

How cultivation theory applies to racial problems media essay



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Introduction

American cartoons comprise the most popular film product industry for children worldwide, and have gained considerable attention in terms of educating children. As an excellent medium for storytelling, children learn the basic concepts of what the world is like and what love and ethics are from the fairy tales they watch. I am currently studying one of the communication theories, namely, cultivation theory. American cartoons, particularly Disney movies, are classic objects of study.

The cultivation theory developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross of the University of Pennsylvania states that “ the more time people spend “ living” in the television world, the more likely they are to believe the social reality portrayed on television.” Therefore, heavy television viewers have a higher estimation for a particular social reality (e. g., violence, prostitution, affluence, occupation, and marital discord) than what real-world phenomena can justify. Thus, to make the theory applicable to the real world, the study emphasizes the harm that television shows might bring to people. In my opinion, early education is essential to the development of an individual’s personality; it also determines his/her later ideology. Thus, the effects of cartoons on children’s self development are worth studying.

American cartoons and animation movies have benefits, particularly in teaching children the values of honesty, bravery, and friendship, and the fact that justice and good will triumph over evil. However, we can also see that the protagonists often use violence to defeat evil. Along with violence, gender problems and religious issues also show up in most films more than

we think, and children learn about them without guidance. Children could easily confuse reality and fantasy, particularly in our current society where parents who are busy with work and socializing use video games and television shows as substitute companions for their children. In a nutshell, studying American cartoons is crucial for us because they may drastically affect children's upbringing by presenting negative messages.

The cultivation theory deeply focuses on the effects of violence on the behavior of people. In this paper, I will analyze the issue of racial discrimination in cartoons to make the study of the cultivation theory more complete. Discrimination is another essential topic that has been largely neglected due to the focus on violence in cartoons.

Literature Review

Dixon (2006) believes that heavy viewers of television are more likely to think that an African-American suspect is guilty; they also view the world as a more dangerous place than it actually is. Television encourages violence and aggression. Durkin (1985) supports the view that children obtain information on gender roles and racial views from television and model their behaviors based on television characterization.

Gerbner describe the process of " blurring, blending, and bending" that is experienced by individuals with heavy viewing habits. (Griffin, 2011). Heavy television viewers create a common outlook through constant exposure to the same images and labels. In movies, the heroes and the victims are always fair-skinned, whereas the criminals or villains are always black- or

dark-skinned. Mastro and Stern (2003) add that races other than whites are under-represented, negatively depicted, and are often targets of mockery.

From Larson's theory, the more children watch television programs, the more likely they are to develop and entertain more traditional gender and racial stereotypes based on what they view in the media (Larson, 2002).

Waver (2011) analyzes racial related-phenomena in American movies and finds that the race of the actors clearly affects the desires of white audience members to see the films. The higher the percentage of black actors in the movie, the less interested white individuals were in seeing the movie.

Analysis

Most Disney movies feature gorgeous princesses, including The Little Mermaid, Snow White, and Rapunzel, who are all depicted as Caucasians.

The princess in the film The Princess and the Frog was dark-skinned but her prince was a white man. Most heroes in these movies are all fair-skinned, but the skin tones of the villains are diverse. In the movies, the storylines usually start with a white man who breaks into a new cultural environment, changes the locals' points of view and customs, and leads them defeat the bad guy, after which he becomes the hero. Tarzan even became king of the forest.

This stereotype exists in numerous American movies. According to the cultivation theory, children may subconsciously develop behavioral stereotypes, although what they view could be biased, distorted or misleading (Oliver, 2001 & Smith, 1994).

American cartoon movies also add their own value to foreign cultures, which may adversely affect children's knowledge of the actual status of other
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nations. For instance, the song of the Disney movie *Aladdin* (1992) used inappropriate words to describe the hometown of Aladdin. In the song, the words "...where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home" offended the Arab Americans, who believed that the lyrics are a misrepresentation of the Arab culture and should be removed. In 1993, the *New York Times* published a critique of the said movie, which was entitled "It is racism, but hey, it's Disney." The article pointed out that "To characterize an entire region with this sort of tongue-in-cheek bigotry, especially in a movie aimed at children, borders on barbaric" (*New York Times*, 1993). Another Disney movie, *Mulan*, twisted certain facts of the Chinese culture. In the movie, Mulan was characterized as an independent, liberal woman who suggested to that the princesses chase love bravely. Although this is an accepted idea in modern society and could be deemed proper by most people, it is not the real ideology in ancient China; it is not part true history and real tradition. In another animation movie, *Pocahontas*, the love story was exaggerated and deviated from what actually occurred in history.

The contents of some American cartoons are more suited to adults. For instance, the show *South Park* features sarcasm, dirty words, and improper content that could easily be misunderstood by children. In an episode in the 11th season of the show *With Apologies to Jesse Jackson*, the word "nigger" was used 43 times. Although the purpose of this episode was not to humiliate black people, as the episode was in fact highly accepted by blacks, children may misconstrue the purpose of this cartoon and learn a new word that they could abuse.

Another Disney movie entitled *Song of the South* featured a song called Zip-a-Dee-Do-Dah, which won the Oscar for Original Score in 1946. However, the movie had racist tendencies when viewed from the criterion of today. The story takes place in the South after the Civil War, and Uncle Remus, a freed slave, tells stories to children and makes them laugh. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. viewed the portrayal of the happy life as a slave with suspicion and posited that it is humiliating to minorities. Disney did not publish the DVD in the United States to avoid eliciting resentment from the public. ¶¶

Griffin (2000) describes the effects that media can have on the audience as being similar to a cue ball. The effect of the cue ball exists regardless of the distance of the cue ball to the other balls. A similar effect can be seen in the posters of most movies, where the character's outlook is already published before the audience even sees the movie. For instance, in the movie *Aladdin*, the skin tones of Aladdin and Jasmine are fairer than those of the other people in the movie, and Jafar's appearance could already give a general impression of his villainy even before the movie is viewed. Fair skin can thus be mistakenly connected to purity and kindness, whereas black or dark skin could be associated with criminality and craftiness.

The problem is not limited to movies alone. The audience has its own personal interest, which causes the racial issue in movies to become an infinite loop. According to the study by Weaver in 2011, white people are more inclined to choose movies with white cast members than movies with cast members from other races, thereby decreasing opportunities for white children to see more movies from different aspects, as well as the opportunities for them to change their stereotypes. White audience
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members that practice selective avoidance if they perceive that a film has a black theme is precisely the concern that black actors such as Will Smith have expressed, especially when it comes to romantic leads in movies (Jones, 2005). Last year, only two of the 30 highest grossing films featured major non-white characters.

According to the cultivation theory, when audience members repeatedly view the same scenario from various television shows and movies, they will associate it with the outside world in their mind. Racism is a phenomenon that cannot be completely eliminated, particularly in a country with so many ethnicities, such as the United States. The high rate of positive roles that white people portray indicates the constancy of racism in the future.

Conclusion

Children from all over the world watch Disney and other American cartoons. Thus, these movies and shows have far-reaching effects. Growing up exposed to many classic and fantastic stories have kept children well entertained and educated, as they come to appreciate the stories being told and the excellent techniques and artwork used in the telling. The positive influences that these movies have on children are undeniably more immense than the negative influences, as they teach children to be independent, tough, and patriotic. Advocating liberty, human rights, and American ideology is necessary for a nation to unite and educate people. However, praising American culture while criticizing others is not respectful. Racism is not a concept that children should learn. We can strengthen their idea of equality by using the cultivation theory, which could result in a decrease in conflicts between races, genders, and other issues.

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As embodied in the cultivation theory, when television predominates the lives of children, its influence can permeate the behavior, language, thoughts, and actions of children. Moreover, negative messages tend to be received more easily than positive messages. Thus, the effects of media on children should be studied, and possible modifications should be introduced.

Recent American cartoons already manifest some changes. For instance, the main character in the movie Megamind has blue skin, and the classic image of the superhero is the one being mocked. An upcoming movie entitled Escape From Planet Earth will feature stories of several blue characters.

Guidance from parents is also essential in eliminating or mitigating the influence of cultivation effect on children. A child's knowledge of the world and his ability to tell right from wrong are not yet mature, so parents can help their children understand what is on screen by explaining the contents of television shows to them. The movie rating system should be used worldwide. The cultivation theory also clearly posits that the cultivation effect occurs only after long-term, cumulative exposure to television (Weimann2000). Thus, decreasing the amount of time children spend watching television is also necessary.