Social construction and ideology in animation films

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1. Introduction

This essay is part of a research in animation films which is grounded on the theories of Greimas and Saussure. There are many different forms of animation and they are related to different methods of production, technology, techniques, geographic allotment of production and socio-economic conditions. The research covers the period from 1995 to 2009 which is a period of continuous change in the animation industry and in film production methods in general. These changes are affecting the semiotic system of animation films. The aim of this essay is to show through examples from animation films that the production of meaning is linked to social conditions and material production methods since “The semiotic systems are produced by the exo-semiotic process of material production” (Lagopoulos 1986: 236) and thus, in order to study the production of meaning and ideology in animation films there is a need for connecting the semiotic system with its material production and society.

2. From animation production to the production of meaning

Whether cinema was invented in 1889 by Charles-Émile Reynaud and his Theatre Optique or in 1895 by the Lumière brothers, cinema from its early years was identified with live action films while animation films were associated with the visual effects of Georges Méliès. This dichotomy resulted in the devaluation of animation as a cinematic form and was grounded in the demand for “realism” and the misconception that live action films “depict reality” while animation films are “products of the imagination” and thus, “not real”. The false belief that the cinematic sign has a referent in the natural world led to the assumption that animation is not cinema but something “other”. In our days due to the rapid and continuous technological progress, the change in production methods and the massive use of animation and visual effects in live action film production that led to the consequent merging of the cinematic forms, we have realized more profoundly that all cinema is constructed, mediated and manipulated and so it is difficult to claim that any cinematic sign has a natural referent outside the semiotic system. The above is consistent with Saussure’s principle of arbitrariness in which is clearly stated that in every sign the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and the sign has no referent outside the semiotic system.

Many media and animation theorists like Lev Manovich (2001), Alan Cholodenko (1991, 2008), and Alexander Alexeief (1994) support the position that there is no difference between animation and live action films and that “film per se is a form of animation”. (Cholodenko1991: 22-23, 2008: 10) or as Alexeief expresses it: “Anyhow, it is legitimate to consider cinema as a
particular kind of animation, a sort of cheap, industrial substitute...” (Alexeieff 1994: xix). While this is a very strong argument when we examine animation practice per se and we are addressing the question “what is animation?”, I argue that in the course of the history of cinema, animation and live action films have evolved into two different forms of cinema due to historical and social structures that led to the production of their distinctively different langues. According to Saussure, langue is a sign system in which the value of every sign is defined by its difference with the other signs of the system. It is a system of pure values “determined by nothing else apart from the temporary state of its constituent elements” (Saussure 1986: 80) and thus, it is not determined by any relations to objects. In his famous metaphor of language with a chessboard, he notes: “… a state of the board corresponds exactly to a state of the language. The value of the chess pieces depends on their position upon the chess board, just as in the language each term has its value through its contrast with all the other terms” (Saussure 1986: 88). For Saussure is central that all sciences should pay greater attention to the fact that their objects belong to two different axes, the axis of simultaneity (axe des simultanéités), which refers to the relations between things that coexist and are independent of time, and the axis of successive (axe des successivités), which refers to the individual (as opposed to holistic) changes of all these things over time. These two axes define the first two of the four fields of linguistics that are following: (a) For Saussure the first and most important is the field of synchronic linguistics (linguistique synchronique), which studies the axis of simultaneity (the langue), as social system, and this at a static, simultaneous state. (b) The second is the diachronic linguistics (linguistique diachronique), which studies the axis of successiveness, that is successive forms of elements of langue. (c) The third is the linguistics of speech (of parole), namely the use of langue, and it is of secondary importance compared with the first type of linguistics. (d) The three previous linguistics is for Saussure “internal”, in so far as they are related to the language per se. He adds to these external linguistics (linguistique externe), which is a social linguistics, because is linking language with its outside socio-historical environment.

It is clear from the above that Saussure does not connect langue with the exosemiotic, which in our case is the material production of the animation films and that he relates langue and parole to two different branches of linguistics and he defines langue as the field of study of linguistics.

Many Marxists have criticized Saussure’s separation of langue and parole: for example Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) criticizes Saussure’s splitting of langue and parole as separating individuals and society where it matters most, at the point of their production. Eventually, theorists from the French semiotic tradition have shown that a semiotic analysis of parole is possible. Algirdas Julien Greimas (1966) developed thoroughly a narratological method of analysis that allows the analysis of parole. More recently, Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou (1992) have provided us with a methodology that links the analysis of meaning with the social sciences and makes the social semiotic analysis of parole possible.

To return to animation theorists, Paul Wells (1998, 2007), Maureen Furnish (2008) and Giancarlo Bendazzi (2006) agree that animation has developed its own language in the course of its history. This language is continuously evolving and changing due to social changes and the constant technological developments that lead to consequent changes in production methods and labor. Animation is identified as such and differentiates itself as a cinematic form through its language that is connected to its material production methods. As the societies and the methods of
production are changing, consequently the language of animation is constantly evolving and changing.

We cannot ignore the connection and interrelation between the semiotic, which is the language, and the exosemiotic, which is the material production, and thus, in order to study the production of meaning and ideology in animation films, we need to see it in connection with the material production and society. In order to achieve this, I have applied in the research an articulation of semiotics with Marxist theory, following Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1990) and Lagopoulos (1980, 1986, 2000). This articulation with the exo-semiotic is grounded mainly on Lagopoulos’s theory and more specifically in his *articulation of production*.

Lagopoulos defines three exo-semiotic articulations of a text: a) the *articulation of production or of derivation*, which is identified with Saussure’s amorphous substance of ideas and consists of non-formalized ideology, that is, what Louis Hjelmslev calls the substance of the content; b) the *articulation of manifestation*, which consists of the substance of the expression, the manifestation of the semiotic system with the help of an exo-semiotic material (for Saussure it has a material nature and coincides with the phonic substance); and c) the *parallel articulation*, which is created by the reference of the semiotic system to external material referents (Lagopoulos 1986: 236-238).

The articulation of production bridges the semiotic with the material, socio-economic and technological, dynamics of society and through it the semiotic field is constituted. It follows that the epistemological and theoretical constitution of the semiotic field cannot be independent from the epistemological and theoretical formulation of material production, and that the main axes of the semiotic systems derive from material production. It further follows that for every structurally different type of society, which is founded for mainstream Marxism on the concept of mode of production, the semiotic fields in their historical specificity are differently structured. Thus, the a priori generalization of the structure of the semiotic field is misleading. It finally follows that, in the interior of a given society, to every structurally different social group (the fundamental social groups being founded for Marxism on the concept of ‘class’ in certain types of societies), corresponds a different variant of the general semiotic system of the society (see also Houdebine [1977: 164-165], who refers to Volochinov’s views on language); thus, the general use of the concept of a general ‘cultural text’ is misleading. (Lagopoulos 1986: 236).

3. Analyzing animation films: case studies

Animation production is mainly geographically allocated in three areas: a) Europe, where many different techniques have developed and the focus is on artistic expression and art films; 2) USA, where the industrialization of production and commercialization prevailed; and 3) since the 1980’s we are witnessing the phenomenon of the impressive and continuous development of Japanese animation (anime), that is challenging American domination.

Usually when we refer to animation one of the first things that comes to mind is the productions of Disney. Since the early 1940s the dominance of Disney Company is undeniable and therefore we can say that it is both the dominant animation paradigm and that it expresses the dominant ideology. “It is safe to say that in no other medium has a single company’s practices
been able to dominate aesthetic norms to the extent that Disney’s has”. (Furnish 2008: 107). In other words, “Disney orthodox animation is the predominant language of animation”. (Wells 2002: 4). The basic characteristics of Disney animation are: 1) industrial production 2) technological pioneering 3) films for children 4) films produced for universal consumption 5) strictly defined aesthetic code. The diachronic huge success of Disney led all other animation producers to be defined in relation to Disney animation, either by trying to imitate it or by standing in opposition to it. As Furnish writes: “In every type of cultural production, there are dominant forms of expression that tend to define it within the minds of people in the general public, if not specialists in the field. During the 20th century, the practice of ‘animation’ typically was identified by four characteristics: it was 1) American 2) created by cel artwork 3) made by men 4) made at the Disney studio”. (Furnish 2008: 13).

The period under examination here covers the years between 1995 when Pixar released Toy Story, the first 3d computer generated feature film, and 2009. This is a period of constant changes in production methods and struggle for dominance in the field. During this period America is still dominant but its domination is challenged by the continuous rise and expansion of Japanese animation production. Disney and the American animation industry in general, following the demand for technological pioneering, has replaced cel animation with computer animation and Disney, even though its dominance is not absolute, is still considered the leading company. The films that are used as examples below were produced during this period and their production technique is not only an aesthetic choice, but affects their deep structure. It is extremely interesting that these films are discussing and defending specific ideological choices concerning their production methods, labor and the social conditions leading to the choice of the way they are constructed.

3.1 Artistic creation versus industrialization of production: The Triplets of Belleville

Although it is difficult to refer to a European history of animation, as it is characterized by a great variety and diversity in the techniques and production methods that are applied not only from country to country but even within the same country, there is a common characteristic: if Disney / USA films have as their dominant characteristic industrialized production, Europe emphasizes art films, personal expression and aesthetic value. The relationship of European films with the arts remained unbroken and uninterrupted until the early 21st century. Even though many European films which have been produced by small groups and with almost no budget can be regarded as masterpieces, they did not succeed in reaching broad audiences. The Triplets of Belleville (Sylvain Chomet, 2003) apart from winning many prizes, enjoyed great commercial success and for this reason it is chosen here as a case study. Animation art films are usually short. This could be considered as a feature length art film. It is a hand drawn musical with very little dialogue and a film very rich in intertextual references.

The film narrates the story of an old woman and her orphaned grandson who wants to take part in the cycle race Tour de France. The Mafia kidnapes him together with other cyclists and takes him to Belleville in order to exploit his love of cycling to make money. His grandmother, madam Souza, succeeds in rescuing him with the help of three old singers.
Analyzing the film, the antithesis between art film production versus industrialization/commercialization of entertainment is striking. All the codes merge to form the poles of this basic antithesis. The film is mostly concerned with the process of creating and the artist. If the bicycle race connotes the process of production, it is transferred from France to Belleville, a place that signifies the American way of life and industrial production. The Mafia, the production companies, are exploiting the artists. Due to industrialization the production process becomes not only mechanical but also mechanistic, leading artists from the pleasure of producing to the unhappiness of work done for profit. Competition and industrialization leads the artist to a race giving him no pleasure and in the end leaves him drained. The antithetical pair unique versus identical is another difference between art production and commercial production. While artists are poor, the industry is rich. Even though in the movie the grandmother finally rescues her grandson leading their adventure to a happy ending, the movie doesn’t resolve in the same optimistic way the conflict between artistic and commercial production. The film concludes that the art films are old, with no production budget and they are defeated by the new, rich commercial production companies. The end phrase of the film is “yes, it’s over”, one of the few sentences used in the film, which leads to a sad conclusion for the European art films: The era of artistic expression is over.

3.2 The defense of identity: Spirited away

Hayao Miyazaki’s Studio Ghibli is one of the best known Japanese anime studios in existence today and he is often referred to as the Walt Disney of Japan. Studio Ghibli has taken a different track from western companies when it comes to animation production. While Disney has chosen to base its production on technology and innovation, Studio Ghibli on the other hand is still producing films with the traditional Japanese anime, that is hand drawn, limited animation and has instead decided to use technology only as a background tool.

Spirited away (Miyazaki 2001) is the highest grossing film to date in Japanese cinema, as well as winning the 2003 Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film and a Golden Bear at the Berlin International Festival in 2002.

The film narrates the adventures of a teenage girl in the spirit world in order to save her parents, who have been transformed into pigs because of their gluttony.

The codes of the film are formed around the poles of the opposition between traditionality versus globalization. From the title itself, kamikakushi (hidden by kami/deities), which alludes to Japanese folk belief, through many of the film’s principal characters, such as YubabaThe (a descendent of yamauba or mountain witch) and Kamaji (a tsuchigumo or earth spider) who are characters found throughout Japanese folklore, Japanese mythology and Shinto religion, to clothes and architecture like the traditional Japanese baths, all connote the intrinsic “Japaneseness” of the movie, supported by the choices of production methods and expressed by the specific technique that is used and the resulting aesthetic. “Westernness” on the other hand is the negative pole of the antithesis, connoting gluttony, consumerism and loss of identity. It is a movie in which Japanese animation is defending its identity.

3.3 Blame consumerism, not technological innovation: WALL-E
WALL-E (Pixar 2008) is an American 3d computer animation film (CGI) produced by Pixar Animation Studios. As mentioned above, Pixar is considered a technological pioneer. Its movie Toy Story (1995) signified the entry into a new era for animation production as it was the first 3d animation feature film entirely constructed with the use of computers, which led to a radical change not only in the animation film industry but gradually also affected live-action film production, redefining the position of animation in the film production process as a whole. While redefining the position of animation in contemporary film production and projection, Pixar threatened the absolute sovereignty of Disney Company in the field and altered the prevailing stereotypes both in the aesthetic field and in movie content. The reaction of Disney came in 2006 when it bought Pixar. Despite the acquisition, Pixar was not incorporated into Disney but still retains its autonomy, both in the organization of its production line, which is based on a different model than the one Disney applies, and in the choice of the themes of its films.

WALL-E follows the tradition of Pixar’s films in recording huge success: in addition to its numerous awards and high revenues it is considered by the public and many critics as one of the best movies of all times. For example, TIME Magazine ranked WALL-E first in its list of the “Best film of the decade” (Corliss 2009).

It is particularly interesting that while Pixar has led to the creation and dissemination of digital animation and is continually investing in new technology and software which in turn affect the organization of production and of human labor, the deep structure of the film focuses on the impact of technology on human labor and society.

The basic antithesis of the movie is expressed through the antithesis humans versus robots. Humans are categorized both under the code of nature, as biological organisms which are, and this of the consumer class, while the robots belong to technology under the culture code as well as in the productive /working class under the social code.

Therefore the antithesis between humans and robots is primarily an antithesis between nature and technology, namely nature and culture, and secondly between consumption and production. The consumerism of the humans leads both to the destruction of the natural environment and the destruction of their culture. It could therefore be argued that consumerism leads people to self-destructive behavior. The only thing that helps them to survive is a part of their culture: technology, robots. Robots ensure the survival of people, the remedy of the ecological disaster, the rescue of civilization and finally, the return of people to their natural environment.

The second antitheses, that of consumption versus production, is associated with the social code. In the film a monopolistic company has the role of absolute monarch. As mentioned above, humans belong to the consumer / middle class and the whole production of this society is based on a new working class, a “technological proletariat” consisting of robots. The company-authority imposes its ideology and most people and robots follow it and reproduce it, massively and unquestioningly. Eventually the film defends technology. For the movie it is the upper-class ideology that leads humanity to destruction, not technology that is constructed to serve people. Full automation leads to a dystopian society but people can choose how they want to live. What is being criticized here is the consumerist-capitalist economic system. Summarizing, the film moves on two axes: first, exercising criticism towards the consumer society that leads to the destruction of the environment and culture, and second, defending technology as part of human culture. The movie proposes a change in the political-economic system, in which, however, a clear separation
of classes is maintained, and a return to a more natural lifestyle and a more traditional production model without giving any clear suggestions about the proposed economic model and the role of technology in it.

4. Conclusion

The languages with which we conceive the world are social products and their production depends on social conditions and material culture. If semiotics ignores the social practices from which the semiotic systems derive, we are inevitably heading to greater or lesser misconceptions. As I am following here the reasoning of Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, it wouldn’t be possible for me to express it in a better way, so I would like to conclude this essay with her own words:

We are constrained by the “languages” through which we conceive the world. If we do not have a theory of the production of these languages through the process of production and reproduction of human society, then the very possibility of scientific knowledge is lost (since science is itself a language), and we are simply all playing a game with signs. … If there is no relation between semiotic systems and social practice – a practice that is not independent of semiotic systems, but that also has non-semiotic parameters – then the game is just in our mind. Which seems to me, personally, to be rather pointless.  

(Boklund – Lagopoulou 1983: 23).

Notes

1 The term *exosemiotic* in Lagopoulos (1986) defines “the outside of the semiotic system”.
2 Cel animation is a type of hand drawn animation first applied by Disney.
3 In order to reduce production cost, in limited animation they don’t draw the intermediate frame and design each time only the features that change.
4 The text was originally published in Greek and is translated into English by its author, Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou.

References


