). This description is stereotypical because it moves beyond the natural response of typing, which is part of human nature in order to make sense of the world (Hall 247). In this case it is stereotyping because only a few characteristics are being described and they are exaggerated, negative and simplified (247).

The racism is not solely apparent from the description of the tribe. When Tarzan catches Kala's killer the plot uses explicit imagery: "So quickly did Tarzan of the Apes drag back his prey that Kulonga's cry of alarm was throttled in his windpipe. Hand over hand Tarzan drew the struggling black until he had him hanging by his neck in midair; then Tarzan climbed into a larger branch drawing the still threshing victim well up into the sheltering verdure of the tree" (Burroughs 92). The reference to hanging black people brings to mind Burroughs' American nationality and the Ku Klux Klan, who were already active at the time he wrote the novel.<sup>4</sup> The black people in this novel are less human than their white counterparts, which defines moments as quoted above as racist. While these descriptions are written from the point of view of the narrator, racist thoughts are ascribed to Tarzan as well. While Tarzan's first encounter with the black men is a negative one<sup>5</sup>, it does not explain his

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<sup>4</sup> There have been several Klan's of which the first was active from 1865 till 1871 and the second Klan became active in 1915, a year after *Tarzan* was published (Lester and Wilson 27; MacLean 4)

<sup>5</sup> Nala is killed by a black warrior in front of Tarzan (85).

racist stance: “Tarzan had looked with complacency upon their former orgies, only occasionally interfering for the pleasure of baiting the blacks; but heretofore their victims had been men of their own color. To-night it was different – white men, men of Tarzan’s own race – might be even now suffering the agonies of torture in that grim, jungle fortress” (211). It is unlikely that Tarzan, who was raised to see every other species as an enemy, is able to distinguish between black and white man, resulting in the black people being treated as less than human. Tarzan does realise they are human because he identifies Kulonga as the archer in his novel, a picture which depicts his species (88). Tarzan and the narrator’s disapproval of the black tribe cannot be accounted for as solely the result of the killing of Kala because the stereotypical description of the black tribe occurs before Nala falls victim to the tribe (81, 85). After Tarzan and D’Arnot set out to get Tarzan to America, Tarzan says: “Enough to know that each of you are right in your judgment of the characteristics of the lions you have met. But one might as well judge all blacks by the fellow who ran amuck last week, or decide that all whites are cowards because one has met a cowardly white” (262). This statement, however, does not erase the previous stereotyping of black people, nor does it justify the treatment of the black people as less than human previously in the book.

## **Film**

Whereas the black tribe that disrupts the tranquillity of Tarzan’s tribe is omitted in the Disney film, Disney does incorporate microaggressions that evoke white supremacy. While some may argue that this film relates to white humans and animals it is important to note that in this case the gorillas are representative for Africa and its inhabitants as explained in the introduction through the concept of naturalisation.

*Light and Darkness*

In the first scenes the Greystokes arrive at the island after a shipwreck. What is noticeable is that the Greystokes are shown in daylight throughout this montage, with the exception of when they flee from the burning ship (00:36), whereas the introduction of the gorillas happens entirely in the dark. Generally speaking, light is associated with goodness, day, and concepts such as innocence. On the other hand, darkness is often associated with evil, night, and concepts such as corruptness. According to Roland Barthes there is a “hidden set of rules and conventions through which meanings, which are specific to certain groups, are made to seem universal and given for a whole society” (Sturken and Cartwright 20), also known as myth. Which explains why above connotations for darkness and lightness exist. It is part of the way society is able to give meaning and to make sense of the world. These connotations are not universal but created on a cultural level. Furthermore, according to Umberto Eco, cinema is a language with a triple articulation. On the first level the total image can be broken down into semes which function as meaningful units, these can be broken down into iconic signs, and finally, these can be analysed in the conditions of perception such as light and shade which have no meaning in themselves.<sup>6</sup> These conditions, however, are essential to the construction of meaning (Lapsley and Westlake 45-46). Throughout the entire film light, light fall and shade are used to distinguish between the humans and the gorillas.

For instance, the gorillas are often shown either in the shadows or with the light coming from behind them. The phi-effect, which is normally used to convince the mind of movement while looking at static images such as film through, for instance, light and shadow (Stam 187), is used by Disney to set Tarzan apart from the gorillas. Tarzan is often shown in the daylight, has light fall on him from the front, or is the only one standing in the light.

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<sup>6</sup> For a more illustrated explanation see Lapsley and Westlake’s *Film Theory: An Introduction*.



Image 1 for instance shows how Tarzan is flying through the jungle above the walking gorillas while exposed to sunlight. This distances Tarzan from the group and literally puts him above the gorillas. Kala, Tarzan's adoptive mother; Terk, his best friend; and Tantor, his elephant friend are at times exposed to sunlight. Tantor, however, is an elephant and does not find himself directly opposed to Tarzan as the gorillas do at times.

In the scene where Kerchak and Tarzan disagree when discussing the Porter situation Tarzan is drawn in the shadow of Kerchak, who once again has the sun fall on him from behind. After being unable to settle their differences, Tarzan literally runs into the light, an image which can also conjure up strong connotations (see image 3 and 4). Images such as these can imply that the apes are wrong, as they are in the dark, and that Tarzan is doing the right thing by disagreeing, as he runs into the light.

### *Reverse Racism*

Another noticeable theme with regards to ethnicity is that of reverse racism. An interesting difference between the novel and the film is that in the film the gorillas are quite immediately aware of the fact that Tarzan is not one of them. Young Tarzan is not accepted by Terk and her friends and this incident could be considered the first reverse racist moment. While the young apes are playing a reckless game (see image 7), Terk emerges and she is asked why she is late. She tells them she was detained by a small pest. At that moment Tarzan clumsily emerges from the shrubs. The young apes make their dissatisfaction explicit (see image 8) and tell Tarzan he can only play with them if he fulfils an impossible task. This moment can be interpreted as bullying and a point at which the creators try to evoke pity from the viewer towards Tarzan. After upsetting the elephants, Nala tries to protect Tarzan, but Kerchak tells Nala that Tarzan is not one of them (see image 6). This can be seen as reverse racism as well. Especially when this scene is compared to the next one, in which Tarzan tries

to change his appearance because he is not accepted. These situations are problematic because while they draw attention to discrimination, they victimize a character who would be privileged in the real world. Even though reverse racism is a problematic phenomenon, in this film it undermines the fact that minorities are more often the victim of racism than privileged groups such as white men. In this case reverse racism could negatively influence the way the audience perceives the gorillas in the film because these events portray them in a negative light.

### *Dialogue*

The dialogue of the film emphasizes the differences between Tarzan and the gorillas as well. The moment Kala finds Tarzan trying to change his appearance, in order to fit in, she attempts to convince Tarzan that he is not so different. When Kala calms him down, he exclaims: "I will be the best ape ever!" (21:47). This is problematic because Tarzan is no ape, which would mean that humans are capable of being better gorillas than gorillas themselves. While Tarzan at that point is still a child not aware of his true nature, the film sequence that follows shows him as the best ape. In the film he is successful because he tries really hard; in the novel he succeeds because he survives on what his tribe teaches him and learns how to hunt. It is problematic that he improves in this way in the film because it suggests that nothing is out of reach of the white man if he tries hard enough, a message which seems to resemble the American dream.<sup>7</sup> Tarzan is able to master a world which he should not be able to control and thus he is placed above the others.

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<sup>7</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the American dream is: "the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative".

### Chapter 3: Tarzan and Gender

This chapter will focus on Tarzan and the concept of gender. As Pieter Swanepoel writes, Tarzan is often seen “as the embodiment of masculinity” (223). It is therefore interesting to analyse how Tarzan relates to the concept of gender in both the film and the novel. It appears that both plots use quite a traditional idea of masculinity.

#### Novel

##### *Tarzan and Uncertainty*

Swanepoel argues that rather than being the embodiment of masculinity Tarzan could also be the embodiment of uncertainty (223). If Tarzan symbolizes uncertainty this would contradict the macho description of masculinity, which focusses on truth and confidence (226). Swanepoel ascribes Tarzan’s uncertainty to different aspects of his life. For instance, Tarzan struggles with his identity because he is raised as an ape rather than a human being, because of the loss of his parents, and the loss of his ape mother, and because of his confrontations with mankind (227-231). Swanepoel concludes with the statement that the “sturdy kind of masculinity” which the public has portrayed onto the character of Tarzan is a figment of the imagination (232).

While Swanepoel is correct in his stance that the sturdy concept of masculinity within Tarzan is one of the imagination, as it is never explicitly stated in the film, it does not mean that it holds no power. Concepts such as masculinity are socially constructed, but they do have predominant meanings. To simply disregard Tarzan’s masculinity as a figment of the imagination of critics undermines the possible influence these types of stories may have on its audience. As mentioned in the introduction, research has shown that the construction of youth identities can be influenced by ideas of masculinity acquired through digital media (Weber

and Mitchell 30, 37, 38). Swanepoel provides a rather simplistic conclusion which does not take into account why Tarzan is regarded in such a way or what influences these images have.

Nevertheless, Burroughs seems eager to have Tarzan move beyond his humanity.

Tarzan is not just very masculine, but he is also often described as god-like: “His straight and perfect figure, muscled as the best of the ancient Roman gladiators must have been muscled, and yet with the soft and sinuous curves of a Greek god, told at a glance the wondrous combination of enormous strength with suppleness and speed. [...] he might readily have typified some demigod of a wild and warlike bygone people of his ancient forest” (Burroughs 119). Even after he has been severely wounded several times and half of the flesh of his face has been torn off, Tarzan still embodies a certain wholeness: “What a perfect creature! There could be naught of cruelty or baseness beneath that godlike exterior. Never, she thought, had such a man strode the earth since God created the first in his own image” (198-199).

Comparing a man to God himself is interesting because Tarzan is no longer simply manly but also god-like, which would put him above humans all together. He moves beyond the apes because: “there was that which had raised him far above his fellows of the jungle – that little spark which spells the whole vast difference between man and brute – Reason” (114).

However, he also moves beyond man because he can kill lions (265), gorillas (72) and men (90) with just the help of a rope and a knife. Tarzan seems to combine the best of both worlds in his being.

Furthermore, Tarzan kisses Jane, after saving her from Terkoz (189), as a sign of taking her as his woman, but he has never been familiarized with the concept of human love. These things make Tarzan superior but also define gender roles as Tarzan takes Jane as his wife and thus considers her to be an object he is allowed to take, regardless of her will. Tarzan continually saves Jane and her party, even though he has no understanding of who or what they are. Often Burroughs describes these actions as Tarzan’s human instinct taking over,

although it is questionable whether his noble, masculine and god-like behaviour is a natural response considering his wary and alert attitude towards other species in the jungle. Tarzan has been raised on jungle principles and is cautious of everything. Nevertheless, when he meets Jane he feels the need to continuously protect her and her party, his only flaw being that he is not yet able to speak to her in her language.

## **Film**

### *Tarzan and the Male Gaze*

Because film adds the visual dimension, gender can be analysed in a different manner. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey discusses the position of women in traditional cinema through psychoanalytic theory. She argues that because of their lack of a phallus, women can only act as a bearer of meaning (a child) and not as a maker of meaning (804). Often in cinema women function to fulfil the pleasure of scopophilia (looking itself as a source of pleasure) and are thus subjected to the male gaze by both male characters and male audiences (806). Tarzan complies with the idea that: “A male movie star’s glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror” (810). Because he is not just human but he has almost inhuman strength and displays a sense of masculinity and superiority which could be considered desirable. This concept of the gaze stems from Lacan’s work. According to Lacan the gaze “is part and parcel of a desire for completion of oneself through the other (the image in the mirror, the other person through whom the subject misrecognizes himself or herself)” (Sturken and Cartwright 122). His fully muscular body (see image 1 in Appendix B) could definitely be regarded as a stereotype of macho masculinity.

Furthermore, Disney's Tarzan does seem to correspond with the main controlling figure described by Mulvey (810), as Tarzan's superiority elicits a desire to be like him from the viewer. Tarzan is the one who has real agency and power in the film. Therefore, it is viable to consider Tarzan and Jane's relationship in light of Mulvey's theory as well. This means that Jane's only function is to comply with the male gaze of both Tarzan as a character and the spectators. An example of this can be found in image 2, where Tarzan has just saved Jane from the baboons and they have landed in a tree. In that moment, Tarzan notices the resemblance between him and Jane. At first Jane is portrayed as an independent woman, who refuses Tarzan's help, but despite her efforts at being independent, she needs Tarzan to save her. The bonding between Jane and Tarzan is interrupted by a gunshot. In that moment Tarzan hangs from the tree to look for the danger and Jane is portrayed helplessly in the tree. What is striking about this image is the fact that Jane is left in the rain while Tarzan is drawn in the sunlight. This use of light emphasizes his status as a hero and Jane as being less significant. It is Jane, and her company, who generate the conflict and crisis in this plot and thus present Tarzan with an opportunity to be the hero.

Another important moment takes place when Clayton has ordered his men to capture all the gorillas and Jane tries to save Kala from her cage. Jane appears to be independent and heroic (see image 3), nevertheless, her attempt is disrupted when one of Clayton's men appears behind her. Before Jane can save Kala, or the man can attack Jane, Tarzan sweeps in and takes out the man and helps Jane free Kala. It is through Jane's inability to open the cage and her clumsy manner that Tarzan's heroic nature is emphasized. Therefore, Jane's main purpose in the film seems to be, to create situations in which Tarzan can show his superiority. This results in Jane functioning as a tool rather than an independent agent. As *Tarzan* complies with the male gaze, it privileges white men because the women and the Other become the object of the gaze, rather than the subject.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the purpose of this paper was to illustrate how *Tarzan of the Apes* reinforces the notion of white male privilege through the usage of microaggressions. This was achieved through close-readings of both the novel and the film, while focussing on gender and ethnicity in relation to the character of Tarzan.

On the level of ethnicity, it is clear that the racism in the novel is directed at the black tribe through stereotypical descriptions but also through imagery of hanging black people. It moves beyond the idea of microaggressions, as the racism is quite explicit. While Disney is more careful their adaptation, nevertheless, contains multiple microaggressions such as playing with light and shade to distinguish between humans and gorillas. The Disney adaptation lacks any coloured or black people. It can therefore be argued that the gorillas in the film are a representation of black people. Whereas the racism in the film is different and less apparent, it still shares the idea of white people, or in this case a white man being superior to the Other.

At the level of gender there was a difference between the film and the novel in the gendering of Tarzan. In the novel the focus on Tarzan's masculinity led to the image of him being god-like. Everything that made Tarzan masculine attributes to his superiority to both animals and humans. In the film Tarzan's masculinity seems emphasized because of Jane, as she created most of the scenarios in which Tarzan could act like a hero. As a result, her role complied with Mulvey's explanation of the role of women in cinema as object of the male gaze. While Tarzan was still superior the film does not portray him as god-like. His masculinity is, however, used by both versions as a tool to make him superior to others.

Concluding, white male privilege may not be directly a part of both versions, nevertheless, the analysis of Tarzan in relation to gender and ethnicity does show a certain bias towards white men. The notion of white male privilege is reinforced in this story through

the idea that Tarzan as a white man is able to master a world that he should not be able to control. He has inexplicable advantages which make him superior to the rest. The message both works spread is a message of success as long as you are a white male. The (micro)aggressions in both the film and novel contribute to Tarzan enjoying developmental privileges as a white man that cannot be explained. In the novel the black tribe has grown up in the jungle as well, however, they are not as strong or smart as Tarzan. The adaptation privileges white men because women and the Other serve as the object of the gaze, rather than the subject.

Nevertheless, there are still various aspects this thesis has not been able to mention due to its limited length. Discussing *Tarzan* in light of white male privilege is a good beginning but is not enough to draw bigger conclusions. The relevance of the analysis of the 1999 film might be questioned because it is not one of the newest adaptations, nor is it one of Disney's newer films. However, Tarzan's status as a children's classic and the fact that youth identities are influenced by exposure to digital media, make this research relevant. Furthermore, this thesis discussed different aspects of both storylines rather than comparing the two. While the creators of the adaptation took a liberate approach in the creation of the 1999 film, it could be interesting to delve deeper into Disney's adaptation in light of Disneyfication. Future research might be interested, as well, in conducting surveys in order to test whether films such as Tarzan actually influence the perception of concepts such as masculinity or reinforce the idea that white men are better. Additionally, it might be interesting to test whether children who have watched Disney films, as opposed to children who have not, have different ideas about gender and ethnicity. As *Tarzan* is still a popular story to adapt, analysing several adaptations might shed light on what makes Tarzan such an interesting franchise.



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**Appendix A: Stills Relevant to Ethnicity**

Image 1:



Image 2:



Image 3:



Image 4:



Image 5:



Image 6:



**Appendix B: Stills Relevant to Gender**

Image 1:



Image 2:



Image 3:

