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Ways of Thinking (ADAD4018)

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Are conformist ideals holding artists down in the modern era?

In this piece I will be focusing specifically on more modern art that is used to convey emotion. I will go into detail about how artists involved in modern media art have had to grow and evolve in order to fit into the areas of media they want to be a part of. The art piece I look into shows how herd mentality can affect people and thus ties into my work by showing that being creative even when in a situation where conformity would be easier is important in order to thrive as an artist.

Analysis of an Artist

Ken Sugimori is best known for his work on the Pokémon franchise, having designed all of the original 151 Pokémon. He has also worked on the majority of cinematic Pokémon media and has done work for various card games, including the collectible cards for Super Smash Brothers. He is beloved in the gaming community for creating hundreds of beloved designs that continue to be drawn and reimagined by artists within and outside of Game Freak.

Reference used: SATO, 2014.

Sugimori was not wildly popular immediately, however, having worked for Game Freak (while it was an illustrated gaming fan magazine, not a game company) for a significant while before the successful Pokémon franchise came into existence. He and Game Freak pitched many games that either didn't do very well or didn't go into production at all before Pokémon's release, such as Jelly Boy 2 which was slated for release in 1994 on which he was the lead character designer. This clearly shows that Sugimori is prepared to discard things and keep pushing on if the situation calls for it.

Sugimori's style has changed and evolved throughout the many years he has been working. His initial style was quite stiff and appeared to be inspired by the works of Akira Toriyama, the creator of Dragon Ball, particularly the pieces from 1989 onward. However as time progressed, Sugimori began to find his own style, softening corners and creating more fluid,

interesting poses. This can be seen quite clearly in the Pokémon designs between generations, with them appearing to become “softer” as time went on and the shading becoming more defined. Sugimori’s style was most noticeable as “his” style by the fourth generation of Pokémon with Diamond, Pearl and Platinum. Referenced work: The Pokémon Company (2017)

When designing a new character or Pokémon creature, Sugimori’s process is in-depth. His inspiration for Pokémon specifically tends to come from observing real life animals, such as fish in aquariums, and considering how that species could be interpreted into the colourful world of Pokémon. After he has the inspiration to create a Pokémon, he will create rough sketches that he will draw over and over again to make sure he likes the concept and that it would fit into the Pokémon universe. He will make sure the proportions are to his liking before declaring it finished. (Shepperd C., 2017)

On the topic of creating Pokémon designs Sugimori says that, "I do feel that I always want to show new Pokémon that people have never seen before. To do that, I think of ways that I can surprise the players." (Shepperd C., 2017). Sugimori’s art almost always does reach this goal as he is incredible at innovating and making sure that Pokémon don’t look too similar to each other unless it is on purpose in order to create a regional form of a Pokémon in which case he is a master of making Pokémon look similar enough to obviously be the same species, but not identical.

Analysis of a Movement

“Anime art” is a very subjective term as it can apply to any art created for an anime or manga. In modern day “anime” art tends to look quite similar, with the genre having found a style that artists within the movement have found fits the idea they are trying to portray most fittingly. (Baricordi, A. 2000)

Modern anime art can be characterised by certain motifs such as large eyes, oversized or unnatural hairstyles and exaggerated body proportions. Male anime characters will often be more muscular than would ever be possible for a real human being, often leading to complaints that anime series are “promoting unhealthy body standards” and affecting the minds of those watching. Anime character designs are rarely akin to real people and often look more similar to exaggerated fashion dolls or figurines as opposed to anything that’s supposed to resemble reality, further leaning into the argument that the style promotes an unnatural standard of beauty. (Patten, F. 2004)

Akira Toriyama, previously mentioned in the section about Ken Sugimori, is the artist of the famous manga and anime “Dragon Ball”. Shonen manga are aimed at young boys and are perhaps the most recognisable form of anime and manga, with “Dragon Ball” being one of the most recognisable of them all, alongside “Naruto” and “Bleach”. Popular shonen art tropes were conceived within Toriyama’s “Dragon Ball”, such as the aptly named “shonen hairstyle” which is generally perceived as a wild, untamed hairstyle worn by main protagonists in shonen manga. After the main character, Goku, inspired this hairstyle it became somewhat of a cliché in the shonen manga sphere and Toriyama has made jokes about it in his own work in response to the effect his work caused. (Go, I. 2018)

“Dragon Ball” also revolutionised the body types of shonen protagonists. Before Goku’s inception, main characters in manga tended to be bulky, muscular adults whom the younger readers could only aspire to be as they could not realistically achieve such an unrealistic build. This excessively muscular body type was popularised by earlier shonen such as “Fist of the North Star” and “Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure”, both of which had exceptionally muscular protagonists. Goku’s design completely turned this idea of needing an inhumanly muscular protagonist on its head, as Goku was a child and ultimately gained a physique similar to what a younger individual could realistically achieve if they followed a training regimen similar to the character. (Thompson B., 2022)

Goku’s slimmer, more realistic appearance inspired future shonen protagonists to look similar, with characters such as Naruto looking far more similar to the physique of the children reading as opposed to being a superhuman, adult man with far more muscle mass than what can be achieved without the use of performance enhancing drugs. “Dragon Ball” successfully used its more unique art direction to revolutionise anime art into something that could inspire instead of showing an unachievable ideal. (Nasir S.B., 2021)

Semiotic analysis of a painting



Haring, K. (1986) "Party of Life Invitation."

Party of Life Invitation, created by Keith Harding in 1986, leans into Berger's semiotic theory of symbols as objects, which in this case apply to the figures, and that these items can have more than one meaning at the same time. The most obvious symbolism within the piece is that humans willingly join the rat race of conformity but then cannot get out once they realise the horror that is being stuck in a system where everyone is identical. (Berger A., 1995)

The lack of colour in the piece suggests a sense of emptiness or lack of emotional "fullness", as if being in a situation such as this has drained all of the colour from the individuals involved. In this situation colour quite clearly links to uniqueness and something about this situation has drained all sense of individual identity from the figures in the image. The harsh black outlines further suggest the idea of having been drained of colour as the identical lining between each figure makes them look indistinguishable from one another. (Van Der Meulen, M. 2019)

Some of the figures seem to be more content to stay where they are while others are escaping, leaning into the idea of objects having dual meanings and giving commentary on how some believe staying in the rat race of life is the only way to live while others attempt to escape to find some form of individuality. Some appear to be pushing figures further down, too, as if forcing them to stay where they are so they can escape and make their own existence more meaningful at the expense of others. The figures towards the bottom of the piece also appear

to have been pushed down there as opposed to being there of their own accord, which is perhaps a comment on the commonly accepted thought that it is necessary to crush others in order to reach your own ends.

The figures on the very edge of the image have symbols above their heads that suggest they have seen something shocking beyond the barriers of the situation they are stuck in. This may be a comment on the rather horrible reality that by escaping the box that society attempts to put you in you will be attacked by people trying to force you back into conformity at every turn, as being an individual in a world where being the same as everyone else is the norm causes questions to be asked about the current status quo that could potentially lead to a social shift towards valuing creativity over conformity.

The arms of the figures on the end may also suggest that they are security of sorts that keep the figures in place. This may suggest the idea that people of low social standing can only get a certain height on the social ladder before being forced back down by the people born into high social and monetary positions. The people who have been crushed at the bottom may be those who have failed to break their way out of the box and are being crushed under the feet of people who have managed to get further than they have.

In conclusion, learning to grow and evolve in order to not only improve your art but also to avoid falling into a rut is important, artistically, and mentally. Haring's piece shows what can happen to those who fall into a herd mentality of only doing what gets the job done and is "good enough", leading to a society where everything is similar and people don't break out of the box out of fear of losing the success they have already achieved. The aspects of art I have studied go to show that going outside of the box put in place by societal norms can lead to brilliant things that would otherwise have not been considered.

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