

“Arrgh, Matey” Using Textual Analysis to evaluate the evolution of the Pirate from their original form, to their transformation into the modern day characters.

Everything that exists today is the continuing evolution of what came before it. Before written language was developed, history was oral. Passed down from generation to generation, there would be a group or a person entrusted with the history of the people. They had to remember everything so others may never forget. As time goes on, these stories become myths. Once real people turn into revered figures or simply forgotten by time. People become mythologized, deified. They are no longer what they were, just an idea of what they were.

In modern times, big media companies such as Disney have taken that process and sped it up. Anne Peterson in “You believe in Pirates, Of Course...” Disney’s Commodification and “Closure” vs. Johnny Depp’s Aesthetic Piracy of ‘Pirates of the Caribbean she discusses how Disney has created a “closed text” which is something that carefully develops details and connections, leaving readers or viewers little chance for active participation and interpretation” They have created an idea of what the pirate was and merely calls upon it as a symbol. “Piracy, like murder is, one of the earliest of recorded human activities”(Gosse 1968) Pirates have become a symbol of what they are wanted to represent. They’ve become closed characters and are no longer the villains they were in real life.

Piracy is often called the world’s second oldest profession. For as long people have traveled by water, there have been pirates. In our modern time, the fascination with pirates has been linked to a particular time in maritime history. That time period is known as the “The Golden Age of Piracy”. The term was first used to describe the period of piracy by George Powell in the Gentleman's Magazine. During the later half of

the 17th century and for half of the 18th century, pirates were a vicious force to be reckoned with. They were murderous, scoundrels, thieves, pillagers, monsters. They followed no laws but their own. With the release of *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates*, the once villainous scoundrels of the sea became characters in a story. You could read about the most well known pirates, from Captain Kidd to Blackbeard. You would read about things that happened on their ships, get details into their personal lives. They would become not monsters, but humans. In 1883, a book by the name of *Treasure Island* would be published and would go on to have the single biggest impact on the representation of pirates up until today. This book would be adapted into films several times throughout the decades, with the 1950's version being the definitive one. This depiction of pirates on film would be mimicked and commodified by everyone for years to come. Disney had created a closed text on the pirate. To examine the transformation from murderous pirate to loveable caricature in our modern culture, a semiotic analysis will be used.

This paper will contribute to the ongoing conversation, using textual analysis, of how real events, people, or professions are separated from what they are and turned into a symbol that often has little connection to what it originally was. It will look at piracy as a commodified industry and examine representation in pirate related media.

Disney's *Treasure Island* is nexus of transformation for pirates in becoming a symbol and turning into what they are today. It created the tropes that are still used across all things pirate today. From mannerism to what a pirate does and does not look like.

Piracy throughout the ages

For as long as man could access the sea, there have been pirates. From the moment men could travel and trade, there have been references to those who sought to profit from this by stealing their goods. Piracy has gone through several well-defined cycles. The first defined cycle in European Maritime history comes from Henry Morgan. Who amassed a fleet so powerful that trading ships, heavily armed or not, could escape his wrath. (Gosse, 1) The next period is defined by Barbossa who had amassed power in such a way that the Barbossa pirates were recognized as an independent state. (Gosse, 2) The lack of organization and various maritime wars throughout the 17th and early 18th centuries lead to a lightning bolt moment. Between 1716 and 1725 was the Golden Age of Piracy. The Anglo-American pirates were numbered around five thousand! This era produced the most written accounts on the activities of pirates and their daily lives. (Rediker, Under the Banner of King Death, 1) This time period was home to the most infamous pirates whose names live on to this day: “Black Sam” Bellamy, called himself the Robin Hood of Pirates (Also referred to as Rogue Romeo)” (National Geographic), Captain Kidd, Calico Jack, Anne Bonny, Mary Read, Charles Vane, “Black Bart” Roberts, and Edward “Blackbeard” Teach. Each of these pirates have had their legacies carried on by having their defining characteristics taken and emulated in various pirate literature, media and other characters across other media and genres.

A General History of the Pyrates, which was written by a man who called himself Captain Charles Johnson, was published in 1724. It contains biographies of the world's

pirates. It provided first hand accounts, intimate knowledge and reads almost like a book of myths. This book is the start of turning these dastardly pirates into mythological figures. From this point forward we see various media produced using the character of the pirate and see them turn from criminal to beloved literary figure. In print we see Lord Byron's The Corsair and Treasure Island define pirates as anti-heroes and characters we can empathize with. In film we see Captain Blood who becomes a pirate because of unfortunate circumstances and causing us to root for his success. In Treasure Island, the 1950s Disney film version, we are introduced to Long John Silver and what truly solidifies our current modern day interpretation of what pirates really are. In the 21st century we still have true pirates: vicious men who will plunder ships, murder crewman all for the sake of profit. These true pirates don't come into modern conversations or media. We still see the "Disney-fied" version set in stone by Treasure Island. The most popular idea of the pirate being Johnny Depp's Jack Sparrow from the Pirates of the Caribbean film series by Disney which has made 4.5 billion in the box office.

What is the Pirate

Depending on what year you ask that question, will change the answer to the question. To Cotton Mathers, the pirate was a vicious monster to be hated. The pirate was also something else to Cotton Mathers. Captain Kidd was taken in and to be executed for the various atrocities he committed, but because of the abundance of Seamen in his congregation, Cotton Mather saw opportunity. He saw seafarers as God's ambassadors who would spread the Protestant religion across the world. (Pitt 6) He also saw the

seamen as victims who are vulnerable to the vicious pirates who would tempt them away from god. Effectively, to Cotton Mather's, pirates were the devil of the sea. This idea of pirates being demons of the sea would be a similar idea supported by the government's of the world. Woodes Roger is known to history as a pirate slayer, a man who has tasked his life with eliminating the pirate scourge and being very successful.

(Way of the Pirates) To Lord Byron, Conrad is described as "A man of loneliness and mystery...saw more than marks the crowd of vulgar men...He had the skill..to prove his heart...where his frown of hatred darkly fell, hope withering fled- Mercy sighed farewell!"

(Byron 48) Conrad is the embodiment of the anti-hero. The pirate isn't this purely vicious monster, but someone who operates outside the law to accomplish his goals. Even though he operates outside the law, we still see someone with a code. We then arrive at what defines the pirate to this day. Robert Newton's portrayal of Long John Silver in Treasure Island. A vastly popular film where classic pirate imagery was born. The use "Arrgh" and "Matey," having a parrot as the animal that accompanies a pirate, having a peg leg and slightly open eye. (Treasure Island) Disney had defined what it meant to be a pirate and closed the text.

Closing the text on the pirate

"A closed text is one that carefully develops details and connections, leaving readers or viewers little chance for active participation and interpretation. An open text, on the other hand, presents itself in such a way that a full story is told without elaborating every detail of plot, character, or motivation. Thus receivers can take a more active role by

making their own connections, by "filling in the gaps." The open or closed nature of the text is influenced by the medium in which it exists. In general, told stories have more possibility for openness than do those in printed and filmed media. " (Stone, 2) Disney has become a master of "closing the text" on various fairy tales and other stories. They take ideas and create the definitive idea of a story through film, books and the tie-in merchandise. When Walt Disney created Snow White, he wanted it to be his version and no one else's. (Saunders, 51) This idea of creating a version that would be his and no one else's carried over to the 1950's version of Treasure Island. Treasure Island was already a popular book, one that mythicized the pirate and took several liberties with them. However, the film took this to a whole new level. The pirate is presented in various ways throughout the film. We have the pirate who is to be feared, a villain. There is the bumbling drunks, which is represented by most of Long John Silver's crew. Then there is Long John Silver himself, who is portrayed by Robert Newton. He is the anti-hero. He is charming, cunning, and a sweet talker. He lives by his own honor code and is humanized by his love for young Jim Hawkins. He responds with "Arghs" and "Matey". He has one leg and speaks with a specific "pirate accent", which is best described as making the voice raspy and deeper. He is unconventional and likeable.(Treasure Island) You have to love Long John Silver. Disney had closed the text on what the pirate is. They can be the villain, the bumbling drunk, but most of all they are the endearing hero. Robert Newton's portrayal of Long John Silver to this day is the baseline for which all other pirates must follow. In the 21st century, Pirates of the Caribbean, a 4 billion dollar movie franchise follows the same cues set forth in Treasure Island.

Closing the text and then throwing out the book

Pirates of the Caribbean is a 4 billion dollar movie franchise, with Jack Sparrow as it's lead pirate. Anne Peterson in "You Believe in Pirates, Of Course...": Disney's Commodification and "Closure" vs. Johnny Depp's Aesthetic Piracy of "Pirates of the Caribbean" that Johnny's Depp's portrayal of Jack Sparrow put bullet holes in the classic Disney closed text narrative of good triumphs over evil. (Peterson 70) Jack Sparrow is by no means a good man, but he is not associated with the bad pirates anymore. He is the anti-hero. "You can take a man off a pirate ship, but you can't take the pirate out of the man" (Peterson, 72) Disney aimed to commodify Pirates the same it always has. It realizes the marketing potential of tie in merchandise for its movies since Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (Saunders, 49) Disney aimed to based Pirates of the Caribbean on it's ride, Pirates. The ride is quite horrific. Grotesque pirates plunder, capture and burn down a village. There is an underlying fear of rape, torture and general debauchery associated with this imagery. These fears are eventually dispelled through humor and caricature. The Pirates are dumpy and clearly dangerous, they aren't perceived as a threat. For torture, a man is dumped in a bucket of water. He is portly and absurd looking. For drunkenness, one of the pirates offers rum to a cat. (Peterson, 69) These themes were expected to be carried over to the film. Johnny Depp however turned this idea on its head. While still displaying the ridiculous characteristics, he was a centerpiece of the film instead of just being the supporting role. Will Turner, the intended hero of the film ends up playing second fiddle to Jack Sparrow, the pirate.

Johnny Depp's portrayal of Jack Sparrow is now the de facto image of what a pirate is in the 21st century.

The Method

Textual analysis is a qualitative methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences. Visual, written, or spoken messages provide cues to ways through which communication may be understood. Often the messages are understood as influenced by and reflective of larger social structures. For example, messages reflect and/or may challenge historical, cultural, political, ethical contexts for which they exist. Therefore, the analyst must understand the broader social structures that influence the messages present in the text under investigation. (SAGE Communication Research)

Profits for Pirates

Treasure Island was Disney's first live action movie (Christophershobris 2018). Over its almost 70 year lifespan, this film has grossed almost \$4.5 billion. The Pirates of the Caribbean franchise has made \$4.5 billion since 2003 (Clark 2018). A list put together on r/boxoffice on Reddit, shows the top 10 highest grossing Pirate movies and Disney dominates the list with 6/10 (Idk_Very_Much 2018). Disney has control over what the pirate is in our media. They almost exclusively create successful pirate content in film

and made billions of dollars doing it. Pirates have been fascinating to our culture at large since the release of A General History of the Pyrates in 1724.

Are you Reading me, Matey?

People have long been clamoring for pirate material. Many popular pirate novels were produced following the golden age of piracy, with Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson being one of the most popular. The book follows a young Jim Hawkins and his adventure with Long John Silver, a devious, cunning and charming pirate. The book is a coming of age tale for Jim Hawkins who serves as its chief narrator. He faces life and death situations but is unrelenting in his moral code, and serves as the only person the dastardly Long John Silver is nice to. Long John Silver is a trickster, a charismatic man who is only out for himself, and also a little strange but finds himself endeared by the young Jim Hawkins. This book would be adapted in a number of films in the early 20th century, four of these films were made before Disney took a turn. It wasn't until Disney produced their version of the tale and released in 1950 that the pirate took on a new form that to this day remains.

X Marks the spot

Because of Treasure Island's success, Disney has created a closed text on what the pirate is. The film established what it means to be a pirate and all things that followed have had to incorporate these elements, which are now considered piratical by modern culture. There are four things that are important to the pirate: the visual, the accessories, the sound, and the character. The visual includes things such as the

eyepatch, the peg leg (or missing leg), the parrot, the clothing, the hook, the tricorn hat, and the dirty worn look. These are all integral to forming the the look of the pirate.

Treasure Island had various characters sporting different pieces of these pirate visuals.

They all appeared a bit dirty and worn, while the most prominent character had

something to set him apart that none of the others had. Long John Silver had a talking parrot, a near constant squint, and a bright red coat that clearly distinguished him as a

unique character (rather than a basic pirate). The accessories include the black spot, the ship, flag and the treasure map. The black spot is an invention of Robert Louis

Stevenson which means that the person who has it has been marked as guilty, by either removal from a leadership position or is set to be killed (Treasure Island). The flag and

the ship are accessories that actually existed. One can't be a pirate without a ship. The

flag, known as the "Jolly Roger" was something to be feared. The Jolly Roger is most

often depicted as a skull and crossbones. There were various designs of the Jolly Roger

used by several different pirates including a bleeding heart, an hourglass, and a red

skeleton. The skull and crossbones design was made the de-facto Jolly Roger because

of its appearance in Treasure Island. The last of the accessories is the treasure map,

which leads to buried treasure. There are no historical documents that exist that show

that any pirate had a map that lead to buried treasure. Most of their treasure was sold or spent and rarely accumulated enough to be buried.



[Pictured: The Jolly Roger]



[Pictured: The Treasure Map]

The sound is another important part of the character. How does a pirate speak? How does a pirate communicate? With a slight growl in their speech, with “arghs” and “mateys”. Treasure Island made this communication central to the pirate so that one cannot separate these speech patterns from the pirate. Pirates have come from all over the world, they did not have a singular language or speaking style that reflected the profession. Disney changed that. The final important piece to the pirate narrative is the concept of character. The pirate represents something larger than a sea thief. Disney carefully crafted specific characters in the pirate narrative.

Who are ye, but Pirates?

There are two character blueprints that were necessary for the pirate narrative that presently exists. These character blueprints, along with their speech, visuals, and accessories carried over into Pirates of the Caribbean, another Disney property and the most popular piece of pirate media ever created. Will Turner and Jack Sparrow are modern incarnations of Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver, the very characters that started this phenomenon nearly a century ago. They set the tone and closed the text on what a pirate story is. Jim Hawkins is young, dapper, and straight-laced. He has a moral

code, obligations to his parents legacy, he wants to uphold the law and sees pirates as villains. On his journey he befriends a pirate and this friendship transforms the pirate from self serving villain, into a relatable anti-hero. Jim Hawkins is there to humanize the pirate, to tell us that the pirate is bad, but not that bad. In this regard, he draws several parallels with Will Turner in Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl.

When Will Turner first encounters Jack Sparrow he refers to him as if the word is poison to his lips, "The Pirate" (Pirates of the Caribbean). This scene draws parallels with Treasure Island when Jim Hawkins says "He was a pirate". They both share this incredibly disdain for a pirate. Both of these characters set up the expectation for what a pirate is. Villainous, disgusting, immoral, and hated. According to Will Turner and Jim Hawkins, there is nothing good about the pirate. It is when their lives are saved by the pirate, from the "truly bad" pirates, that they take on a new understanding of what a pirate is. Long John Silver and Jack Sparrow have a similar trajectory as well. Long John Silver has the accent that to this day is mimicked by all those who would be pirates. This is mirrored to some degree by Jack Sparrow who, while not as gruff in tone, still takes on the pirate accent. Long John Silver is charismatic, he talks his way out of danger and he remains on friendly terms with his enemies, even when they are trying to kill each other. He is the center of attention at all times and can charm anyone into doing what he wants. He is the embodiment of freedom. Jack Sparrow is very much the same. He is shown as a little eccentric, but he remains charming. Those who would be his enemies gain a respect for him. He's a pirate, but he's not like "those other pirates" because he remains the center of attention and has skills that are admirable. In both Treasure Island and Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl, Jack

Sparrow and Long John Silver escape punishment for the crime of piracy and are given a chance to escape. They earn the respect of those who are in charge of eliminating piracy, but fall in awe of the freedom of the pirate.

The Black Spot

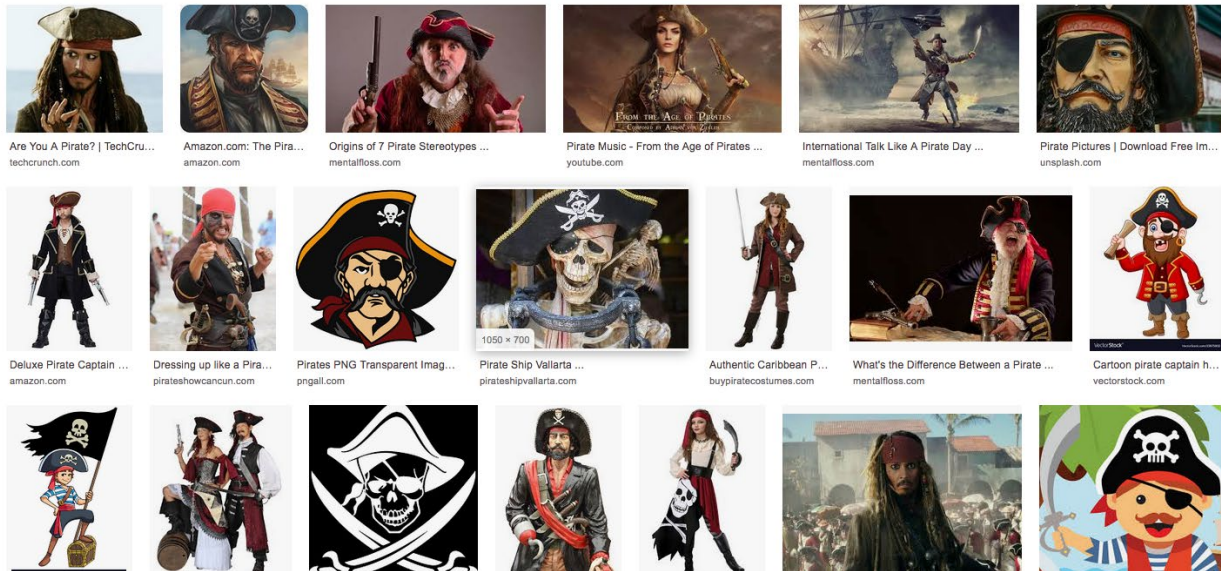
“A closed text is one that carefully develops details and connections, leaving readers or viewers little chance for active participation and interpretation.” (Stone, 2)

Disney effectively leaves a black spot to imagination when it comes to pirates. Piracy has a culture and an ideal attached to it, all manufactured by Disney. Long John Silver was by no means a good man, he murdered people to get what he wanted and then turned on his own men when it benefited him. Despite these killings, Long John Silver is never presented as a villain. He is too charming to be bad, and he is too likeable to be seen as a bad guy. What redeems him, is his heroic action to save Jim Hawkins from the even worst pirates. He lives by his own code and escapes because people are in awe of his freedom. The same goes for Jack Sparrow. Despite Jack Sparrow's crimes and involvement with piracy, Will Turner saves his life at the end and allows him to escape. He is willing to be branded a pirate because Jack Sparrow saved his life. Pirate is no longer a dirty word, but one worn with pride. It means, “I am proud to go against the establishment, I am proud to defy the law. This defiance makes me free.” The pirate is free above all else. The open water, the lack of rules and the ability to do what one wants without consequence attest to that ideal. The villainy pirates commit are a comedic backdrop to this freedom and, as a result, murder is never taken seriously.

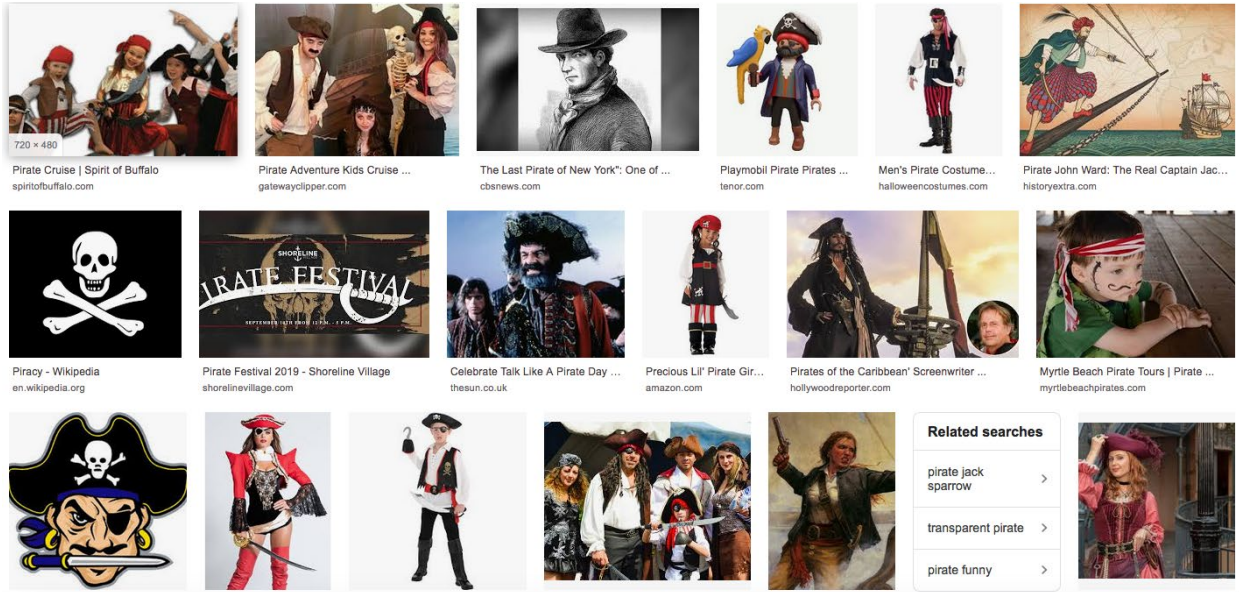
There are pirates as villains, but they are overshadowed by the good pirates. Disney has created what a pirate is. The pirate is fun, cool, and charming and while backdrop of murder and chaos is there, it is not the focus. The focus is the anti-hero pirate and his ridiculous caricature with the peg leg, the parrot, the eye patches, the arrgh and the mateys. Pirates came from all over the world, they have different speaking styles and cultures, but none of that fits this particular pop-culture image.

Yerr all White

Beyond the caricature of the pirate, in particular we are given a very specific image of the pirate. Pirates existed for centuries and have existed all over the world. Yet they in popular tv shows, films, and imagery, the pirate is distinctly white.



[Pictured: Google Search of Pirate]



[Pictured: Page Two of Google search of Pirate]

The only difference in the google image search is the one photo of a Somali pirate in a sea of white faces.



[Pictured: Somali Pirate]

The image of the pirate is carefully crafted to fit a white adventurer who operates outside of the confines of the law and is to be admired for it. Disney seeks to commodify and define what things are. They control the image so they can make money off of it.

When you think of pirate, they want you to think of what said the pirate is. If the pirate wasn't white, due to ingrained racist constructs, the pirate might be considered what they actually are, dangerous. If the cultural idea of a pirate was the black Somalian pirate, Disney could not make money off of that. People of color are often demonized and made to appear less than their white counterparts. The white adventurer is the safer choice, it's the choice that appeals to the majority. There is a deliberate way in which the pirates image was crafted and it pulls from various cultural desires. The desire to be free, the desire to take revenge against those who harmed you, the desire for adventure. The advent of the image of the pirate came about for a very specific reason and that was to make money. Disney saw their chance and ran with it. Perhaps they could do that same again by continuing the Pirates franchise, but pulling people of color to the forefront. To diversify what a pirate can be. After all, what ye but all pirates at heart?

Conclusion

Piracy and the history of humankind is inextricably linked. Since humans first took to the sea, piracy has existed. Much of our culture's knowledge about piracy comes from a very specific era in time. The lack of organization and various maritime wars throughout the 17th and early 18th century led to unique moment in time, The Golden Age of Piracy. The Golden Age of Piracy has been narrowed down between 1716 and 1725. The reason behind this extreme popularity is that this time period produced the most written

accounts for the scourge of the sea. Various pirates rose to infamy during this time period and have seen themselves be reimagined as characters in various stories, books, plays, and movies. From the printing of A General History of Pyrates to billion dollar franchise Pirates of the Caribbean, pirates have enamored our culture. Disney is a billion dollar media enterprise hell bent on creating a closed text. A closed text is one that carefully develops details and connections, leaving readers or viewers little chance for active participation and interpretation. An open text, on the other hand, presents itself in such a way that a full story is told without elaborating every detail of plot, character, or motivation. Thus receivers can take a more active role by making their own connections, by "filling in the gaps. Disney closed the text on piracy in 1950 with its first live action film, *Treasure Island*. In this movie they created the popular tropes that exist in every pirate medium to this day. Swashbuckling adventures, parrots, peg legs, parrots, arghs and mateys. Pirates have taken on another meaning in culture, one that is the physical incarnation of freedom. Living by your own code and going wherever the wind takes you. Disney controlling what pirates are, controls the culture's thoughts on what they could be. Pirates are cross cultural , they existed in every race, background and even gender. Yet the idea of the pirate is strictly white, European and male. A quick Google search will produce pirates who are all distinctly white. In Disney's attempt to close the text on the pirate, they've eliminated a vast number of cultures and people from participating in the excitement of commercial piracy and made it a whites only entertainment piece.

Where do we go from here?

Piracy has been turned into a multibillion dollar industry. Pirates have been far removed from what they once were. They are no longer criminals, but are safe characters for children to dress up as. In future research, it can be explored how the image of white piracy affects people of color who enjoy pirates. If Disney can open up the representation of piracy, perhaps we can see a more diverse and representative Google image search? Representation in media is not only effective for the profits of Disney and other companies, but it also gives people characters to model themselves after. Expanding the gender, race and ethnicity of pirates (and not just as the villains) would give people other heroes to look up to. Ultimately, this research should help contribute to the conversation of how representation in media defines our ideology of what a person or character from history is and how it is defined through a white lens.

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