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Proposed Title:

Exploring the inherent sexualization of female characters in animated media

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Gender

Representation

Exploitation of female characters in the form of sexualization is evident in animation both historically and in the current industry. This essay will explore the sexualization and objectification of female characters within animation and how it affects the industry, influences audiences, and impacts social expectations. The essay will focus on three key words: sexualization, gender and representation, and explore the influence that inherent sexualization has on animation as an industry.

The essay will emphasize the normalization and expectation of exploitation of female characters. The essay will also discuss the effects of sexualization in other media resulting from the animation industry, and how this impacts societal expectations.

This essay will provide research on the presentation of gender and its effect on gender biases, intersectionality, feminism, character design, and industry. The research will expand on gender in animation and, much like with sexualization, how it is affected by societal standards. Furthermore, this essay will analyze the use of semiotics in how gender is presented in animation, specifically in anthropomorphism.

The importance of the key word ‘representation’ is explored, discussing how representation is affected by both sexualization and gender. This essay will have a focus on the effect of how representation is seen in animation based on visual stereotypes and how that affects the viewers of animation.

Sexualization

The relationship between sexualization and objectification includes whether people who have experienced sexualization are viewed more like objects than like people and has been the subject of recent studies. According to research, those who identify as sexualized are more likely than non-sexualized people to be treated like

objects, and processed and categorised as such, with fewer human characteristics. Furthermore, sexualization encourages undesirable actions like social isolation, often due to lack of self-confidence. Together, these findings provide insight into potential pathways behind violence against those who have experienced sexualization (Bernard, P., Cogoni, C. and Carnaghi, A. (2020). The sexualization of women in media is closely connected to the concept of female characters being seen as sub-human in comparison to their male counterparts (Langton, R. (2009). The objectification of women in animation is related to the concept of female characters value being connected to their image, and as a result, are valued based on their visual appeal. Furthermore, the objectification and sexualization of female character images promotes the narrative of women being an ‘other’ within media, where the character is used to simply satisfy the male gaze (Garcia, M. (2021). This may be interpreted as the dissociation of a person's body or bodily components from them as a person, rendering them an inanimate object devoid of emotion or thinking. Often female characters are made to be reliant on their visual image rather than their actual character, due to the exploitation and sexualization of their bodies taking priority to create a character that seems more appealing. Compared to male characters, women are more frequently shown as being dominated, acting like objects or animals, dressing provocatively, or engaging in sexual activities. Women’s bodies are digitally modified to enhance breast size, decrease hips and waist, lengthen legs, and erase imperfections (Sexualisation & Objectification of women in media (2023).

The concept of hypersexualizing women in media also relates to the concept of visual discrimination based on how sexualized the character can be. Examples of this can be seen in early illustration works, such as fairy tales.

Comparing the description/depiction of female characters, the concept of good and evil can be easily inferred through visual signs, for example an evil witch compared to a heroine type character (Rayner, P., Wall, P. and Barker, J. (2006). From this, researchers have inferred that the concept of morality is substantially based on whether a character fits the general beauty standard for women, which is inherently connected to how a women's value is reliant on if the audience can sexualize them (Savigny, H. (2020). Female villains are often connected to their ethics through several visual stereotypes, such as long noses, skin blemishes and 'unattractive' body types, which further highlights the previously mentioned concept of value being related to sexualization. Overall, the idea of a women being 'ugly' and unable to be sexualized means they are undesirable in the story and is considered as a villain (Calle, T.M. (2021). An example of this kind of depiction can be seen below in Figure 1, where the depiction of the "witch" character is a very stereotypical depiction of an evil type of female character.

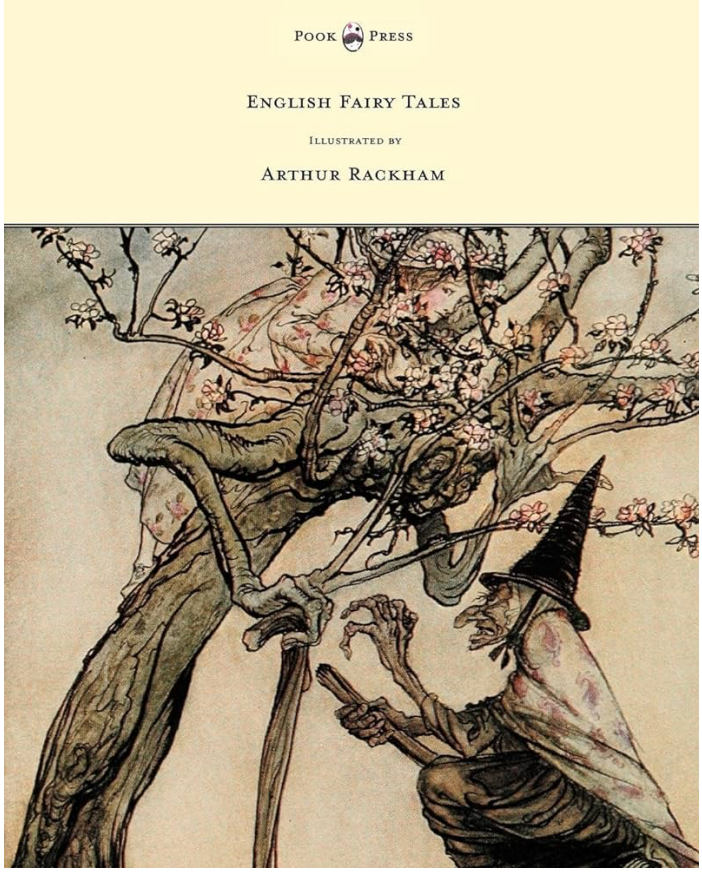

Figure 1, Rackham, A. (2013a) *English Fairy Tales – Illustrated by Arthur Rackham*, *Pook Press*. Pook Press. Available at: https://www.pookpress.co.uk/shop/english-fairy-tales-illustrated-by-arthur-rackham/ (Accessed: 2024).

The sexualization of female characters extends far into the animation industry, even in media that is directed towards younger audiences. Cartoons provide a greater emphasis on males than on women to the point that the plot either revolves around them or is entirely centred around them, giving women very little room, time, or importance. Examples of this can be seen in several shows for a younger audience, such as ‘Johnny Bravo’, ‘Phineas and Ferb’, and ‘The Flintstones’. Furthermore, the sexualization of female characters are also included in animated media that targets a female audience, such as ‘The Power Puff Girls’ with the character of ‘Miss Bellum’. Examples of these characters can be seen in figures 2 and 3 below.

Figure 2, Brumfield, S. (2022) *Column: The culture surrounding anime*, *THE ITHACAN*. Available at: https://theithacan.org/42771/life-culture/popped-culture/column-the-culture-surrounding-anime/#:~:text=Most%20prominent%20is%20anime's%20hypersexualization,and%20audience%20to%20gaze%20at. (Accessed: 20 April 2024).

Figure 3, Partible, V. (2004) 'Witch-ay Woman', *Johnny Bravo.* Cartoon Network.

In these shows there are mainly stereotypical or supportive roles for women. Children gain knowledge and learn through observation. Continuous exposure to such stereotypes via television reinforces acceptance of this as a standard, expected portrayal of women. These preconceptions have a profound effect on neurological development; they restrict their ideas and prevent children from developing an open mind and tolerance for different viewpoints. It is difficult for children to embrace different gender notions and attitudes as they get older. They may not be receptive to other people's viewpoints as they are raised with a prejudiced viewpoint (Foundation, R.E. (2017).

Additionally, sexualization is particularly evident in adult targeted animation, where characters can be more explicit and sexual due to the animation being aimed at an older audience. Examples of this can be seen in ‘The Simpsons’, ‘Family Guy’, ‘BoJack Horseman’, and ‘Clone High’. Relating this to the concept of sexualization being expected in female characters regardless of the audience, an egregious example can be seen in Japanese animation, or ‘anime’. The most noticeable is how anime hypersexualizes its female characters. One instance is the overtly exaggerated body proportions. Additionally, these female characters are frequently objectified and used as objects of gaze for both the audience and the male characters (Brumfield, S. (2022). In figure 4 below, the objectification of female characters is incredibly prominent due to the exaggerated features in the character design, which is an incredibly common trend in Japanese animation.

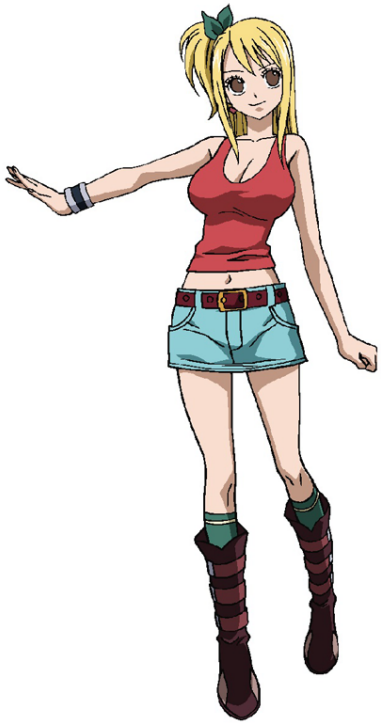

Figure 4, Mashima, H. (2009) Fairy tale. TV Tokyo.

When comparing the depiction of male and female characters in these animations, it highlights that “female representation in mainstream animation is often stereotyped and redundant” and have a major focus on portraying “a very narrow dentition of beauty and femininity” (Sá, G. and Tavares, P. (2017). Male characters are depicted with various body types whilst female characters tend to only fit the stereotypical hourglass figure. This pattern displayed throughout various types of animation emphasises that sexualization is normalized in all types of animated media, as female characters are expected to be more appealing to the viewer in order to be appreciated by the audience.

Gender

Gender theory investigates how people conceptualise and socially structure sexual difference. This is a process that all cultures go through to define what constitutes

normal and abnormal behaviour. The process also hinges on how "nature" and "culture," or the systems humans have created to subdue and oppose nature, are viewed, with civilization being both superior and masculine. These social structures and conventions have almost always resulted in patriarchal societies that privilege men over women (Gerish, D. (1970).

Gender and its presentation in media create biases that are depicted in subtle forms such as social and physical aspects (Bradley, Harriet. (2013). Furthermore, there are aspects of gender presentation that is dependent on societal characteristics, such as intersectionality and class (Hooks, Bell (2000). This section of the essay will focus on how gender is represented in media and how it links to the sexualization of specifically female characters. An example of this can be seen in the anthropomorphism within animal characters. Anthropomorphism has been heavily criticised for creating men as a ‘default’ in terms of gender whilst female characters have more overexaggerated features in order to indicate gender, which is often described as ‘manipulative’ or ‘unsophisticated’ (Parkinson, C. (2020). Within animation, male characters are often presented with natural features that are expected from the animal or objects that they are depicted as, whereas female characters are given exaggerated features (Cheryan, S. and Markus, H. (2020). This further emphasizes the belief of women being an ‘other’ when depicting the gender. The concept of anthropomorphism in animation being inherently sexualized in women is emphasized by the typical over exaggerated features that are used to indicate that a character is female. Examples of this can be seen in movies such as ‘Rio’ (2011), ‘Balto’ (1995), ‘The Aristocats’ (1970), ‘Surf’s up’ (2007), ‘Ice Age’ (2009) etc. Examples of this type of gender presentation can be seen below in figure

5 and 6, as the characters display the consistent over exaggeration of the female gender.

Figure 5, Donkin, J.C. et al. (2009) Ice Age 3, dawn of the dinosaurs [film]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.

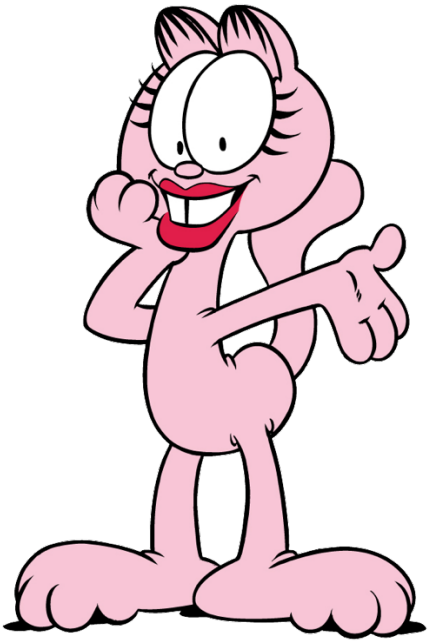

Figure 6 Viacom to acquire Garfield for Nickelodeon portfolio (2019) Paramount. Available at: https://ir.paramount.com/news-releases/news-release-details/viacom-acquire-garfield-nickelodeon-portfolio (Accessed: 24 April 2024).

Both examples identify what animation uses to imply the female gender, such as the long eyelashes and exaggerated facial features. Gender presentation also relates to the idea that when considering the depiction of female characters, often it is shown that “to be a woman is to perform” (Lucifora, P. (2023). This sexualization in the presentation of the female gender further relates to the earlier exploration of value in female characters coming from their ability to fit the beauty standard and be applicable to the male gaze, furthers emphasising that women in animation are inherently sexualized. However, it is important to acknowledge the development and progression of the representation of female characters, and ultimately gender as a whole, in animation. A prominent example of the development is the recently released “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles; Mutant Mayhem”, where the main character ‘April O’Neil’ (Figure 7) is redesigned to look more like a teenager compared to her passed sexualized counterparts.

Figure 7 Smitt, K. (2023) April who? ‘Mutant mayhem’ character designer defends changes, Bleeding Fool. Available at: https://bleedingfool.com/news/april-oneil-did-mutant-mayhem-character-designer-understand-the-assignment/ (Accessed: 24 April 2024).

Overall, gender is a performative ideal that is an evolving process wherein femininities and masculinities interact dynamically and in different ways with a wide range of categories, such as age, class, sexual orientation, nationality, and ethnicity (Glapka, Ewa. and Braid, Barbara. (2018). Furthermore, the depiction of gender, has continued to evolve to sexualize women in animation through the use of performative features, which accumulates gender biases based on said representation.

Representation

Studies indicate that the idealised portrayal of beauty in the media might negatively impact an individual's contentment with their physique (Karsay, K. (2021). This section of the essay will explore the keyword ‘representation’ and its connections to the unrealistic depictions of gender and the sexualization in animation. Ultimately, media impacts how the audience views whatever aspect the media has focus on, such as race, class and gender. Animation is under constant criticism for its lack of representation of both women and people of colour (Katatikarn, J. (2024), which creates a divide within the audience and the animated media as minorities can feel validated and feel free to voice their thoughts because of representation (Why representation matters - Celebrating Black History Month (no date). This fosters a collaborative atmosphere where everyone feels appreciated and ideas are freely exchanged. Representation has a crucial part in shaping our ideas of who we are, what we are worth, and what we are capable of achieving. Seeing successful people that resemble you is motivating (Overton, I. (no date). This can be related to the previous discussion of the constant sexualization of women, as there is a connection to how women are represented, the effect on social biases, and the expectations that are enforced through how women are depicted (Karsay, K., Matthes, J. and Fröhlich,

V. (2020) in animation. The current presentation of women in animation has a major effect on the audience as it becomes ingrained that sexualization of the characters and audience is expected, due to the connection between women and female characters, which ultimately leads to the self-objectification of women and young girls (Mimi Arbeit, P. (2022). Although there are consistent signs of development, overall female representation in animated films still vastly different from that of male representation. Gender representation is becoming more equitable and equal, and this is evident in films where the proportion of female faces even surpasses that of male faces (Avelino, M. (2023).

However, it is eminent to recognise the development that recently occurred in animation of how they depict female characters. Much like in Figure 7, female characters have recently been gaining recognition in their characters and have had several variations in body types and facial features. Animation companies are putting increasing effort into developing complex, inspirational, and norm-challenging female characters. By rejecting traditional preconceptions, these characters encourage young viewers and function as role models. Furthermore, the industry has benefited from the talents of female writers, directors, and animators who have brought a variety of viewpoints and more realistic depictions of female characters (Studio, H. (2024). An Example of this is in the character design of the female character ‘Carol’ in the animated TV show “Carol and the End of the World” (Figure 8).

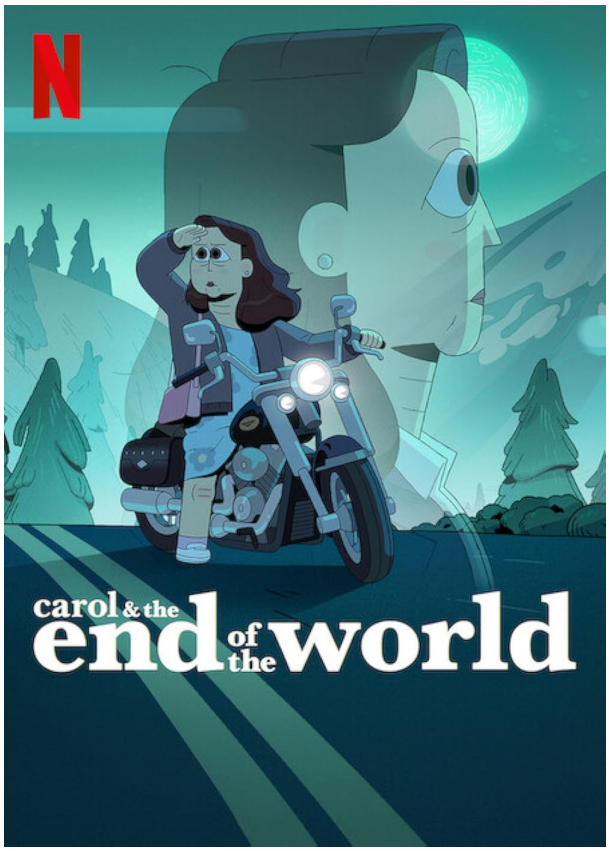

Figure 8, Carol & the end of the World (2023) IMDb. Available at: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt29629770/ (Accessed: 24 April 2024).

This emphasises the main characters personality rather than her image and give her an appearance that differs from the typical sexualized design of female characters. Overall, whilst the current representation of women in animation does have its negative aspects due to its relation to sexualization, it is constantly developing and improving in its depictions as it creates positive changes in the industry and sets a new standard for women in animation (Angelina, B. and Imanjaya, E. (2022).

In conclusion, depictions of female characters have historically been inherently sexualized which has led to a distorted representation of gender. The objectification of women in animation has created harmful influences for societal expectations of

women as it normalized unrealistic ideals of what a woman should look like. Such expectations lead to the value of women being placed solely in their image. However, the development in animation has become much more advanced and liberal in approach as creative freedom has begun to expand for female characters. Many recent animations have shown female characters as strong, complex individuals developing their own themes central to animations, rather than being simply a counterpart for their male characters. As the development of the industry continues, more women will be empowered by influential animation characters.