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Course: BA(Hons) Illustration

Word Count: 2592

To put my investigation into context, my essay will attempt to link the 3 words Diversity , Gender and Animation to create an essay question that will help further my studies. These explorations will be supported by key artists, such as Rebecca Sugar (Gender/Diversity), Matt Burnett (Diversity) and Kiana Khansmith (Animation). I will also be using visual aids such as graphs and utilising them in partnership with the artists and key words to explore the topics that arise from these and allow myself to critically and thoroughly address said topics in relation to my own area of interest, character design for the animation industry, to find out how inclusive it is. I will mainly be focusing on major companies like Disney and Cartoon Network , but will also look at smaller companies as well to give a better overview of the topic.

Diversity

In 2005, a spin-off series of long-running children's cartoon Arthur, included a character who had lesbian parents. Although the episode was scheduled to air on PBS and its affiliate stations, but was pulled because the secretary of education, Margret Spellings, wrote to PBS saying, "Many parents would not want their young children exposed to the life-styles portrayed in this episode" (Fetters, Escobar, 2019)ⁱ.

Since then, we would like to think that society is more accepting of the LGBT+ community, but in 2019, Alabama Public Television programming director Mike McKenzie made the decision to cut an

episode of the mainline series of *Arthur* for depicting a gay wedding between 2 male characters. When asked to give a statement on his decision for *AI.com*, McKenzie claimed it would be a “violation of trust” (Crain, 2019)ⁱⁱ towards the parents who allow their children to watch the show unsupervised. This strongly suggests that even in a time when we have very large and public events such as LGBT+ History Month and Gay Pride, people still consider LGBT+ people as a ‘sensitive’ subject which is not suitable for children to be exposed to. To put it into a wider context, in 2020, Krystalline Armendariz, a queer Latina documentary film maker, was mistaken for a delivery boy by a senior executive at her company. In her own words she explains, “surrounded mostly by cis white men, I was hyper aware of the fact that few around me would be able to relate to the experience of being misgendered and racially profiled on their way back from grabbing lunch.” (Armendariz, 2020)ⁱⁱⁱ

However, this does appear to be the minority of broadcasters these days, as the representation of LGBT+ people has come “leaps and bounds” (Ellis, 2018-2019)^{iv} and we are constantly seeing more positive representations of these types of characters. A good example of the diversity of this movement was featured in Netflix’s 2019 special, *Rocko’s Modern Life: Static Cling*, where a supporting character from the original 1990s series of *Rocko’s Modern Life*, comes out as a transgender woman. The inclusivity of these popular cartoons is encouraging to see, and on top of this we are even getting shows where the main cast are from the LGBT+ community.

It is also worth mentioning that we are seeing pushes not only for queer representation but also racial representation. Cartoon Network’s new series titled *Craig of the Creek*, features a pleasantly diverse cast from different backgrounds and cultures; an article by *Fast Company.com* praises the shows creators, Ben Levin and Matt Burnett, for including a seemingly very mundane and insignificant scene: “the 10 year old titular character running home to have dinner with his siblings and parents.” (Ifeanyi, 2018)^v

The reasoning for this praise is simple: black people have not seen enough representation of their everyday lives. Also in this article Matt Burnett himself expands on this, saying “People have pointed that out, like, ‘this is so refreshing to see on television.’ We are looking to show those little moments. They’re not big political statements, but they can mean so much to people.”^{vi} Burnett’s work towards normalising racial inclusivity in cartoons is very encouraging and exciting.

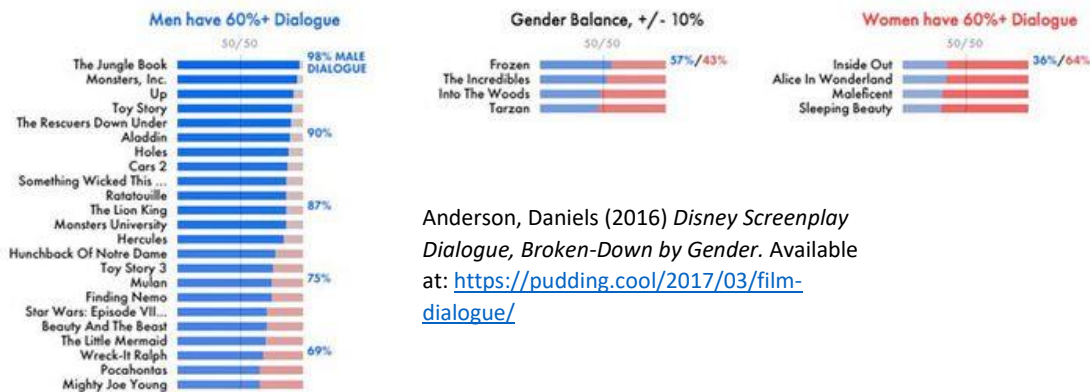
On a wider scale, we can also see examples of religious inclusivity in the animated series *The 99*, which is based off a comic book which features superheroes who are based off of the 99 virtues of Allah. Its popularity has been steadily growing and even had a Nestle printed advert. Its very encouraging and refreshing to see a positive representation of Muslims and the Islamic faith, rather than the dangerously negative portrayals western media presents us with.

Arguably one of the most popular cartoons to feature a diverse cast of inclusive main characters is Cartoon Network’s *Steven Universe*. Rebecca Sugar, the show’s creator, wanted to make a cartoon which had depictions of strong main characters who also identify as queer. Sugar herself is bisexual and uses some of her own experiences of being in an interracial relationship. The surreal sci-fi setting and alien characters have allowed Sugar to tackle such topics; “There are ways I can talk about my relationship with Ian and the obstacles we face, my own experience with antisemitism, my experience coming out as bisexual as a teenager...the layer of fantasy in the show allows me to have fun with truths that are not fun”^{vii} she stated in a 2019 interview for the guardian. The article also points out that the show is “renowned for its simple approach to often inaccessible themes for children, such as consent, grief, anxiety and abusive relationships.” (Adegoke, 2019).^{viii}

Even though the target audience for *Steven Universe* is older than that of *Arthur*, we can see that tackling themes relating to the LGBT+ community should still be a prominent theme in cartoons targeted towards a younger audience to open up younger audience’s minds to different relationships between adults. There is still backlash and resistance from some countries to fully embrace the ever-changing representation of queer relationships; in a 2016 episode of *Steven*

Universe where one of the female characters passionately embraces another female character with lesbian undertones, the UK branch of Cartoon Network decided to cut the scene as “(they felt) that the slightly edited version is more comfortable for local kids and their parents.” (Duffy, 2016)^{ix}

Gender



Anderson, Daniels (2016) *Disney Screenplay Dialogue, Broken-Down by Gender*. Available at: <https://pudding.cool/2017/03/film-dialogue/>

The role of females and their portrayals in animated movies is also a topic which faces lots of controversy and back lash, particularly when it is compared to the roles and dialogue of male characters.

Here, we can see that there is a large male bias for dialogue in Disney films. According to the publishers of this data, Pudding.com, “22 of 30 Disney films have a male majority of dialogue. Even films with female leads, such as *Mulan*, the dialogue swings male” (Anderson, Daniels, 2016)^x.

According to IMDB.com, only 5 out of 30 people on the writing team for *Mulan*; this tells me that due to the male dominated writing team, they ended up with a male dominated movie, despite the lead role being a woman. Pudding.com also pointed out that “Mushu, (Mulan’s) protector dragon, has 50% more words of dialogue than Mulan herself.”^{xi} This further reinforces the idea of a heavy male bias within Disney’s animated movies.

Furthermore, according to an article by Its Nice That.com, the advocacy group Women in Animation has said “60% of animation students in the US and Europe are women, but the drop off rate as they move into industry is staggering, with only 20%–40% of professional roles held by women” (Brewer, 2018)^{xii}. Also within this article, we learn that Anna Ginsburg, an animation director on movies such as *What Is Beauty* and *Private Parts*, believes that the animation industry can be “like a boy’s club with mad, macho energy flying around.”^{xiii} This article also features an interesting observation from executive producer at Strange Beast Animation Studios, who states that “men are the creative leads and women are the jobbing crew animators or producers. Women are there to facilitate and enable the creative voice and vision of men.”^{xiv} This idea of women being nurturers who are only there as support or an object to obtain for men is an internalised societal problem. We could track it all the way back to Greek mythology and fairy tales, (which is what the majority of Disney movies are based off of) and see many of these tropes have lasted in movies that were only made in the past 20 years.

An article by Bustle.com explains that “the death of fictional mothers contains elements of misogyny, serving to split women into two (the “good” dead mother and the “evil” stepmother) in fairy tales and to glorify fathers in modern-day stories” (Weiss, 2016)^{xv}. This idea that women can only be good or evil is shown countless times throughout Disney’s 20th century movies; *Snow White*, *Sleeping beauty*, and *The Little Mermaid* are some that immediately spring to mind, and even movies from the 21st century such as *Brave* and *Frozen* still hold the idea of splitting women as ‘good’ and ‘evil’. The mention of this plot point’s purpose being that it is to glorify male/father characters is seen in *The Little Mermaid*. This is best explained in an academic critique of the movie which reads, “Ariel must choose between these two men. Ariel never considers running away to a life that does not include male protection; she rejects her father’s culture to embrace Eric’s culture” (Trites, 2013)^{xvi}

Although all of this information might seem bleak and hopeless, like with LGBT+ representation, we are also seeing a change in the industry to a more positive and equal gender representation. In the

same article that featured Anna Ginsburg, Niki Lindroth von Bahr, a fellow animation director, says that “I’ve never felt questioned as a woman in my current position.”^{xvii} The general idea is that it seems if you can get into the industry as a woman, you will in fact be respected in your position. Lindroth von Bahr goes on to say that the “big challenge is encouraging women to reach that position in the first place.”^{xviii} Fortunately, companies such as Animated Women UK, who, in their own words say that “(they) aim to change the gender landscape by building a vibrant network that facilitates mentoring, knowledge exchange and education...” (Animated Women UK, 2013-2021)^{xix} There are plenty of other companies like this that can help kick start and network women who are looking for a career in animation out there if you do a bit of research .

Furthermore, in the last few years, we have seen an algorithmic breakthrough in gender representation within the animation industry: technology which can track gender ratios throughout production. Jessica Heidt, a script supervisor at Pixar Animation Studios, realised that if you watched any of Pixar’s movies between 2007-2013, “It would be likely that for every 6 people you saw on screen, 4 would be male, and only 2 would be female.”^{xx} When you compare this to the world’s gender ratio of 49% male to 51% females (not including people who identify as non-binary), we can see the numbers do not add up; Heidt, with the help of Josh Minor, a tools developer at Pixar, created an algorithm to bring light to this. This made major changes to movies such as Cars 3, making them more inclusive in their gender portrayals by dispersing dialogue more fairly and changing characters who were originally male to female. In her own words, Heidt says “I was inspired to make this tool by a problem-it was something I saw across the entire industry, and I realised I had access to information that nobody else did.” (Inside Pixar, 2020)^{xxi}

Animation

The importance of animation is often overlooked by most people as being either 'childish' or of a 'lower quality' as opposed to live action movies. Despite this general consensus, there is a lot more appreciation for cartoons and animation these days, with streaming sites such as YouTube, Disney +, Amazon Prime and Netflix making the accessibility greater for a universal audience. Take the example of the 2019 *Aladdin* live action re-make of the 1992 animated original, and how in his video essay on the importance of animation, the YouTube user Centre Row states that the "live action film could not compete with the vibrance and energy and life of the animation" (Centre Row, 2019)^{xxii} in its cartoon version. I have to agree with this as there is no beautifully cinematographed opening scene of the Arabian desert like in the original, and the Live action version seems to focus more on its expensive looking sets in areas like the Bizarre and the Cave of Wonders than trying to suck you in and immerse you into the magical world of *Aladdin*.

Kiana Khansmith, a story board artist at Disney, goes onto saying how cartoons should always be valued as a legitimate resource, even if you work realistically or with lots of ornate detail: "there's a lot to be learned from the pushed posing and expressions that you can apply to your work on a more subtle level." (Team DeviantArt , 2020)^{xxiii} I believe that Animation does in fact hold a lot of value and power in our everyday lives and over society in general, and what children see on the tv will have a huge effect on their understanding of people and of the world. The power animation holds over its audience can be used in a positive way as long as we create responsibly.

Conclusion

To address these topics in my own practice, I will make an attempt to tackle the issue of diversity by designing characters who would identify in the LGBT+ community and include a range of ethnicities and cultures rather than white washing. By including these characters in my pitch bibles for

university, it could in turn normalise the idea of having LGBT+ characters in our work, and I would like to continue to explore the issue in more detail through my dissertation in the 3rd year. To address the topic of gender inequality and misogyny, I will continue to include a wide selection of strong female characters in my portfolio and pitch bibles and make sure I develop plenty of characters who aren't just female to look pretty and actually have developed personalities. I will continue to explore the ways in which women are presented in animation and cartoons and see if the current situation changes. Considering we are already going down the right path, it will be interesting to re-visit this topic in my dissertation. For animation, I will continue to study the industry and keep on top of my research. I will continue to design and create characters with rich depth and soul which people of all ages, races, genders and cultures will be able to relate and identify with. In my dissertation, I will compare my own designs with that of the professionals working in the industry and compare and contrast our character designs and worlds and see what I can offer, which I genuinely believe will be an inclusive and diverse portfolio which will hopefully be industry ready by the end of the 3rd year.

Question

The question that I have come up with after exploring my key words is:

Through the exploration of gender, race, culture and sexual orientation, discuss what animation companies are doing to ensure their movies/cartoons are inclusive and relatable to all of society, and what can be done to better this through your own practice.

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- ⁱⁱ Crain, A. (2019) 'Alabama Public Television refuses to air *Arthur* episode with gay wedding', *AL.com*, 20th May. Available at: <https://www.al.com/news/2019/05/alabama-public-television-refuses-to-air-arthur-episode-with-gay-wedding.html> (Accessed: 5 May 2021)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Armendariz, K (2020) 'Why We Need More Queer POC Working in Film – and What I’m Doing About It', *Salty World*. Available at: <https://saltyworld.net/why-we-need-more-queer-poc-working-in-film/> (Accessed: 5 May 2021)
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- ^v Ifeanyi, KC (2018) 'Inside Cartoon Network’s Racially Ground-breaking Show “Craig Of The Creek”', *Fast Company*, 4th January. Available at: <https://www.fastcompany.com/40551963/inside-cartoon-networks-racially-groundbreaking-show-craig-of-the-creek> (Accessed: 6 May 2021)
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- ^{vii} (Please refer to reference viii)
- ^{viii} Adegoke, Y. (2019) 'Move over, Disney! Meet the woman leading the LGBT cartoon revolution', *The Guardian*, 1st October. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/oct/01/move-over-disney-meet-rebecca-sugar-the-woman-leading-the-lgbt-cartoon-revolution-steven-universe-adventure-time> (Accessed: 6 May 2021)
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- ^x Anderson, H. and Daniels, M. (2016) 'Film Dialogue from 2,000 screenplays, Broken Down by Gender and Age', *The Pudding*, April. Available at: <https://pudding.cool/2017/03/film-dialogue/> (Accessed: 8 May 2021)
- ^{xi} (Please refer to reference x)
- ^{xii} Brewer, J. (2018) 'Why is there a lack of women in animation, and what can we do about it?', *Its Nice That*, 8th March. Available at: <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/why-is-there-a-lack-of-women-in-animation-internationalwomensday-080318> (Accessed: 9 May 2021)
- ^{xiii} (Please refer to reference xii)
- ^{xiv} (Please refer to reference xii)
- ^{xv} Weiss, S (2016) '5 Fairy Tale Tropes That Perpetuate Sexism' *Bustle*, 21st March. Available at: <https://www.bustle.com/articles/149098-5-fairy-tale-tropes-that-perpetuate-sexism#:~:text=Boxer%20theorizes%20that%20the%20death%20of%20fictional%20mothers,in%20a%20child%27s%20life%20is%20unworthy%20of%20mention> (Accessed: 9 May 2021)
- ^{xvi} Trites, R (2013) 'Disney’s Sub/Version of Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid”', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 18(4), pp. 145-152. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01956051.1991.10662028> (Accessed: 11 May 2021)
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- ^{xx} (Please refer to reference)
- ^{xxi} Inspired: Jessica Heidt, Who Gets All The Lines? (2020) *Inside Pixar*. Disney+.
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