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Chinedu Richard ONONIWU\*\*

## Highlighting Racial Demonization in 3D Animated Films and Its Implications: A Semiotic Analysis of *Frankenweenie*

### Abstract

This article focuses on a semiotic analysis of *Frankenweenie*, one of Disney Picture's 3D animated films. Anchored within the psychoanalytic film theory, the aim was to highlight how animated films, as colorful and comic as they are, can demonize a certain group of people. Studying how animated films can do this can lead to an important understanding because children's exposure to modelled behavior on television and in movies has the potential to influence a wide range of attitudes and behaviors, cause victimization, alter their perceptions of reality, reinforce stereotypes and make them acquire such negative emotions as fear and anxiety, and behaviors like retaliation and passivity. The possibility of these adverse effects is even of greater concern in Africa and similar contexts which are at the receiving end of cultural products such as films that emanate from the West. The findings suggest that the negative portrayal of 'people of color' or other characters that represent them, by American film producers and directors seems to be a reoccurring phenomenon. Significantly, from an African perspective, this study corroborates scholars' position that Disney has continued to portray 'people of color' negatively over the years.

**Keywords:** Racial demonization, 3D animation, racism, semiotic analysis, children, films.

### Introduction

A film is a bed of meanings, from the manifest to the hidden. While the eyes and ears are easily caught by the film aesthetics of color, light, sound, the overall fineness of the storyline and finesse in which the characters play their roles, there are meanings that often lay latent. Films can harbor ideologies, empathy, misconceptions, beliefs and stereotypes which can only be uncovered with more critical eyes. While telling a story, filmmakers can as well demonize a certain group of people by the way they present characters that represent them. Animated films, as colorful as they are, have portrayed certain groups of people in a negative light

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(King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2010) and this light may illuminate what children see or think of these people in real life.

Understanding demonization in animated films is important for some reasons. Firstly, as Fouts et al. (2006) argue, children's exposure to modelled behavior on television and in movies can influence their attitudes and behaviors, cause victimization, alter their perceptions of reality, and reinforce stereotypes. This can happen after a repeated exposure to animated characters that model the demonization. Overtime, they learn cynical attitudes and stereotypes about individuals who inflict harm without a rational motivation; learn such demonizing labels as 'devil', 'wicked', 'evil', and acquire such negative emotions as fear and anxiety, and behaviors like retaliation and passivity. Secondly, as the scholars also argue, demonizing certain people in animated films can spur such negative consequences associated with stereotypical beliefs and the labelling of others as alienation and segregation, and when children who belong to the demonized groups are called such names as 'monster' or 'evil', their self-esteem and self-concept are attacked. Thirdly, children are susceptible to effects of negative media portrayals because they can constitute an active audience. Livingstone (2000) argues that children can be curious, anxious; in all, resourceful viewers in a way that counters the idea that television viewing is an effortless experience. As Lemish and Götz (2017) note, children can make meaning out of their media experiences in ways that serve their needs, creativity, and life experiences through processes which may include resisting traditional conventions and interpreting them in creative ways. These views about children as active television audience suggest that when they are presented with animation films, they have the ability to look in-depth to discover latent meanings and can find out when any group of people are demonized.

The negative effects that demonization of certain groups of people in animated films can have on children is therefore worth some reflection, more so due to the overwhelming global influence being exerted by such big media companies as Disney. Modern-day advancement in technology means that messages which demonize certain groups of people can also be distributed through DVDs, video and Internet games, satellite television, and mobile phones, which make for a global reach, and which ultimately serve the economic as well as the discursive agendas of their powerful owners.

In addition, commercialization seems to give oxygen to animated films and film companies, making them exert even more influence. Despite successful efforts to change 'traditional media offerings' (stereotypes, portrayals and presentations), commercial forces still dictate how animated films are produced, distributed and experienced by their audiences. Potter (2017) gave the instance of *Thunderbirds Are Go*, which though considerably more balanced in its representation of female characters and their appearance and behavior, was still influenced by a highly gendered children's television merchandise. She notes that the belief that children prefer gendered television programs and associated merchandize appears to prevail among many producers, distributors and marketing teams, and exert considerable influence in retail and marketing sectors. Consumer products such as toys which emanate from television merchandising and licensing therefore remain a crucial component of the funding of much contemporary children's television, with their success vital to the sustainability of popular series. These popular animated films may also include those with contents that demonize 'people of color'. This makes one wonder if children actually prefer racist television content and if the belief of the existence of such preference has also prevailed among film

producers, distributors and marketing teams, making them dwell on animated films that seem to demonize ‘people of color’. Remarkably, however, animated films (no matter the content), according to Turkmen (2016), seem to be children’s favorite. This preference makes them exposed to the influence of these films.

In Nigeria and undoubtedly parts of Africa, children are exposed to animated films (Oyero & Oyesomi, 2014; Okoro & Onakpa, 2016), and Disney has over the years played a prominent role in this exposure as some of these children live in middle-class families that can afford satellite television and other platforms. The very popular ones include *Cinderella*, *The Jungle book*, *The Lion King*, the colorful and high-grossing ‘*Frozen*’, to mention a couple. A very competitive telecommunications sector which has made high-speed Internet and satellite television available and relatively cheap to access, has equally increased exposure to these animated films. Not much is however known about the availability, accessibility, and popularity of animated films produced by Nigerian film companies. This one-sided exposure, when repeated overtime, means that the ideologies and perceptions related to issues such as race, gender, class, sexuality among the child- (and even) adult-audience may be constructed and shaped by the predetermined reality which such animated film companies as Disney present to them, with no alternative for contrary or multiple viewpoints. Negative racial portrayals as presented in these animated films may therefore be viewed as factual by children and this forms the basis for all adverse effects associated with them.

### **Rationale for the study**

Demonization of races, as a severe aspect of racialization has had a long history, and has been perpetuated in Disney animated films. King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) argue that in such movies as *The Lion King* for example, the hyenas who speak in an inner city African-American dialect are presented as treacherous, and evil Uncle Scar’s mane is black. King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) are of the view that Disney’s attitude towards ‘people of color’ has not changed much along the years. In this context, the fact that racist, stereotypical, and sometimes demonizing content may depict real-life situations may not be good enough justification to produce them. The focus is meant to be on such adverse effects as low self-esteem, self-doubt and prejudice which these contents may have on children.

Instances of nuanced racial demonization in animated films may not have been highlighted or acknowledged much in the literature, especially as it concerns such audience as children in Africa. This has become imperative as children generally fall within an uncritical audience for whom such film companies as Disney produce many of the animated films they are exposed to. It is interesting to note that Disney launched a Disney Africa channel in 2014, bringing the popular television channel closer to children in Africa. This raises the need to highlight this sort of representation using such research method as semiotics. The aim of this study is therefore to determine racial demonization inherent in *Frankenweenie*, one of Disney’s 3D animated films. At the 85<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards organized to honor the best films of 2012, *Frankenweenie* was nominated for the Best Animated Feature – the only animated horror film in that category. Since a horror film has the potential to vividly present a contrast between good and evil – one which can make demonization glaring – *Frankenweenie* was selected as it was the only animated horror film nominated as one of the best in 2012.

## Ideologies in Walt Disney animation films: The hidden and manifest

Walt Disney and his brother, Roy, set up a cartoon studio in Hollywood in 1923: the Disney Brothers' Studio. After 14 years, their first animated feature-length version of *Snow White* was released. The film's phenomenal success at the time (earning \$8 million on its initial release and winning a full-size Oscar statuette and seven miniature ones) heralded a golden age of animation and a rising influence of the Disney movies. By the mid-1970s, Disney studios started growing significantly (Elnahla, 2015). Today, Disney films have grown remarkably, exerting great influence in America and around the world. Although Disney animated films can be perceived as mere children's stories since they come with lovable characters and 'happily ever after' storylines, there are many underlying messages in them.

In-between the film aesthetics, Disney conceals, for example, strong themes of hierarchy in different variations. Artz (2002) argues that Disney's animated features promote ideologies supportive of capitalist globalization. *The Lion King*, one of Disney's most successful animated films shows the 'upper class' (lions) prey on the 'middle class' (antelopes and zebras) and the 'lower class' are the grasses that give life to the middle class.

Apart from messages on the different variations of hierarchy, Disney animated films also hide away gendered messages and by so doing, reinforce some gendered stereotypes. Disney films present women as weak and overly dependent on the masculinity of the males to survive. From Snow White who needs a princely hero to save her, to the princess in the *Princess and the Frog*, Disney sends messages to the world that women are frail and must find a princely hero to save the day. In *Snow White*, Disney also suggests that women can be childish. Snow White was shown to be so childish that even after the dwarfs repeatedly warned her to be careful and not let anyone into the house before they left for the day's work, she lets an old woman in.

Furthermore, Disney animated films conceal a beauty ideal – that which upholds fairness, red lips, large eyes, long hair, pointed nose and hourglass figure. These features as possessed by such notable female Disney characters as Snow White, Cinderella, Belle (in *Beauty and the Beast*), Ariel (in *The Little Mermaid*) and Aurora (in *Sleeping Beauty*) are definitions of beauty and anyone who wants to be seen as 'most beautiful' must possess them. Beauty, by any other standard, is therefore not good enough. Solis (2007) argues that children might learn that being just beautiful is not as good as being the most beautiful, and that attempting to become the most beautiful is worth taking risks, and even worth dying, for.

On a cursory look, one may not see these messages but is rather carried away by the storyline and endearing characters which the filmmaker wants the reader to see. But the reader is not to be confined to the filmmakers' preferred reading, for no image has a single meaning. For Barthes (1977), the image is polysemic. This means that it shares with other signs, including linguistic signs, the property of being open to multiple significations. As Barthes suggested in *Rhetoric of the Image*, the observer's perception can be coaxed into a preferred reading of the image. But in the end, the observer has the power to make his/her own choices by reading his/her own meanings into any text.

However, animated filmmakers may not always create animations for their preferred reading to prevail over the audience. Animations may mirror the culture, realities, concerns and interest of the audience in any given society or a particular section, thus leaving messages manifest and easy to grasp. For Freeman (2005), children's animation films are like 'portable professors'. Freeman's notion suggests that the film industry will reflect those issues and interests

which the audience will most readily engage with and be most concerned about; children's films are akin to being a finger on the societal pulse. This seems to be the filmmakers' sort of defense for production of content which may be described as racist or stereotypical. Joseph Barbera who was responsible for some stereotypical content in *Tom and Jerry*, claimed that the racial gags did not reflect his racial opinion but what was common in the society and cartoons at the time, and were meant to be humorous instead (Maltin, 1997).

For decades and till date, racism is one issue of concern in the United States of America. Racism, in this sense, transcends mere hate or disapproval of a certain group of people for no reason to include giving reasons, no matter how subtle, on why they should be avoided by the rest of the world. King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) note Disney's importance in providing both children and adults with a reinforcement of ideologies concerning race. They see animations as socializing agents that guide children through the complexities of highly racialized scenarios, normalizing certain dynamics while rendering others invisible. They argue that these films teach children how to manoeuvre within the terrain of race, and that films, in their role as agents of socialization, provide children with the necessary tools to reinforce expectations about normalized racial and sexual dynamics.

Apart from capitalist and gender ideologies, Disney animations embody stereotypes associated with different minority groups such as Blacks, Asians or Latinos. King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) argue along this line. According to them, racialization takes place on many levels within animated films and it serves as a tool to teach children to maintain racial ideologies and by so doing, reinforces the status quo.

## Empirical review

Unearthing the apparently hidden meanings of media texts has been a focus of a significant array of research. The aim of one of such as conducted by Devlieger and De Coster (2009) was to find out the multiple meanings of such disabilities as sexual impotence, albinism, blindness, deafness and difficulty in movement in African films. The study employed a semiotic analysis of the following films: Sembene Ousmane's *Xala* (1975), Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni* (1982), Falaba Issa Traore's *Gombele* (1994), Dan Koyate's *Keita* (1995), Djibiril Diop Mambeti's *La Petite Vendeuse de Soleil* (1998) and Saadi Jilaani's *Khorma* (la bête) (2002). The researchers found that disability is understood as loss and also the possibility for regeneration in *Xala* and as genuinely accepting gifts from God in *Wend Kuuni*. They also found out the ordinariness of disabled people and how people have misguided perceptions about them in *Gombele*. Disability was also found to be an overcoming of barriers in *Keita*, an enlightenment for a rather dark world in *La Petite Vendeuse de Soleil*, and positive despite people's disruptive tendencies in *Khorma*.

Cartoons can be used to satirize. This is evident in findings from a study conducted by Sani et al. (2012). The study aimed at analyzing the linguistic elements used in cartoon written texts to illustrate how Nigerian cartoonists specially use language to construct satire as a means that could be used to initiate positive social and political reforms in Nigeria. Findings from the study showed that Nigerian cartoonists use interjections frequently in the cartoon written texts to create satirical impressions about political leaders. Cartoons can also convey societal perception. This was shown in a study conducted by Ulubeyli, Arslan and Kivrak (2015) aimed at finding out society's perception of the responsibility of workers for occupa-