When They See Us as the Central Park Jogger Case's Monsters

Changing the Narrative from Villain to Victim

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Abstract

On the 19th of April, 1989, a jogger was raped in Central Park, New York City. In the days that followed, newspapers collectively exclaimed the following narrative: five African-American/Latino "wilding" youths – now known as the Central Park Five – were the monsters of this random and heinous act of violence. Thirty years later, Ava DuVernay's Netflix miniseries *When They See Us* would cast these five monsters as the innocent victims of a racially biased legal system that enabled their wrongful convictions. In this master's thesis, the 1989 and 2019 narratives of the Central Park Five will be compared to each other. More specifically, by means of a narratological framework, the discourse, medium and context of both narratives will be analyzed to better understand what enabled a shift in identity of the case's villain. Both narratives were created as an emotional response to the larger context of their time. While the newspapers in 1989 followed a long-standing tradition of the mythic Bestial Black Man to cast the five teenagers as the culprit, DuVernay's fight for racial justice in an era of police brutality and Black Lives Matter found Prosecutor Linda Fairstein at the heart of the problem. Due to DuVernay's dramatization of the Central Park Jogger Case, the miniseries has given way to a whole new generation of people who strongly believe that the once bestial, criminalized young teenagers are actually the victims of Fairstein's, or better yet, the system's racially biased prosecution.

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0. Introduction

> "This was your version of the truth, right?"
>
> "That's what I believed to be the truth," Hartigan said finally.
>
> – Sarah Burns, *The Central Park Five*

On the morning of Friday, the 21st of April, 1989, the city of New York awoke to the following headline: "Wolf Pack's Prey: Female Jogger near Death after Savage Attack by Roving Gang" ("Wolf Pack"). A report in *The New York Times* read: "A young woman, jogging on her usual nighttime path in Central Park, was raped, severely beaten and left unconscious in an attack by as many as 12 youths, who roamed the park in a vicious rampage Wednesday night, the police said" (Wolff). In the months that followed, five Black and Latino boys – aged 14 to 16 – now known as the Central Park Five, would be prosecuted, and later on convicted and sentenced to five to fifteen years in prison. Before any investigation had been conducted, however, "the fundamental narrative of what had happened – and thus the conventional viewpoint shared by most inhabitants of New York – coalesced" (68), Sarah Burns writes in her true-crime novel *The Central Park Five*. It was only in 2002, when Matias Reyez confessed to being the one and only rapist in the Central Park Jogger Case, that cracks started to appear in the original narrative. It would take another seven months for the Central Park Five's convictions to be vacated and erased (Burns 195).

Thirty years after the brutal assault on Trisha Meili, Netflix released Ava DuVernay's miniseries *When They See Us*. Its logline reads: "Five teens from Harlem become trapped in a nightmare when they're falsely accused of a brutal attack in Central Park. Based on the true story" ("When They See Us"). While the five boys – Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana and Korey Wise – were initially cast by the police and news media as the villains of the 1989 narrative, DuVernay's 2019 retelling shows them to be the victims of a racially biased legal system. The videotaped statements – in which the Central Park Five confessed back in 1989 – are shown in the series to be the result of hours upon hours of brutal police interrogations and scare tactics which eventually led to their false and coerced confessions. In the process, Prosecutor Linda Fairstein poses as the show's antagonist, which has resulted in a "public outrage" forcing Fairstein to resign from the "boards of several organizations" (Harris and Jacobs). Fairstein has gone on to file a suit against Netflix and DuVernay claiming to be defamed by the series, which depicts her "'as a racist, unethical villain who is determined to jail innocent children of color at any cost,' the suit alleges" (Maddaus).

How one event and its surrounding historical context could have enabled two seemingly opposite narratives will be at the heart of this master's thesis. By means of a narratological framework and including legal, historical, sociological and journalistic academic scholarship, the 1989 and 2019 narratives of the Central Park Five will be compared to each other in terms of their discourse, medium and context. More specifically, the goal of this study is to comprehend what led and contributed to the villainization of five young boys of color in the public narrative of 1989, and how Ava DuVernay's storytelling was able to shift the narrative and transform the story into one of racial injustice and cinematic activism relevant in today's turbulent era of police brutality and Black Lives Matter. The mainstream media (radio, TV and the written press) have created the 1989 narrative and – thanks to the Netflix series' release in 2019 – the story's news coverage continues up to this day. This MA thesis will analyze the early newspaper coverage only. The reason for this is that this paper is interested in the construction of the story's public narrative, which – as Burns attests – was established before the youths had even appeared in court (68). In contrast, the analysis of *When They See Us* – which follows the lives of the Central Park Five through their initial arrest all the way up to their eventual exoneration – examines all four episodes as they – in their entirety – form and inform the 2019 public narrative. As argued by Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck in their *Handbook of Narrative Analysis,* "only a narratology that deals both with the narrated world (content) and also with the way in which this world is represented (form) has any relevance for text interpretation" (7). Therefore, this analysis will be twofold: on the one hand, establishing the context and time in which the story is told, and the content itself, will be of great importance; on the other hand, this study will unpack the medium and accompanying discourse in which the story is narrated to the public. It is in the combination of this content analysis and formal analysis that an explanation for the Central Park Five's shift from villain to victim in the public eye can be found.

1. True Story: A Crime in the Park

Before going into the significant differences between the 1989 and 2019 Central Park Five narratives, it is fruitful to discuss what these two narratives have in common. The most evident commonality is their story. In structuralist narratology, story (*histoire*) is one of the three levels a narrative text can be divided into according to Gérard Genette; the other two levels are called narration and narrative (*récit*) (Herman and Vervaeck 41-42). Illustrated by E. M. Forster's

well-known example of the dying king and his dying wife[1], a story can be defined as "a chronological sequence of events," while a plot or narrative "refers to the causal connection between those events" (Herman and Vervaeck 11). The story of the Central Park Five or the Central Park Jogger – depending on which aspect of the narrative the narrator likes to focus on – starts with a crime in the park on the 19th of April, 1989. "A [white] twenty-eight-year-old investment banker working in Manhattan's financial district" is raped (Byfield 1). Alongside the assault, various reports are made to the police that night about "a gang of rowdy youths" creating havoc in the park (Burns 26). Many of them – the Central Park Five included – would be apprehended in the following days. In line with Seymour Chatman's diagram of narrative in *Story and Discourse*[2] (26)*,* the 1989 and 2019 narratives' story consists of the same set of characters and settings (existents), while both also depict the events of Trish Meili's rape and the arrest of the Central Park Five.

In both narratives, the event of the rape serves as the story's "inciting incident," which means that it is "the event that sets the main character or characters on the journey that will occupy them throughout the narrative. Typically, this incident will upset the balance within the main character's world" (MasterClass). In Chatman's diagram, an event can either be an action or a happening; an action being "a change of state brought about by an agent" (44), whereas a happening "entails a predication of which the character […] is narrative object," or in other words, the "affected" (45). In terms of our two narratives, the event's status changes: according to the media in 1989, the Central Park Five are responsible for Meili's rape, making them the perpetrators of an action. In *When They See Us*, however, the five boys are wrongfully convicted because they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. In this case, the assault qualifies as a happening in which the Central Park Five are among the affected. While the media and series share the same fundamental story, or "chronological sequence of events" (Herman and Vervaeck 11), the way in which the events of the assault and the presence of the boys in the park are linked to one another allows the story to have multiple diverging narratives. It is in the organization and the act of giving meaning to various chronological events that we find the second level of Genette's three-leveled narratological structure: the narrative (Herman and Vervaeck 42).

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[1] "Forster provides the following example of a story: 'The king died and then the queen died.' This sequence becomes a plot in the following sentence: 'The king died and then the queen died of grief'" (Herman and Vervaeck 12).

[2] See appendix.

Although I have just attempted to reconstruct the Central Park Jogger Case's story, this structuralist approach is a flawed one that has been heavily criticized by poststructuralists. For one thing, reconstructing the story assumes that the past can be known, while in reality "stories can never be reconstructions of the past, because there was no 'real' event first and a narrative repetition afterwards" (Herman and Vervaeck 112). As Itzhak Roeh suggests, "stories have to be told to exist" (164). Nevertheless, this does not prevent people from making inferences; in fact, it seems to be in our nature as human beings "to interpret events succeeding each other in time as events with a causal connection" (Herman & Vervaeck 12). The other difficulty is that structuralism assumes that every story can be reduced to a universal "abstract deep structure" to which every narrative text adheres (41). Poststructuralism rejects this notion, arguing that a text never solely exists in a closed capsule but always depends on underlying codes and ideologies, a "narrative space" as it were (Herman and Vervaeck 113), introduced by the reader and their own context and social reality (Chatman 95; Domínguez; Herman and Vervaeck 12, 13). Therefore, a story can never simply be reduced to a structure that fits all. Based on the public narratives and beliefs that precede a certain event or story, the reader will interpret the event "in the light of the expected" (Chase 213). That in 1989 and 2019 a different narrative was valued as the Central Park Jogger's "true" narrative is due to the fact that the two respective narratives were deemed the most "plausible within the culture doing the evaluating" (217).

Apart from analyses based on reception theory that argue, as summarized by Eva Domínguez, "that the meaning of the text is built at the time of reading, in the act of cooperation that occurs in the encounter between reader and text" ("Going Beyond"), it is equally pertinent to analyze the conception of a text as such. Before there can be any text, there needs to be someone to interpret the story and organize the events into a narrative. "In a genetic perspective," Jan Meister and Jörg Schönert write, this organization is "attributed to the empirical author in terms of real-world ontology, or, in terms of systematic logic, to some abstract narrative instance – i.e., to a narrator" (12). In the case of the Central Park Jogger story – as told by the written press – sociologist and former *New York Daily News* staff writer Natalie Byfield notes that "the police were the first editors" (41). Based on their initial reporting, the media in turn presented a narrative to the public. In terms of Netflix's *When They See Us*, DuVernay and the camera qualify as the narrative's narrator and focalizer, respectively. Returning to Genette's three levels of a narrative text, we may conclude that the media and DuVernay, each in their own way, organize the Central Park Jogger story into a narrative. They are inevitably informed and influenced by their own "conscious or unconscious views of the world" (Herman and Vervaeck 8), which becomes evident in the story's narration – "the

formulation of a story" in terms of "word choice, sentence length, and narrating agent" (42). Before a reader enters the conversation, various codes and ideologies have already been (un)consciously embedded in the text by means of the language used by the narrator. Thus, in order to comprehend the forces at play in the villainization, first, of the Central Park Five, and second, of Linda Fairstein, it is important to acknowledge that besides the reader and context, the author, too, has certain influence on the meaning of a narrative text.

While in Genette's theory, story, narrative, and narration are presented as three independent levels that together make up a narrative text, Chatman analyzes narrative as an overarching entity made up of story and discourse – the latter's definition being more exhaustive than that of narration (Chatman 19). In addition to being "the expression, the means by which the content is communicated" (19), discourse is also the arranging force that turns the events into a narrative within a certain existing paradigm (43). In regard to the Central Park Jogger story's characters and their characterization, it is to a great extent the discourse that informs the reader and strongly influences their understanding of the characters (Herman and Vervaeck 68). It is, after all, in the words used by the newspapers, or in the way the characters are written and directed in *When They See Us*, that the Central Park Five and Linda Fairstein are brought to life. To illustrate this on the level of the plot's macrostructure, both narratives are construed in what Aristotle describes as the realm of the fatal. In both instances, the story's protagonists – the Central Park Five – undeniably fail (Chatman 85). The discourse used by the media in 1989 poses the protagonists as villainous. When they are incarcerated – which marks their downfall as villains – "we feel smug satisfaction, justice has been served" (85). In *When They See Us*, by contrast, the discourse presents them as tragic heroes. When they fail to prove their innocence, and are punished for being in the park, for being Black, we feel outraged.

Similar to the issues raised concerning structuralism, Aristotle's typologies of a plot's macrostructure arguably fail to acknowledge that "units only materialize when an audience enters into a contract with the author on the basis of known or learnable conventions" (Chatman 95). While the Central Park Jogger story remains in the realm of the fatal over the course of its 30-year existence, the representation and audience's understanding of the characters shift from villain to victim – or even to hero, as some might feel. As Chatman argues, "the set of traits constituting a man's goodness changes from century to century, from society to society" (89). Take Anna Fahraeus and Dikmen Camoglu's definition of a villain:

> The villain embodies […] opposition and can present a fascinating complex of characteristics. Villainy is integral in narratives that reflect the innermost fears of the

human psyche, and is often a significant part of the construction of loss, whether it is loss of innocence, loss of loved ones, loss of power, or loss of self and/or identity. The conflict that in the end produces and constructs the hero is the battle to overcome the antagonist or opposition, and resolve the transgressions that disrupt harmony, order, etc. (viii)

The Central Park Five and Linda Fairstein, each in their own way, represent a fear that reigned at the time of the respective narratives' conception. While violent crime kept 1989 New York City awake at night, wrongful convictions on the basis of racial profiling is the fear of many residents in 2019. The discourse in the two narratives, then, plays into dominant cultural discourses as it projects some of society's innermost fears onto the characters it presents as villains.

A final shared feature of the two narratives that should not be overlooked is the medium in which the story is told. What documentary drama and the news have in common is the contract that exists between them and their audience. A reader who engages in the cultural practice of reading or viewing a narrative text presented by the news or documentary drama, is promised some form of truth; both media – in their own right – act as authoritative figures of fact (Bird and Dardenne 80; Paget 3). Journalism generally prides itself on its objectivity when relaying reality to the public (Buozis and Creech 1431). Documentary drama – whose genre designation likewise refers to its factuality and realistic nature – offers, besides the promise of fact, "instruction or information on some matter, and it offers to instruct and inform in the best possible 'artistic' taste" (Paget 15). The notions of objectivity, truth and fact, however, have been deconstructed by various post-modern theorists. As Derek Paget argues, "the phenomenon of 'objective information' is itself a hegemonic myth, designed to anchor populations in a unified view of the world" (19). Bennet et al. concur that the

confusion of authority and legitimacy with objectivity makes the news an active agent in the construction of a narrow but compelling version of reality – a version that is communicated so broadly and filled with such familiar symbolism that other versions seem biased or distorted. (qtd. in Bird and Dardenne 81)

So, while both news media and documentary drama are known for presenting reality, that reality itself is ultimately a cultural construct. Yet, the fact that it is a construct does not therefore diminish the immense power and influence both journalism and documentary drama hold over the public and the public narratives they believe in (Byfield 12).

2. The News: Mythic Bestial Black Boys in Central Park

When Itzak Roeh suggested in 1989 that journalism – in essence – is storytelling, most journalists would have disagreed (162). While members of the profession would insist on strictly collecting and telling the facts, Roeh proposed that "journalists' stories of the real are constructions of meanings, and they seek, as all narratives do, to establish meaningful closure of moral significance. At the same time they also obey most of the same laws and codes of storytelling" (165). As Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt attests, every news story consists of a beginning, middle, and end, similar to a short story, though it usually offers "closure at the beginning of the text – most often in the headline" (953). Roeh was not the first nor the last scholar to propose news-as-narrative, and the notion has since been developed more thoroughly in journalistic scholarship (Bird and Dardenne; Buozis and Creech; Tenenboim-Weinblatt; Wahl-Jorgensen and Schmidt). Elizabeth Bird and Robert Dardenne argue that "one of the most productive ways to see news is to consider it as myth" (70). Like news stories, myth is a form of storytelling that is used to educate people within society about certain values, and to teach them right from wrong (70). Myth tellers would draw on existing myths and archetypal stories to "make sense of the world" (Lule qtd. in Kelsey 251), to "tell it like it means" instead of telling it "like it is" (Bird and Dardenne 71). Crime stories, for instance, often rely on the mythical archetypes of the hero, the victim and the villain to reinforce values of morality within society (71). While the details of the crimes change, the structure of the story and its characters remain mostly the same, as they are easy for the audience to recognize and understand. In some cases even, Tenenboim-Weinblatt notes, "culturally important stories" such as the Central Park Jogger Case would be "mythologized and 'kept alive' by journalists" over a longer period of time (955). The "myth" of the crime in Central Park functions "both as a model of and a model for a culture" (Bird and Dardenne 71). In the case of the 1989 narrative, the media drew heavily on the existing myth of the Black man as criminal while educating the citizens of New York City about who is good and who is evil.

Once we accept the premise of a news story being a kind of myth, we can begin to analyze the discourse of the 1989 narrative through a discourse-mythological approach. When we look at the study of discourse in journalism, it soon becomes clear that the concept is far more complex than what was earlier defined by Chatman in a narratological context. Teun van Dijk, who has written extensively on discourse in the news, proposes that the study of discourse should not be limited to the analysis of words or sentences only – *narration* in narratology – but should involve also the analysis of "structures and strategies of 'whole' written or spoken

discourses or *communicative events*" (192). Discourse, then, "is shaped by the context and the structures of text and talk, where language is used to convey specific ideas about groups and their character" (Chiasson 40). For this reason, it is important to contextualize the era in which the 1989 narrative was produced. Particularly with reference to the discourse-mythological approach, Darren Kelsey argues that such a framework "shows how discourse constructs myth, which carries ideology, yet ideology also informs discourse in the construction of mythology" (251). By recognizing the villain myth as the archetypal story used by the 1989 print media to frame the Central Park Jogger story, and by identifying the existing myths upon which journalists drew to create a meaningful story that would be understood by a 1989 audience, we are able to account for the villainization of the Central Park Five. On a macro level, the following analysis will reveal the discursive practices present that "account for the ways in which 'authors of texts draw on already existing discourses and genres'" (Jorgenson & Phillips qtd. in Kelsey 250). While the news coverage drew on various existing myths, the two most prominently featured ones will be the focus of this discussion. On a micro level, I will undertake a textual analysis of various newspapers to develop a better understanding of the news coverage's language, which in itself is informed by, and simultaneously reinforces, dominant ideologies (Kelsey 250).

In the year that Trisha Meili was brutally raped in Central Park, the so-called city of dreams had become a nightmare for many. With an average of 36 murders a week, the surge of a new drug and AIDS epidemic, burglaries and assaults headlining the front page, and an overburdened justice system, New York City had become a dangerous place for civilians and police officers alike (Burns 8, 10, 11). In addition, the city's population had been undergoing a rather drastic demographic change: while many African-American and Latino people had moved to the city over the past few decades, many white people had been fleeing to the suburbs (13). Since most of the crime reports originated in the city's minority neighborhoods, often framed discursively as "ghettos," Black men in particular – "who have for centuries been stereotyped as menacing and criminal" (17) – became central in the city's fear of crime. The mainstream and tabloid media, in turn, tended to fuel the ongoing racial divide by reinforcing "the stereotype of the minority criminal, projecting images of Black and Latino men in perp walks or mug shots" (14). Among the 3254 assaults that were reported in New York City in 1989 alone, the rape of a white investment banker in Central Park would become one of the city's most infamous crimes (Byfield 31). While "any crime in Central Park was highlighted in the media as especially newsworthy, exaggerating the feeling that it was a dangerous place to go, especially at night" (Burns 20), Natalie Byfield – who then worked in the newsroom of the

Daily News – attributes the story's immense and even international media attention to the rape's interracial nature (31).

At first glance, the 1989 narrative does not seem to have a clear homogenous source text. There does – in fact – exist a 1989 "news narrative," which Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Schmidt define as "a collective body of news stories that gel into a master narrative, a story line that emerges when different news sources gravitate towards a dominant interpretation of events or processes" (262). According to Greg Stratton, it was within the first ten days of the Central Park Five's criminal charge that the print media had shaped "the public consciousness" (283), and framed the five boys as the antagonists of the story (293). While the details of the crime itself changed constantly, the Central Park Five's guilt was rarely questioned, and the word *alleged* was barely used by any of the mainstream news outlets (Burns 67, 69; Byfield 17). The *Daily News* and *New York Post* tabloids in particular even went so far as to compete with one another "to see who could be most outraged by the attack and who could make the boys look most guilty" (Burns 68). Due to the rapid arrests, however, the most prevalent question in the news coverage was not who but why (Lichter et al. 5). Although race was the most frequently discussed possibility as the motive behind the assault, Lichter et al.'s research[3] shows that it was denied 80% of the time (5). A teenager quoted in *The New York Times* said: "This is not a black and white issue. They hurt a woman and race is a cover-up. The [sic] are just bad kids" (qtd. in Lichter et al. 5). Instead of racial animosity, the "mob psychology of the attackers" (6) and the crime as a random act of violence were most often proposed as a possible explanation. Regardless of what ultimately came to be seen as the motive behind the crime in the park, it is safe to say that the early media coverage successfully constructed a publicly believed "master narrative" in which "stark oppositions between the 'evil' of the accused and the 'goodness' of the victim" prevailed (Chancer qtd. in Kennedy 1297).

In opposition to this dominant narrative, which was stained by often blatantly racist language and "other connotative cues that appealed to the racial anxieties of [the mainstream news media's] readership" (Beardsley and Teresa 169), the *New York Amsterdam News* – a Black-owned urban weekly newspaper and "leading alternative publication in the New York City area" (166) – offered a counter narrative to the public. Most of their news coverage on the case was spent challenging the mainstream narrative's framing of the judicial system as the hero and the Central Park Five as savage, bestial villains. In their narrative, the boys were cast

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[3] Lichter et al.'s research, published in 1989, examines the 190 stories printed in "the *Times, Post, Daily News* and the *Amsterdam News* in the fifteen days after the crime" (3).

as victims "within a racist judicial system that engaged in repeated acts of discrimination against young males of color" (171), all the while assuming that the Central Park Five were in fact the rapists (Burns 81). Similarly, *El Diario/La Prensa* and *The City Sun*, a Spanish-language and a Black-owned newspaper, respectively, were more concerned with challenging the system that had led to such a vicious crime in the first place than with questioning whether the teenagers were in fact guilty (82). In their narrativization of the Jogger case, the *Amsterdam News* – like the mainstream news outlets – made use of the archetypal story of villains, victims and heroes (Beardsley and Teresa 176). They furthermore relied on myths of childhood innocence to rehumanize the boys and stress their vulnerability (172), which benefited their own political agenda "to highlight the ongoing persecution and suffering of young black and brown men at the hands of white American authority" (170). Even with the few alternative voices that questioned the dominant narrative – at least to some extent – the Central Park Jogger story had already taken on a life of its own in the minds of most New York citizens, who, according to Burns, were "ready to believe the absolute worst about a group of poor black and Latino teenagers" (81).

A notable discursive practice in the mainstream newspapers' narrativization of the Central Park Jogger story is the victimization of Trisha Meili. According to James Ettema and Theodore Glasser, who have analyzed and interviewed various investigative journalists to comprehend how narrative can be "used as a moral force in the life of the community" (13), it is the reporter's moral task in news stories about acts of terrible vice "to evoke outrage at the violation of dearly held values in the conduct of public affairs and implicitly invite, if not explicitly demand, a return to those values" (12). To accomplish this public outrage, such narratives make use of a demonstrative discourse "designed to distinguish between the honorable and the dishonorable" in order to establish innocence and guilt (12). Two possible narrative strategies that Ettema and Glasser identify in their research is the "highlighting [of] cruelly ironic details of the victim's experience, and [the] privileging [of] the victim's own account of that experience" (14). The irony of Meili's situation is that after twelve days of being comatose, she woke up with no recollection of the assault, making it impossible for her to give an account of her experience. In the meantime, however, she had already become the Central Park Jogger. While it is undeniable that Meili was the victim of a horrendous crime, the news coverage in the first few days – when it was still believed that Meili was "likely to die" (Burns 31) – made sure to emphasize that she had not only been wronged but that she was also "innocent – innocent enough, at least, to make [her] victimization by 'the system' a moral outrage" (Ettema and Glasser 13). Through constant hospital media coverage that provided

updates on her wellbeing and highlighted the severity of her injuries, and news articles focusing on her personal life, such as "She Put Up Terrific Fight" and "Lived a Dream Life" in the *Daily News,* the widespread "image of the jogger as an upper-class, virtuous white woman, without a questionable or criminal past," was created (Byfield 57). As Joan Didion narrates in "Sentimental Journeys," Meili "would be Lady Courage to *The New York Post*, she would be A Profile in Courage to *The Daily News* and *New York Newsday*" (46). To John Gutfreund, she was "the personification of 'what makes this city so vibrant and so great,' now 'struck down by a side of our city that is as awful and terrifying as the creative side is wonderful'" (qtd. in Didion 46). In short, the Central Park Jogger had become the ideal image of a morally upstanding New York citizen – or even the emblem of the city as a whole – unjustly struck by tragedy.

As in all binary oppositions, the irrefutability of Meili's established innocence facilitated the magnitude of the Central Park Five's believed guilt. It was the discourse used by the newspapers to present the teenagers to the public that enabled their villainization. Although the details of the crime itself were shocking, the fact that it was a rape, more specifically the rape of a white woman by Black boys, caught the city's imagination as the narrative fitted within a larger American historical tradition of the Black rapist, also known as the mythic Bestial Black Man (Chiasson 32; Didion 47). This myth, which finds its origins in the first interactions between colonial European and indigenous African people, supposes that "black men are animalistic, sexually unrestrained, inherently criminal, and ultimately bent on rape" (Duru 1320). Due to the United States' historical institution of slavery, these stereotypes were strengthened as they became part of the country's public discourse and collective unconscious. As such, Black men came to inspire fear, as they were viewed by white society as "impending rape threats" (1324). While explicit expressions of racism have become largely unacceptable since the Civil Rights movement, the image of the mythic Bestial Black Man has persevered and sometimes found its way into the courtroom (1342). In the case of the Central Park Jogger Case, however, Jeremi Duru attests that the trials were spared this type of allusions (1346), in contrast to the discourse in the public forum, which spewed animal and savage imagery of the mythic Bestial Black Man left and right:

> Negative imagery used to describe the attackers or their behavior fell into four distinct categories: terms that evoked animality (e.g., 'wolfpack,' 'herd,' 'bestial'); criminality ('thugs,' 'gang,' 'crime spree'); aggressiveness ('marauders,' 'war party,' 'hungry for action'), and a catchall category of colorful negative terminology ('wildeyed teens,' 'fiends,' 'these goddamned people'). (Lichter et al. 10)

Besides overusing such terms in relation to the Central Park Five, the press often presented the boys inaccurately. For instance, they reported that the boys lived in a predominantly Black community, while in fact they were from Spanish Harlem (Welch et al., "Moral" 11-12). Moreover, their names and photographs were published repeatedly. In combination with the constant coverage of the jogger's "long list of injuries" that heightened the "savagery of the black male" (Byfield 60), the mainstream news media thus fed into the stereotype of the Black criminal (Welch et al., "Moral" 11). Although Lichter et al.'s research has shown that the press rejected race as the crime's explanation, it becomes clear that their reaction to the crime was in fact steeped in racial language (Burns 90; Duru 1348).

The second most prominently featured myth in the newspaper coverage originates in folklore. One of the first instances in which the inhabitants of New York learned about the boys was through the analogy of a wolf pack. Throughout history, both wolves and werewolves have earned and maintained a strong reputation for being villainous in their encounters with humans (Jones 95). One of the most famous stories upholding this myth is that of Little Red Riding Hood. As a result, the assault on a woman jogging in the park alone at night soon came to be equated with this myth: "as one cop put it, '[she] gets what Little Red Riding Hood got'" (Duggan qtd. in Welch et al., "Youth" 46). Moreover, a *Newsday* article depicted the "wolf pack" as exercising its "evil impulses under a full moon" (qtd. in Duru 1349). The image of the full moon in folklore typically "prompts the mythical werewolf into untold savagery, from which he cannot escape; he has no choice, as attacking, maiming, and killing are his nature" (Duru 1349). In addition to the animal's mythical legacy in literature, the term "wolf pack" also developed an applied meaning after World War II, when people started to use it "to refer to gangs of teenagers committing robberies or assaults in cities" (Burns 70). By continuously comparing the Central Park Five to folkloric villainous wolves, in the process highlighting yet again the savagery of these mythic Bestial Black Boys, the newspapers painted a recognizable picture in which the Central Park Five were unmistakable monsters.

If the two previous myths were not enough to convince the public of the boys' villainous nature, a number of further details would become the final nail in the coffin for most. When the news media first broke the story of a group of Black and Latino youths assaulting a white woman, the newspapers immediately made certain assumptions on their background. On the 23rd of April, 1989, Pete Hamill's column "A Savage Disease" in the *Post* read: "They were coming downtown from a world of crack, welfare, guns, knives, indifference and ignorance. They were coming from a land with no fathers. … They were coming from the anarchic province of the poor" (qtd. in Hancock 38). In the days that followed, the newspapers and the

public discovered that the Central Park Five in fact had no violent past at all, and were from "middle-class families exceeding in their curricular and extra-curricular activities" (Duru 1353). One would expect such a revelation to have created some reasonable doubt; but, on the contrary, it only contributed further to the characterization of the boys' intrinsic evil in the existing narrative (Hancock 42; Duru 1353). According to Lichter et al., it was the contrast between the horrendous details of the crime and the boys' apparent exemplary behavior prior to the assault that "drove home the theme of 'good kids turned bad'" (12), and made the rape seem all the more unexpected and random. The boys, in turn, whom the public now believed to be "able to hide their 'savagery' under their civil and polite personas" (Duru 1353), essentially became strangers to the public, a feature that Stella Chiasson argues makes for an "ideal" villain (39).

Having established the many ways in which the 1989 narrative's discourse presents the Central Park Five as villains, we should still ask the question what type of villains they are. In a psychologically inspired study of literary and filmic villainy, Enrique Arenas distinguishes between villainy in the weak and the strong sense. The weak definition, he argues, "encompasses all possible metaphorical uses of the term *villain*" (6). A strong villain, on the other hand, is a kind of role that must always be played by a character (7). It must be a character – Arenas elaborates – who is "endowed with a motivational dimension," who has "the ability to transform the world around by exercising their will," who has "a certain degree of self-awareness," and whose actions are intentional (7). Arenas further differentiates between strong villains and wild animals since the former "can be measured in terms of social responsibility and are easily perceived as negative figures against the background of expected humane behaviour" (7). When we apply this theoretical framework to the many myths embedded in the 1989 narrative, we can conclude that the characters were presented to the public in the manner of the weak villain. In the news coverage, the Central Park Five are continuously compared to animals, with some articles even going as far as to suggest they are sub-animals. The endless descriptions of their savagery and bestiality suggest that whatever happened in the park that night does not fall under "expected humane behaviour" in the eyes of the mainstream media (7). The main reason why the assault caused such moral panic lies in the fact that it was unmotivated. So, in the narrativization of the Jogger story, the Central Park Five take the shape of a metaphorical "monstrous villain" whose aesthetic properties "are exactly those that spectators need in order to project over them their fears and anxieties" (12).

Finally, the Central Park Jogger Case – as presented by the mainstream written press – cannot be discussed without mentioning the very word that became synonymous with and

encapsulated the essence of the case: WILDING. Prior to the assault, the term had been unheard of by most, and reporters suggested that it was coined by some of the suspects while in holding. It later turned out to be a misunderstanding due to the fact that the police misheard one of the accused quoting a song called "Wild Thing" (Byfield 44). Byfield defines wilding as "intentionally behaving in a crazy manner, causing harm to others, and damaging property" (1). *The Daily News* described wilding as "street slang for going berserk"; to the *Post* it was "THE NEWEST TERM FOR TERROR IN CITY THAT LIVES IN FEAR" (qtd. in Burns 69). In reality, the term became much more complex as it not only implied the savagery of the boys' crime (Duru 1348), but also "came to define the[ir] inhumanity" (Hancock 42). Stephen Mexal for one insisted that the term was so elusive "that the central narrative of its definition became, in an odd twist, the narrative of its elusiveness" (106). Regardless of its precise origins and its elusive definition, *wilding* emerged as "the symbolic expression of [the city's] anxiety over youth violence" (Welch et al., "Moral" 22), and it placed the Central Park Five at the heart of the problem. Thus, the wilding, savage, bestial wolf pack became the monster of the 1989 mainstream newspapers' morality crime story, known as The Central Park Jogger Case.

3. The Series: Cinematic Activism Against Institutionalized Racism

By the time Matias Reyes – a by then convicted felon on account of multiple rapes – came forward in 2001 as the actual and sole rapist in the Central Park Jogger Case, four of the Central Park Five had already served their six- to seven-year sentence, while Korey Wise – the fifth member – was still serving his six- to fifteen-year sentence in state prison. After a yearlong reinvestigation by the district attorney's office, the five men's convictions were eventually vacated and erased on the 19th of December, 2002, exactly thirteen years and eight months after the crime in Central Park (Burns 195). The new verdict was met with disbelief by the New York tabloid press who repeatedly discredited Reyes's confession, and maintained the Central Park Five's guilt (200). *The New York Times*, on the other hand, examined Reyes's previous crimes and found similarities between those and Trisha Meili's, as well as inconsistencies in the teenagers' initial statements (Burns 201). Nevertheless, there was a strong resistance by "police, former prosecutors, and some in the media" to consider the possibility of the youths' innocence, proving once again how "powerfully entrenched" the original narrative had become in the public discourse and collective conscious (203). In contrast to the heavy media attention the case garnered in 1989, the articles that spoke of their exoneration in 2002 were only "a blip on the radar" (DuVernay qtd. in Patten). In her true-crime novel *The Central Park Five*, published in 2011 and related to Ken Burn's 2012 documentary film of the same name, Sarah Burns attests

that "to this day, many people who read the papers in 2002 assume or were led to believe that the convictions were vacated on a technicality, or that the new evidence did nothing to contradict the guilt of the Central Park Five" (204). Former President Donald Trump, for one, who petitioned to bring back the death penalty in relation to the case by placing $85,000 full-page advertisements in New York's four daily papers in 1989 (Burns 72), would go on to call the Central Park Five's $41 million settlement in 2014 a disgrace. He would later on reiterate his statement and disdain for the men as the 2016 Republican nominee for president (Patten). Even with their exoneration and the settlement of their civil lawsuit against their wrongful convictions, the Central Park Five, for many, remained the monsters of the 1989 crime that had shaken the nation.

In an era of continued police brutality against Black people and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the African American filmmaker Ava DuVernay – known for *Selma* and *13th* – presented a new narrative of the Central Park Jogger story to the public by means of her four-episode miniseries *When They See Us.* The critically acclaimed documentary drama – created, co-written and directed by DuVernay, and released worldwide on Netflix on the 31st of May, 2019 – is part of Netflix's 2018 Strong Black Lead movement. The movement, "as a form of black activism and resistance on screen" (Smolyannikova 5), is a content production project designed to promote Black stories, and advance the representation and number of Black people in front of and behind the camera. The stories are furthermore meant to oppose mainstream narratives by challenging stereotypical depictions, and reshaping "the imagery associated with African American identity" (5). In *Oprah Winfrey Presents: When They See Us Now*, a TV Special with the original men and the show's cast, DuVernay explains that the series' goal was to "create something that was gonna be a catalyst for conversation" (00:06:04-00:06:06), something that is "actually gonna move people to action, move people to evaluate what they think and how they behave in the world" (00:06:17 – 00:06:22). Given the amount of discussion and public outrage the miniseries has provoked (Brickell 28; Callan), we may assert that DuVernay's 2019 narrative as a form of counter-storytelling has accomplished its goal. Apart from challenging the country's justice system and the American cinema's historical tradition of pejorative Black representations (Smolyannikova 62), the narrative was also meant to provide restorative justice to the Central Park Five. As DuVernay says: "I really wanted the men's stories to be told, and I wanted them to be heard" (*Oprah* 00:08:14 – 00:08:17). The first step in the men's rehumanization was to release them from the name and role they had been given by the 1989 media. Instead of the Central Park Five, the show became *When They See Us* and the men would become known as the Exonerated Five (*Oprah*).

Unlike the news that is restricted to objectively reporting the facts, the miniseries' genre as a documentary drama allows DuVernay to tell parts of the Central Park Jogger story that had previously been withheld from the public. Acting as a form of truth teller, the genre challenges the existing discourse, and creates its own by means of a persuasive narrative (Brickell 6). While the documentary aspect of the genre encourages the story to be read as news (Brickell 7, 10; Paget 29), it is the drama part that persuades the viewer of the issues portrayed on screen (Brickell 10, 17). The aim of a documentary drama, as argued by Derek Paget, is to offer the viewer – who expects "to acquire access to hitherto unrevealed (or narrowly distributed) 'facts'" (8) – a "complete seeing" (qtd. in Brickell 6). The 1989 audience had not been privy to the men's police interrogations and coercion, but the viewer of the 2019 narrative is. By means of "the fly on the wall camera technique" (Brickell 14), the viewer essentially becomes part of the narrative as they "feel integrated into the situation that is being shown on screen" (14). In addition to the audience's increased understanding of the situation at hand, Paget asserts that the viewer's emotional involvement is necessary in order to accomplish complete seeing (Brickell 11). This emotional involvement can be attained through various elements of the TV series' medium e.g. sound, music, lighting, directing, cinematography, the actor's performance… as they – each in their own way – contribute to the creation of sympathy, and have the capacity to pull the viewer further into the narrative (Brickell 28). For this analysis, however, I am interested in the purely narratological elements such as the ordering of the story, the dialogue and the actions of the characters to the extent that they inform the viewer's understanding of said character, and how these elements contribute to the 2019 narrative's discourse in which the Exonerated Five are presented as the victims of Fairstein's racist, villainous plan to imprison Black people at all costs.

Given the fact that the genre encourages the viewer to view a documentary drama as news, the discourse of the 2019 narrative will also be analyzed through a discourse-mythological approach. As it is the goal of both the news and documentary drama to help the public make sense of the world (Lule qtd. in Kelsey 251), with documentary drama additionally working "towards an articulation of publicly known matters which invites an audience to define or re-define its relationship to them" (Paget 29), we may assume that similar strategies and discursive practices – as those revealed in the analysis of the 1989 narrative – will have been used by DuVernay to create innocence and guilt in *When They See Us*. Different from the 1989 narrative, DuVernay retells a story that already exists in the public discourse. In order to persuade her audience that different characters take up the roles of the archetypal villain, hero and victim than the ones allotted by the 1989 media in their narrative, it is paramount that

DuVernay's narrative proves the Exonerated Five's innocence. While the 1989 mainstream newspapers' discourse asserted that the Exonerated Five were the perpetrators, DuVernay's narrative shows on multiple occasions that their involvement in the crime is nonexistent. Unlike the 1989 audience who first learned about the case through the description of the crime, *When They See Us* commences with the introduction of five well-behaved teenagers, who are talking to some of their friends or family members about the upcoming spring break and their plans for the evening. The boys are introduced separately, since only two of the five know each other prior to their arrests and convictions. Through dialogue, it becomes clear that it is by sheer coincidence that the teenagers wander into Central Park on the 19th of April, 1989, together with a group of around thirty youngsters, many of whom they do not know. When some of the youths start to harass innocent passers-by, none of the Exonerated Five participate. The latter's looks of shock and uneasiness even suggest that they condemn the violent turn the night has taken. Before anything more can happen, a voice-over signals that the police have started a goose chase, and due to the sound of police sirens, the youths flee the park. It is only after all the boys have left, that the viewer – for the first time – learns about an additional crime that has taken place in the park that night as Prosecutor Linda Fairstein walks onto the scene of the Central Park Jogger Case. To remove any lingering doubt that the Exonerated Five are in anyway complicit in the case, the fourth episode displays Meili's assault. The perpetrator is shown to be Matias Reyes, the DNA samples found at the scene are proven to be a match, and he is shown to have acted alone.

In order for the miniseries to evoke outrage and to inspire people to demand change and justice, it is not enough for the Exonerated Five to be simply innocent. Similar to the press's victimization of Trisha Meili, "ironic detail and control of point of view" (Ettema and Glasser 15) are used as narrative strategies in *When They See Us* to emphasize that the men are not just innocent, but they are in fact the victims of a racially biased legal system which is a moral outrage. Since the narrative is told from the teenagers' perspective, the Exonerated Five – for the first time – are allowed to give their "own account of [their] experience" (14). The audience, in turn, becomes witness to their police interrogations in which the men's innocence is "painstakingly *made real*" (13). Before being taken to the precinct, Antron McCray recounts the night's events to his dad: "I was following these big kids in the park and… it was fun at first, but then they started throwing stuff. That wasn't cool, you know? […] We left" ("Part One" 00:14:10 – 00:14:22). During his interrogation, Yusef Salaam claims: "I didn't go in there [Central Park] to beat up on people. I just wanted to hang with Korey and Eddie. I wouldn't have gone if I had known that's why we were there" (00:24:46 – 00:24:55). When a detective

tells Kevin Richardson that "Antron McCray and Raymond Santana said they saw you rape the lady" (00:26:37 – 00:26:44), Kevin repeats four times that he "didn't see any lady" (00:26:51 – 00:26:53). The longer the interrogations progress, the more the detectives become violent and accusatory towards the boys. The Exonerated Five, by contrast, become increasingly confused and emotional as they repeatedly plead to be released since they are innocent. In the end, we see how the detectives coerce the boys into telling a version of the facts that matches the narrative the police have come up with. The only reason the boys go along and admit to a crime they did not commit is because the police have promised them they can go home if they do.

In the first five minutes of the series, the irony of the teenagers' situation – a constant thread throughout the show – is introduced when Kevin's sister says: "You're a free man. Don't waste this spring break, Kev" ("Part One" 00:01:17 – 00:01:20). Little does she know that her brother would not be free for the next eight years of his life. There are many factors shown in the series that have influenced the outcome of the case, but most ironic becomes the influence of details in the men's personal lives on their verdict. When Kevin runs from the police on the night of the crime, he is tackled and struck on the head with a helmet by a police officer. During the investigation, Kevin's wound is used as evidence against him, and proof of the jogger's supposed defense against her attacker. The only reason Antron gives a false videotaped confession to the police is because his own dad forces him to "say what they want you to say" (00:32:51 – 00:32:53), even though they both know that would be a lie. Yusef is treated and interrogated as an adult upon his arrival at the precinct because he altered the age on his ID to impress girls. In reality, he is a minor who is legally required to be accompanied by a parent or guardian. At the end of the first episode, four of the Exonerated Five meet for the first time as they are placed together in the same holding cell. Raymond Santana is the first to speak, as he recognizes Kevin's scratch mark. Raymond was shown a picture of Kevin during his interrogation, and coerced into accusing Kevin of being the rapist. As names are being exchanged, it dawns upon the four boys that they have been played by the police as they all implicated each other in a crime none of them committed. Meanwhile, Korey Wise, the only one who is of age, is placed in adult detention and becomes the most tragic character of the entire story.

The fourth episode, centered on Korey's journey, drives home the ultimate irony of his misfortune. As the only adult, Korey starts out his sentence in Rikers Island where he is beaten and harassed by both inmates and correctional officers. In an attempt to be closer to his mother, Korey asks for a prison transfer and ends up 566 km from Harlem. Throughout his sentence, he would go on to ask for multiple transfers, none of them bringing him any closer to home. Most

of his sentence is spent in solitary to avoid being beaten up. It is in solitary that he and the audience – by means of voice-overs and flashbacks – come to understand the extreme irony of his situation. On the night of the crime, Korey is at a diner with his girlfriend when Yusef comes by and tries to convince him to come to the park. After some negotiations with his girlfriend – "No, Korey!" – to which he responds, "I'll be ten minutes! Stay. I promise. Ten minutes" ("Part One" 00:03:38 – 00:03:42), Korey joins Yusef. In the fourth episode, Korey revisits the event and imagines a sequence where he decides to stay with his girlfriend, highlighting that none of this would have happened if he had said no to Yusef. When the police are rounding up suspects in Harlem the day after the crime, Korey – who is not on the list – is asked if he wants to join Yusef – who is on the list – downtown. "You'll be right back" ("Part One" 00:21:55 – 00:21:57), one of the officers says. In the scenes that follow, the audience learns that due to Korey's presence at the precinct, he inadvertently becomes the investigation's fall guy, making the four's hitherto inconsistent statements make sense, as Linda Fairstein claims that Korey is "the one. He's the glue. We'll make sure he sticks it together" ("Part One" 00:50:52 – 00:50:55). To underline the irony of it all, Kevin notes in the second episode that "the only reason that you [Korey] got... you got caught up in all of this... is cause you went down there to the station with him. To help him out, man. To be there for him" ("Part Two" 00:05:09 – 00:05:27). Thus, what *When They See Us* tells us is that Korey Wise would not have spent thirteen years of his life in prison for a crime he did not commit if he had decided against leaving his girlfriend at the diner, or if he had not gone with Yusef to the precinct in support of his friend. And this makes Korey the ultimate victim.

Similar to the *Amsterdam News'*s approach in 1989 to evoke outrage in order to address the bigger ongoing social issue of young Black and Latino men being persecuted based on their race (Beardsley and Teresa 170), DuVernay's narration furthermore relies on the myth of childhood innocence to victimize the Exonerated Five. As "research into the mythic or symbolic roles played by children in contemporary media has indicated […] children are narratively useful" (Beadsley and Teresa 172). The reason, Kathryn Beardsley and Carrie Teresa argue, is that the character of a child helps "to simplify complex cultural and historical ideas into easily digestible and seemingly apolitical terms of 'good and bad'" (172). The series then, restores the childhood (innocence) the Exonerated Five were denied in 1989 (Tillet). From the get-go, the boys' youthfulness is underscored by means of their playful banter, and "the youthful appearances of the actors" (Tillet). When two detectives are about to interrogate Kevin, an officer warns them not to since "he's only 14," and "his mother felt sick, so she left" ("Part One" 00:23:06 – 00:23:09). To the officer's surprise, the two detectives appear gleeful at the

opportunity the apparent vulnerability of Kevin's situation poses, as it allows them to take advantage of his youthful naiveté. When Antron's father first learns that his son is suspected of rape, he assures an officer it is impossible because his son is too young, "he ain't got no experience. The boy won't even talk to girls yet" (00:30:55 – 00:30:58). In the third episode, Antron tells his mother he has been having nightmares in prison, and just like a little boy, he is comforted by his mother who scares the bad dreams away. All these examples, combined with the boys' scared demeanor during their interrogations, trials and prison sentence, their instant trust in the authorities' false promises, and their constant urgency to go home reinforce the image of the Exonerated Five being "just children, who want and need their parent(s) in a time of need and discomfort, just like any young, innocent child in that situation would have" (Brickell 35).

As opposed to the convincing picture of the Exonerated Five as victimized, innocent children, Prosecutor Linda Fairstein is presented as the boys' antithesis, and the story's villain. To her, they "are not kids" ("Part One" 00:22:47 – 00:22:48), but "animals" (00:19:12), "thug[s]" (00:20:26), and "little bastards" ("Part Two" 00:16:48 – 00:16:49). While various law enforcement characters are shown to be intent on imprisoning the boys at any cost – their language oftentimes resembling some of the 1989 newspapers' more racist discourse – Fairstein is presented as the ultimate force of evil since she is the one calling the shots as leader of the investigation. Apart from her overall inflammatory language use (Maddaus), Fairstein is shown from the very beginning to lead a racially biased investigation as she urges her investigators to get "an army of blue in Harlem. You go into those projects and you stop every little thug you see" ("Part One" 00:20:19 – 00:20:26), because "every young black male who was in the park last night is a suspect" (00:20:06 – 00:20:14). By doing so, she immediately disregards the possibility that the culprit could be anyone other than a young Black man, which gives the audience the impression that the investigation was prejudiced from the start. Not only is she portrayed as prejudiced, but her determination to capture them is also suggested to be motivated by the guilt she feels for the city's many unresolved rape cases, and by the conviction that her conscience will be cleared once these five boys are placed behind bars (Brickell 36). She even plays on that sense of guilt to convince District Attorney Morgenthau to let her stay on the case, instead of her "rival" Nancy Ryan from Homicide. As such, Fairstein is portrayed to be far more interested in furthering her own career and pursuing justice for all victims of rape, than she is in following the case's evidence wherever it may lead. When the timeline and the boys' testimonies do not add up, Fairstein acknowledges the discrepancies in the narrative she has created. Instead of challenging her own narrative, she challenges the boys' truthfulness and

rearranges the timeline to fit her narrative. When a detective remarks that there is not enough time for the events to have occurred in that manner, Fairstein refutes him saying that "it happened, so obviously there was" ("Part One" 00:36:16 – 00:36:19). When the trials reveal that none of the DNA samples match the Exonerated Five, the trials' lead Prosecutor Elizabeth Lederer shares her doubt with Fairstein concerning the boys' supposed guilt. A debate between the two erupts:

> LEDERER. But these boys, Linda...
> FAIRSTEIN. They were in the park, beating people up the same night that she's getting beat up and you're telling me they had nothing to do with it? Bullshit. They said it themselves. They told us what happened.
> LEDERER. They were told.
> FAIRSTEIN. Come on. The eye sees, but it cannot see itself. They couldn't see the whole picture of how their one part fit into the whole. That is all we did. ("Part Two" 00:31:24 – 00:31:54).

As the one who "helped" the Exonerated Five see the whole picture that wrongfully robbed them of their freedom, Fairstein becomes the monster of the 2019 miniseries' narrative.

In contrast to the metaphorical weak monstrous villains in the 1989 narrative, the character of Linda Fairstein in *When They See Us* is an example of Enrique Arenas's definition of a strong villain. Unlike the Central Park Five whose villainy was unmotivated and inhumane, the examples in the previous paragraph attest to Fairstein's villainous characterization as someone who is "endowed with a motivational dimension," who has "the ability to transform the world around by exercising their will," who has "a certain degree of self-awareness," and whose actions are intentional (Arenas 7). Her vendetta against the boys – if we can call it that – is shown to be a conscious response to the city's current rape "epidemic" ("Part One" 00:18:25), as Fairstein believes that the Exonerated Five's convictions are the means to regain control over the situation. In the fourth episode, Fairstein declines the opportunity she is given to redeem herself when Assistant District Attorney Nancy Ryan presents Fairstein with the evidence that proves the men's innocence and details the injustice they have been done. As the strong villain she is portrayed to be, Fairstein continues to rely on her "adaptive intelligence" to reach her "goals, defend [her] interests, and fight back" (Arenas 7). Instead of owning up to her mistakes, she maintains the Five's guilt and even suggests that Matias is simply the sixth member of the Central Park Five. It is her stubbornness, defensiveness, and her failure to accept

the truth presented to her that ultimately cements her in the role of *When They See Us*'s strong villainous monster (Brickell 51).

After the release of the series and the public outrage it has elicited, both Elizabeth Lederer and Linda Fairstein have stepped down from their respective roles as lecturer at Columbia Law School and board member of various organizations (Jacobs). Fairstein, who has furthermore been dropped by her publisher, has written an article in the *Wall Street Journal* in which she accuses DuVernay of writing "an utterly false narrative involving an evil mastermind (me)" and five suspects who are portrayed "as innocent of all charges against them," none of which, Fairstein argues, is true ("Netflix"). When DuVernay is asked by Oprah what she has to say about this specific example of impact the show has had, DuVernay explains "it's really not all about her [Fairstein]" (*Oprah* 00:10:19 – 00:10:21). It is about the system Fairstein is part of – a system "that's not broken," but "built to be this way" (00:10:24 – 00:10:26). While DuVernay is saddened to hear that her storytelling has come "down to one woman being punished for what she did" (*Oprah* 00:10:15 – 00:10:18), she does emphasize that it is important that people such as Fairstein and Lederer are held accountable for their actions. Be that as it may, the series' primary goal – as a form of cinematic activism – was to make the viewer "aware of how corrupt the justice system was and still is" (Brickell 51). Given the public's demand for Fairstein's resignation, we can safely say that goal has been achieved. Whether the series is an example of a false and "sloppy" fictionalization "for the sake of sensationalization" (Gagliano), or an example of a truthful retelling of the case's events remains to be seen, but it goes without saying that similar to the 1989 narrative created by the press, the 2019 narrative has strongly influenced society's understanding of the Central Park Jogger Case as it has led to the punishment of the people it has cast as the story's villain.

4. Conclusion

In this master's thesis, the 1989 and 2019 narratives of the Central Park Jogger story have been compared to each other in terms of their context, medium and discourse by means of a narratological and a discourse-mythological approach in order to comprehend what led and contributed to the villainization of the Central Park Five and Linda Fairstein, respectively. The villains presented in the two narratives both represent and are the embodiment of one of the public's innermost fears at the time of the narratives' conception. The Central Park Five were believed to be at the heart of the city's crime epidemic, whereas Fairstein poses as the emblem of the country's racially biased legal system. While the two narratives were created in a vastly different era and sociopolitical climate, and presented (a) different villain(s) of the crime, this
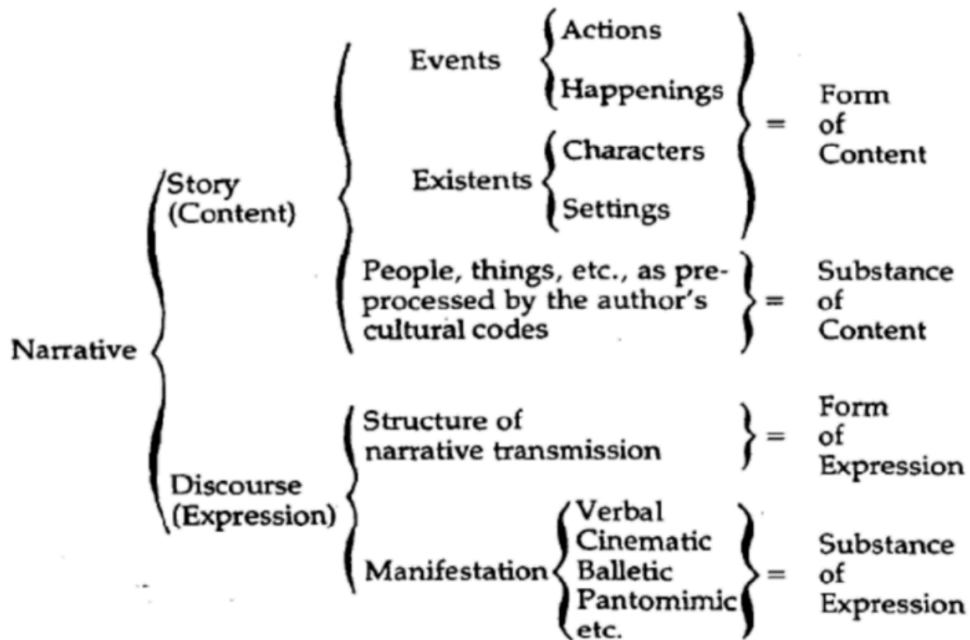
paper has shown the similarities between the narrative strategies and discursive practices used by both narratives. As truth tellers, the news and documentary drama both rely on existing myths and discourses that the audience will recognize and understand in order to educate them and help them make sense of the world. Different from the news whose discourse reinforces dominant ideologies, documentary drama deliberately employs these narrative strategies and discursive practices to challenge the existing discourse. In the case of the Central Park Jogger story, the narratives' narrations both rely on the villain, hero and victim archetypes.

In the 1989 narrative, it was the myths of the Bestial Black Man, the minority criminal, and the folkloric wolf drawn upon by the mainstream newspapers and the often blatantly racist language used to frame the boys as the crime's culprits that led to the villainization of the Central Park Five. In contrast, the judicial system was framed as the hero for arresting and convicting the boys, while Trisha Meili – the crime's victim – became the story's ultimate victim as the news – by means of irony and an excessive news coverage – presented her as one of the city's most innocent and morally upstanding citizens. This narrative – which heavily influenced the public opinion – became so entrenched in the public discourse that many would go on to maintain the Central Park Five's guilt when the latter became the Exonerated Five in 2002. It is only with the release of Ava DuVernay's Netflix miniseries *When They See Us* in 2019 that the Central Park Jogger Case's narrative and its supposed villains started to change in the public discourse. In order to shift the Exonerated Five's narrative from villain to victim, DuVernay's storytelling – similar to the newspapers' victimization of Trisha Meili – highlights the irony of the boys' misfortune and allows them to finally voice their experience and side of the story. By relying on the myth of childhood innocence, by bringing the audience into the police interrogations where the boys were coerced into their false confessions, and by depicting the actual rape by Matias Reyes, the Five have become the story's most tragic and innocent victims. Prosecutor Linda Fairstein, in contrast – who represents the system's failure – is presented as the story's strong and motivated villain who leads the racially biased police investigation and is intent on jailing "innocent children of color at any cost" (Maddaus).

While the Central Park Jogger story has been recounted numerous times, and analyzed by a great many scholars, the "true" story is – and will forever remain – unknowable. What we do know, however, is that stories lend themselves to an infinite amount of possible narratives. Those narratives, in turn – as the Central Park Jogger's 1989 and 2019 narratives show – have the power to change and influence society. Being one of the first scholars to analyze *When They See Us*, there are many paths for future research yet to uncover. While DuVernay presented the Exonerated Five as victims, I propose that the miniseries has turned Antron McCray, Kevin

Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise into the true heroes of the Central Park Jogger story. Yet, as Derek Paget has wisely said: "The question must constantly be asked, 'Whose truth?' – and, 'By whom, and for what purposes, is it being told?'" (172).

Appendix

Narrative

- Story (Content)
  - Events
    - Actions
    - Happenings } = Form of Content
  - Existents
    - Characters
    - Settings
  - People, things, etc., as pre-processed by the author's cultural codes } = Substance of Content
- Discourse (Expression)
  - Structure of narrative transmission } = Form of Expression
  - Manifestation
    - Verbal
    - Cinematic
    - Balletic
    - Pantomimic
    - etc. } = Substance of Expression

Seymour Chatman's Diagram of Narrative in *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film,* Cornell UP, 1978, pp. 26.