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Understanding Culture Through Animation: From the World To Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Generally, culture is aimed to be preserved the way they are thus maintaining the status quo of their origins. The growth and increased range of available local and foreign media content have raised numerous questions as to the impact and effects it brings towards culture. As a mature international industry and a rapidly growing local one, animations films have taken a role in introducing the cultural characteristics of various nations and backgrounds. Similar with other products of different geographical sources, animation carries a reflection of their respective cultural backgrounds. This paper attempts to understand the links between culture and animation, how animation has taken place, how animation have been studied and how animation have been described.

Keywords: animated film, 3D technology, cartoon, anime, culture

INTRODUCTION

Animation as we see and understand today can be traced back since the very early age (Stephenson, 1967) where cavemen were believed to be responsible in its instigation. Overall, animation has progressed significantly from the initial development of moving images, the technology of cel animation (traditional hand-drawn animation) to fully digitally produced 3D animation. The nature of animation, being similar to those of other television and film content, is that they carry themes and styles which are mostly originated from fantasy and folklore as well as the artistic trend of the respective time the animation was created (Halas & Manvell, 1959:29).

The routes of animated film can be observed through four major stages (Halas & Manvell, 1959:13):

- The initial period of trick-work and magic.

- The period of the establishment of the cartoon as a sideline to commercial entertainment (1920s).
- The period of technical experiment and of the development of animation in the form of full length feature entertainment (1930s and 1940s).
- The contemporary period during which people see considerable expansion to the animated film into every kind of use from the television commercial to the highly specialised instructional film.

The process of producing animation has significantly changed with the advancement in computer technology. The reduction of needed physical effort as a result of computer-related breakthroughs has affected the quality and speed of producing animation. Fine details and complex visual effects have successfully been integrated at economical and time-efficient speed.

Another jump which should be taken into consideration is the introduction of 3D visual technology. Images which was previously limited to 2-dimensional views of the x and y axis have seen an addition of a z axis representing the third and newest dimension. The technology was used in various fields and finally introduced in animation through the first ever CGI-animation series *ReBoot* in 1994 followed by the first 3D in 1998, *Toy Story*.

CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS IN ANIMATION

The evidence of cultural existence lies in everyday practices of people from every corner of the world. The language people speak, faith put on to religions, gambling in Las Vegas and eating different food are only minor examples of cultural reflection. People are not born knowing what to do with their lives. They learn through messages communicated to them which bear the stamp of culture (Samovar & Porter, 2001).

The definition of culture is difficult to define because culture is ubiquitous, multidimensional, complex and all-pervasive (Samovar & Porter, 2001). The reality of culture is a very complex term. Different people have defined culture differently but all share one detail in common which states that culture is 'learned'. In terms of substantiality, culture has been maintained throughout specific means i.e. food, traditional clothing, religion. Elsewhere, it gets difficult to identify.

In order to identify the cultural origins in animation films and series, one has to observe the source location of where or for whom an animation is produced and cross-reference the characteristics of the animation with its local culture. This approach is similar to the works found in Stephenson (1967), Wells (1998), Napier (2001) and Poitras (1999) and many others.

DEFINITION OF ANIMATION

Animation comes in various forms. They exist in live-action films, advertisements, corporate videos, video games and also fully animated films and television series. Animation may also appear in the form of moving text, objects, drawings and computer generated images. As suggested by Greenberg (2011), who constructed a theoretical definition of animation, the definition of animation has become less

clear over the years because of the changes that have occurred in terms of how animation is used.

Stephenson (1967:13) suggested a loose definition of animation in one of the earliest attempts to study the nature of animation. He explained the general acceptance towards the definition of animation films as being created on a frame-by-frame basis. This definition is similar to the suggestion of Wells (1998:10) in which Wells suggested that animation was more of a hand rather than a photographic job but maintained the frame-by-frame approach. This article undertakes the working definition of animation as fully animated films and television series and excludes those contained within other forms of media content such as corporate videos, video games or advertisements.

DEVELOPMENT OF ANIMATION

At the 1962 Annecy Festival, French researcher Madam Prudhommeau revealed a sequence of separate cave drawings through a film strip. The result showed a bison falling off into a pit and captured by a cavemen. These illustrations originated from cave drawings during the Palaeolithic age (Stephenson, 1967:24).

The earliest transfer from still representations to visible moving images can be observed through the invention of the thaumatrope by physician John Ayrton Paris in 1825 (Jamalludin & Zaidatun, 2005:6). The thaumatrope was developed as an entertainment device which demonstrates how two still images, separated on opposite sides of the same disc, form a persistence of vision by twirling the strings in a synchronized and parallel movement.

In 1830 at the same time albeit in different places, Joseph Plateau and Simon Stampfer invented another device using the idea of persistence of vision. The spindle viewer known as the phenakistoscope, meaning 'deceptive view' in Greek, is a toy which utilizes a disc which contains a series of continuous images with specific cuts in-between each image. A metal rod is then placed in the middle to enable the disc to be rotated in front of a mirror (Jamalludin & Zaidatun, 2005:7-8).

Not long after the phenakistoscope, a new invention was introduced by William Horner in England. Initially called the Daedalum (wheel of the devil), the device works based on the same principles as the phenakistoscope. The difference mainly lays on its mechanics where a series of images is placed within a metal drum with cuts around the device. From the holes of the cuts produced, viewers are able to view the images being animated when the drums are rotated. The animation becomes more clear and smooth as the drums rotate faster. Although invented in 1834, it was not until the 1960s that the device gained the more familiar name of zoetrope (Jamalludin & Zaidatun, 2005:9).

Unlike other previous devices, the technique developed and patented John Barnes Linnett in 1968 did not utilise or created any specific devices. Kineograph, or commonly known as flip book, operates with a series of continuous drawings compiled in the form of a book. The concept and idea of the flip book is still highly relevant to modern day animation. The main difference lays in the mechanism used to 'flip' pages. With development of computer hardware and software, animators spend less time on hand-drawings and can focus more on other details of producing an animation.

The development of new animation techniques seemed to slow down after the zoetrope. It took 43 years for the world to be introduced to the praxinoscope. In 1877, Charles Emile Reynaud combined the principles of the zoetrope and phenakistoscope by placing a series of images on the outside part of a cylinder and a set of mirrors with the same quantity of the images placed within the inside diameter of the device. When the cylinder is rotated, the reflection of the images will be visibly animated. Vision can be enhanced by placing a candle to brighten the inside area of the device (Jamalludin & Zaidatun, 2005:9-10). The praxinoscope was noted as a dead end towards the development of early animation techniques although it was considered to be the invention that originated the animation genre (Stephenson, 1967; Wells, 1998).

Development of animation has spurred mainly in two countries, the United States and Japan. Animations from these countries have grown into mature industries leading to multi-million dollar corporations such as Walt Disney Animation Studio, Pixar, Studio Ghibli and Toei Animation (animation studios in Japan are commonly known as anime studios). Japan and the United States have led the way and inspired the development of animation in other countries. With increased capabilities in hardware and software technology, other countries have slowly grown to become minor competitors. Although their capabilities might not be enough to overturn the industries of Japan and the United States, animations from the rest of the world do own their respective animation history with some highly visible in terms of their geographical origins.

Development of animation in other countries did occur albeit at a slower rate with several countries producing notable and marketable animation such as *Timmy Time* (UK), *Totally Spies* (France) and *Pororo the Little Penguin* (South Korea). The next segment further explores the characteristics of animation in the United States, Japan, Malaysia and the rest of the world in order to obtain a general picture of what has been studied and understood thus far.

AMERICAN CARTOONS

Early American Cartoons come into view between 1909 and 1920 originating from comic strips during World War I (Halas & Manvell, 1959). With comic strips being a sequential series of drawings, it also serves as an inspiration in putting 'movement' into the characters and objects within the strips. It was not long after the beginning of comic strip-to-cartoon migration for the world renowned Mickey Mouse (initially known as Mortimer) to be introduced by Walt Disney in 1927.

Wells (1998) studied the disposition of American cartoons especially Disney animation particularly the styles, approaches and themes which existed in American cartoons. He observed how logic was used i.e. the bending of time and space, air levitation, defiance of gravity etc. Physically, American cartoons portrayed action which was impossible to achieve in neither live-action films nor the real world.

ANIME

The Japanese are commonly known for their hard work, creativity, and richness of culture. Although advanced in terms of science and technology, they have not

disregarded their cultural roots which are still visible to the world through the electronic media specifically anime, television series and film. *Ultraman*, *Naruto*, *Doraemon*, *Kamen Rider*, and *Ju-On* are among the titles which would be familiar to a number of audiences around the world. Anime, in particular, have become a new and popular culture which has contributed in introducing Japan to the world and has also become a sub-culture in the United States (Napier, 2004:4). Anime has also been globally accepted as part of a worldwide media content consumption.

Ruh (2004) further explained how prominent anime filmmaker Mamoru Oshii (known for his anime film *Ghost in the Shell*) prioritizes the Japanese audience over foreign audiences in the process of producing anime. Oshii stressed that his films must cater to the local audience before seeking recognition of others. This partially signals a possibility that one does not need to create anime exclusively based on global needs and neglecting the needs of local audiences in order to succeed internationally.

To a certain extent, the Japanese have developed their animation as part of a popular culture and a powerful business potential. Physically, one can normally identify the origins of an animation just by looking at it. This comes as a result of established stereotypes towards the physical appearance of an animation. Poitras (1999) made an attempt to understand the Japanese community and belongings within anime. He classified categories relevant to his findings with each category listing items in alphabetical order. His effort was made by observing English-subbed anime broadcasted in the United States. Poitras also suggested the difference between American cartoons and anime by suggesting the complex storylines and various genres available through anime. A mention of the word 'Naruto' and most kids would immediately identify a young blond-haired ninja boy who has the powers of the nine-tailed fox within himself, dressed in his orange jump-suit, a metal headband with a leaf symbol and has special moves such as the Rasengan and Shadow Clone Jutsu. The attraction of Japanese animation or better known as anime towards children and even adults have led to the popularity of past and present titles and formed a popular culture that defines the Japanese in the eyes of the world.

Napier (2001) identified anime as a product of Japanese popular culture which is exported to a large part of the world. It was not easy to get to where anime is standing now, but it has to start somewhere. Previously, anime was overshadowed by Japanese live-action cinema. With initially a limited scope of children's entertainment, anime grew to be consumed by adults as well making its way through corners of the world by offering a wide variety of genre which caters to various interests i.e. *Slam Dunk* (sports), *Yakitate Japan* (bread-making), *La Corda D'oro Prima Passo* (romance) and *Dragonball* (fighting).

Anime's presence in Asia is not a recent phenomenon and it is also slowly finding an appreciative audience in the West. Beginning with the release of Ootomo Katsushiro's hugely popular animation film *Akira* (1988), the quality and attraction of "Japanimation" is gradually being acknowledged by the American market (Iwabuchi 2002; Tong and Umi Khattab 2008).

ANIMATION IN REST OF THE WORLD

Studies on animation of countries around the world have been made by Stephenson (1967). Stephenson described the nature of animation in the United States, Canada, Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and Japan (note that the Japanese animation industry was not yet matured during the time). He discussed the technology, techniques involved, and the history of how animation films took place in their respective countries. Stephenson highly descriptive and historical study can be seen as a documented history on major animation industries of the world at the instance the book was issued. Although Stephenson did not specifically observe the characteristics of animation of these nations, he did briefly elaborate their traits.

Giammarco (2005) suggested the influence of American and Japanese animation on the history of South Korean animation. It began with an animation titled *Gaeggum* which ignited the beginning of Korean animation and also the dawn of an iconic Korean character similar to the effects Mickey Mouse had on Americans. Gaeggum demonstrated an inspiration of using an anthropomorphic form of a dog which was similar to Mickey Mouse.

Other aspects of animation have been studied as well. Davenport & Gunn (2009) explored the interest of animation art through workshops they organized in Estipac, Mexico. The effort was aimed at fostering creativity among pastoral adolescence in Mexico by encouraging animation production as a visual art rather than concentrating on its historical content, plots or story.

ANIMATION IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, locally produced animation series are still in the process of growth. The development of technology in computing and multimedia has allowed creative content developers the space to be creative and assist in developing the industry towards maturity and global acceptance. However, most of the animation titles which have been aired in Malaysia up to date have either been from the United States or Japan.

According to Hassan (2003) animation in Malaysia began in 1946 through the establishment of the Malayan Film Unit (currently known as Filem Negara). Animation was limited to moving text and objects back then rather than referring to television series and film. The first animated film to appear was *Hikayat Sang Kancil*, a short film produced by Anandam Xavier in 1978. A few titles followed shortly after with the appearance of *Sang Kancil & Monyet*, *Sang Kancil & Buaya*, *Gagak Yang Bijak*, *Arnab Yang Sombong* and *Singa Yang Haloba* which ranged from 1984 to 1987.

The growth and development of animation appears to have slowed down from 1987 to 1994 (if the Anandam Xavier's work is considered as series rather than individual titles) and from 1996 to 2007 in terms of quantity of animation produced and its popularity although this statement may need further research and verification. Take note that the catalyst behind the resurgences is the Malaysian government.

The first gap seemed to begin from 1987 during the end of Anandam Xavier's work to 1995 when Kharisma Production produced the first animated television series in Malaysia under the direction of Kamn Ismail entitled *Usop Sontorian*. The sudden surge was a by-product of the government's push for the use of digital

technology (Hassan, 2003). In-between the gap, animation have appeared in other forms especially text and advertisements. Animation produced at the time were brief and only used as a minor element to enhance the attraction of films or advertisements.

The second gap occurs as a result of the lack of printed information on Malaysian animation. After the broadcast of *Usop Sontorian*, a number of animation series have appeared i.e. *Keluang Man*, *Yokies*, *Anak-anak Sidek* etc. However, with the Malaysian economic crisis appearing in 1998, it seemed to be a factor to consider on why animation production has slowed down.

Upin & Ipin took place in the tubes in 2007 with the support from the Ministry of Technology, Water and Communication (now replaced by the Ministry of Energy, Green Technology and Water), Ministry of Science and Technology and Multimedia Super Corridor Malaysia. Seeing the potential of creative digital content (as demonstrated by Upin & Ipin, video games and animated advertisements), the government has set up a support program called the MSC Malaysia Animation and Creative Content Centre to provide funding and technological resources (www.mscmalaysia.my/topic/MAC3). A total of RM750 million has been allocated for this purpose and is made available to developers of video games, visual effects and animation.

With animation from Japan and the United States flooding television channels in Malaysia, one can actually observe that these animations come as cultural products which are different to the values upheld by Malaysians. Watching the routines and behaviour of Upin and Ipin on television may leave one with a proud impression of the advancement of Malaysian animation. Malaysians who have grown up watching *Mickey Mouse* and *Dragonball* may find the emergence of local animation content as refreshing to the eyes. As *Upin & Ipin* portrayed a more local environment, it provides an idea to various characteristics that defines the country that we live in. It all started with the initiative of *Usop Sontorian*, the first locally produced animation for the Malaysian market. The effort by cartoonist Ujang and director Kamn Ismail under Kharisma Production was the starting point to the local animation titles we see today with *Upin & Ipin* and *Boboi Boy* leading the way.

Similar to other animation industries in the world, Malaysian animation is largely influenced by American and Japanese animation. The initial influence of anime on Malaysian animation can be seen through the farming out of ink and paint work in 1985 to Lensafilm, a Malaysian commercial film studio (Hassan, 2003). This eventually led to the training of Malaysian personnel in Toei Animation, Japan which in turn influenced some physical aspects of Malaysian animation.

Hassan (2004: 7–8) described how a number of student animation projects reflected the identity of Malaysia's various races and heritage. According to him, there is no distinctive animation trend in Malaysia that can be considered unique or having a local identity (Hassan, 2008). Hassan also did not specifically mention the cultural characteristics contained within Malaysian animation. Hence, it would be a strong justification towards studying how culture is portrayed in Malaysian animation.

CONCLUSION

In most (if not all) animation, culture is reflected through different means. Some are reflected by the physical appearance of characters, some are reflected with the objects within the animation and even the language they speak. Since the beginning of animation, people have used what they understand and comprehend around them to develop plots and storylines. A number of researchers have studied animation as an exclusive academic field. However, the study of animation content can do better with increased quantity. Animation is on the rise and may well continue to do so in the near future. It is a global trend in which if better understood, the more benefits we can reap out of animation. Animation can become a powerful business tool but importantly as well is the fact than the culture and identity of a nation can be shared through its lenses.

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