

Animation as a Mirror of Society

The other day I was zapping some channels when a familiar vision caught my attention. It was a cartoon with a blond main character using a big sword. Indeed, He-Man and the Masters of the Universe was a cartoon with which I grew up, but the sight was very different from what I remembered. Not only the outfits and the voices had been changed, but also the way they moved -which even I, being a 6 year old girl, considered lame at the moment. Throughout this research paper, I will find the similarities and the differences between yesterday's and today's animation. Does it still have that special 'shining' that it had on its early origins? It does, because it has evolved hand to hand to society and continues showing us a different way to see life.

Animation is a relatively new art -and it actually being considered a form of art is even newer. Its bases come since 1824 when Peter Roget discovered the persistence of vision (Leig). He realized that humans were able to transform a group of still images of an object in various positions into only one moving object. After later studies, we discovered that the eye catches 24 still images per second. It is the brain that interprets this 24 pictures as movement. Somehow, scientist didn't consider persistence of vision as something important and it was not till 1872 that the phenakistoscope was invented (Leig) that scientist gave it use. Its performance was not more complicated than some modern toys': it was a group of diapositives disposed inside a cylinder that swirled, giving the sensation of movement. Phenakistoscope's existence was reduced to cheap representations on fairs and circuses.

H.W. Goodwin invented the nitrate celluloid film in 1887 (Mc. Laughtin), giving the opportunity to inventors such as Lois Lumiere and Alva Edison to create the cinematograph by the 1890's (Mc. Laughtin). Animation started to develop in a series of still drawings painted on a nitrate celluloid film -commonly named 'cell'- that was photographed into a film. The movements of the cartoons weren't planned to look realistic. Deformed creatures appeared and the details were seemed to have been forgotten in most films -when color appeared, sometimes animators forgot to color one apple or two. The most flawless work of animation on its origins was Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in 1937 by Walt Disney (Myers). One of the inconveniences of cells is the amount of time you lose in shooting every single cell inside the film. This also creates an enormous mistake margin. Today, cells have been replaced by computers. Toy Story, by Disney-Pixar, was the first full length animated film made entirely on computers by 1995 (Myers). Using programs such as Softimage 3D, animators were able to create whole scenes in three dimensions. After designing a character or object in programs such as Lightwave, they could insert him, her or it inside the scene and then give him, her or it any movement they wanted (Morisato 14). At the beginning, this work was very hard and making a simple scene could mean to work on it during a whole year. Now, even a normal computer user can make a simple computerized animation segment with programs such as Flash and Adobe Image Ready. Even if today a 10 year old boy is able to create his own animation, the quality of image certainly changes between him and a professional animator. We can take Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within as an example. The main character, doctor Aki, was the most difficult to

create because animators worked almost with every single hair she had. Other characters were not exempted from details, old people have age spots, soldiers have scars, in some scenes their eyes show reflections and their clothing wrinkles and stains. Computerized animation is not more expensive than 'handmade' animation, or at least it shouldn't be. It depends on the artistic quality you search for in your work. It is easier, faster and cheaper to make a 10 second animated gif -graphic interchange format- than a simple drawing moving during one second on cells (Morisato 14).

As movies, animated films weren't born with sound nor music. Yet, movie directors realized that if they hired a band to play during their representations, the public became more interested and after some years, some musicians were hired in order to compose special music for the movies (Coma 161). So did happen with cartoons. When people discovered that they could insert music and sounds on a film, musicians in the place of the presentation were no longer needed. Steamboat Willie was the first successful sound animated film in 1928 -this was the first appearance of Mickey Mouse (Leig). Music was used to give the film the right mood. Just picture a common day image such as taking a turkey out of the oven. If the music is vivid and joyful, the scene has a homeloving atmosphere; but if we change that happy tone into a tetric one, the scene could turn into one of anguish and even terror -will an alien appear from inside the turkey?. Cartoon directors realized this and then took advantage of it. Walt Disney was the first director in using a whole orchestra in order to musicalize his movies (Coma 66). Vocal music also appeared in Disney's work but the voices and the songs were not something exceptional till Snow White. On the other side of the world, we find a form of animation called 'anime'. Ironically, the french word for animation was taken to define Japanese animation. The best works of anime have always given background music more importance than any vocal one. Japanese directors do not only create one motif for each mood during the whole anime but also for every single character. Vocals have been set into the opening and ending themes of the episodes. First, the songs were only meant as a way to identify the series and was sung by normal people or even by the own directors or creators but that was about to change.

Music in animation hasn't lost its importance. Now, not only Disney cartoons, but almost every work of animation uses orchestral music. Unfortunately, vocal music has lost its importance in western cartoons but background music has become way much elaborate than it was before. On the other hand, vocal music has gained more importance on anime. From being sung by people nobody knew, directors -and sponsors- decided to 'hire' important music groups in order to compose and sing the openings and endings of the anime. Usually, vocal music changes when the season does -commonly, a season is made of 26 episodes- and this gives a chance to the anime to change the way it is seen by the spectator. Famous Japanese groups and solists like L'arc~en~ciel, Judy and Mary, and BoA are now relatively known around the world thanks to their participations on famous animes as are InuYasha, Rurouni Kenshin and Lain. Western cartoons don't use to have interesting openings, and the endings are, most of the time, an opening reprise. Also, the music is never changed, giving the cartoon a monotonous tone.

Bond with music, cartoon voices have also suffered changes. Earlier sound animated movies didn't have characters that talked. Somehow, the public preferred to see a singing tree than a speaking one. The pioneer studio that introduced very talkative characters was Warner Brothers on its Looney Tunes. Mel Blanc was a voice actor that participated in most of the 10 minutes long cartoons that were produced in the 1950's (Mc. Laughlin). He did not only made voices of important characters such as Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck but he also gave his voice to most characters of that time. Disney studios didn't have a single voice actor for their characters. The voices varied from cartoon to cartoon and the characters only remained with their accents or tones. On Japanese studios such as TV Tokyo, seiyuus -Japanese voice actors- were not considered something relevant either. If the voice and the character fit, was enough.

One of the first studios that realized that using a famous actor for their movies was a good idea was Disney. Actors and singers such as Tom Hanks and Angela Lansbury are now part of Disney's voice actors' Hall of Fame. Now, best western animators design their characters just after hearing and seeing the voice actor reading some of the movie's dialogues. This way, the character gains more personality -the actor's personality. Seiyuus don't use to be famous people -it is their work as a seiyuu that makes them famous- but in Asia, voice acting became more serious as the importance of anime grew. Today, there are careers in universities that include seiyuu as an actual degree, not like in the western world in which only some classes are needed ('Guy'). Animators don't add the character the actor's personality, it is the seiyuu that has to do it. This is because most, if not all, characters on anime already exist on comics -manga- and of course there they didn't need any voice. When the popularity of a manga grows and moves toward television, it is extremely important to find seiyuus that match the characters and give them life without changing their already existing personalities.

Cartoons are made for different publics in different times (Chesneaux 269). We can see Japan's love for its traditions when the first 'anime' shorts -the style and form were not yet independent from western cartoons- appeared by 1917. These shorts were usually based on Japanese folk stories -like Momotaro or Ori Hime- that lasted for only two minutes ('Guy'). By 1950, animated television commercials became very popular. It is on these commercials that we see the way the people dressed, acted and were. By 1965, cartoons like The Dot and the Line of Charles, 'Chuck', Jones from the Warner Brothers Studio, wanted to give children moral lessons in what was then an 'amusing' way (Leig). For Disney and Warner Brothers, cartoons were relinquished to children. Disney's movies talked of well known fairy tales. Osamu Tezuka, the called 'father of anime', worked with animes such as Tetsuwan Atom, better known as Astroboy, and Jungle Taitei, also known as Kimba the White Lion. His stories were made specially for children too ('Guy').

Fortunately for the growing public, cartoons have turned now to a more mature audience, for Warner Brothers since the appearance of Justice League in the 1970's (Chesneaux 14). For Disney, it was a little bit later and only with long length films such as The Beauty and the Beast. New cartoon studios such as Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network have emerged. As with Disney, they first created children oriented cartoons but now even young adults

find them amusing -like Sponge Bob Squarepants and New Kids on the Block. After World War II, Asian animation suffered an enormous change. In Japan, the stories were basically separated into two main guidelines depending on if they were humoristic or realistic (Martín 223). By 1956, Toei Animation studios was created ('Guy'). These studios were able to capture the two guidelines: one side with dramatic stories like in Captain Harlock; and on the fantastic world, with the creations like the ones of Miyazaki Hayao with Monoke Hime and, more recent, Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi -the first anime ever to win an Oscar. The dramatic trail of Asian animation was emphasized with China's revolution. Animation of this time was meant to lead people to war (Chesneaux 266). Asian animation goes for small children, adolescents, young adults, and adults -the last ones with dramatic stories like The Blue Girl or the famous erotic anime called hentai. But not only Asian animation shows are for adults. New western cartoons like South Park, the Simpsons and The Family Guy have appeared, reviving animation's absurd humor, but now oriented to adults.

Animation has suffered as much changes as society has had. We can find ourselves in their characters: what we want to be, what we would hate to be and what we really are. Most of us have grown with its music and stories, and everyone has at least one cartoon or anime that calls our attention. It has been a long way from Steamboat Willie to Animatrix and, as society, even if animation has had its bad and good times, even with its flaws and with its strengths, it is part of us. It is still special and will continue to be special as long as humans have passion and imagination.

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