Traditional Western Art Elements in Disney Animations, Elite Influence in Mass Culture Through the Prism of the Frankfurt School

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Abstract. Thanks to the development of the media and internet, American mass culture has been spread worldwide. Above all, Disney animation is one of the most successful in its industry. However, the success of the Disney Corporation appears not only due to the prosperity of the company but also the wide dissemination of American mass culture. While our children are watching their films they are learning the American culture and values at the same time, which will shape their ways of thinking and habits of consumption in future. This is the most important criticism of the "culture industry" from the Frankfort School. Even though Disney animations were classified as mass culture, the themes which have been used in Disney animations often contain numerous elements of western traditional culture and arts: when audiences watch these cartoons, those elements are also beginning to be implanted in their mind. In this study I intend to analyze how Disney animation uses elite culture to enhance the quality of their films, and how elite culture can be introduced to the world through an approach free of ambiguity. Most importantly, I attempt to explore how the successful experience of Disney could transfer to Taiwanese animation industry.

Keywords: Mass culture · Elite culture · Disney · Culture industry · The Frankfort School · Taiwan animation industry

1 Introduction

What is "culture industry"? The term "culture industry" first appeared in "Dialectic of Enlightenment" by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorndorno, which is widely considered the most important book of The Frankfort School. The term 'Culture industry' refers to the fact that cultural artifacts have been produced through industrial methods, and eventually cause the deception effect toward consumers. The standards that determine the production of artworks and cultural activities are no longer the inspirations of artists but the the logic of industrial technology. The consequences of culture industry would be a trend towards standardization, with entrepreneurs small differences on each products to create the illusion of personalization which would

increase the willingness to purchase amongst consumers. Yet, the result of culture industry was the birth of mass culture. "Mass culture" refer to the new term of cultural performance in industrial society from the 20th century. It's most famous features are 1. consumerism 2. reproduction. In the point of view of The Frankfort School's scholars, the needs that we are purchasing to satisfy these days are actually not our real needs but the one that been created by capitalism. This is the reason why they tend to use the term "culture industry" instead of "mass culture", in "Dialektik der Aufklarung: Philosophische Fragmente" they claimed that the word " mass culture" would mislead the public. The phrase "mass culture" implies grassroots origin but, it actually controls and shapes the needs as well as ideology of the audience [1, 7].

However, are mass culture and culture industry the only cause of negative effects? W. Benjamin, a scholar of The Frankfort School, held a different point of view. In Benjamin's opinion, art is variable, and can be changed into distinct terms in different times and environments. In the industrial era, the ceremonial value of arts has been gradually replaced by its commercial or exhibited value, which also means the aura of art has disappeared. Yet, due to the development of camera and video, each photo or film can be reproduced, and each copy will identical to the original: in this case, is the aura still a necessarily element of arts? Furthermore, the ready availability of copies allows master pieces to be spread worldwide, giving more chances for the public to approach the classical or elite culture. Under this approach, does mass culture and culture industry still only lead into negative effect? [9].

2 Literatures Review

2.1 Mass and Elite Culture Elements in Disney Animations

Through the development of the media and internet, American mass culture is spread worldwide. Above all, Disney animation is the most successful enterprise (Fig. 1).
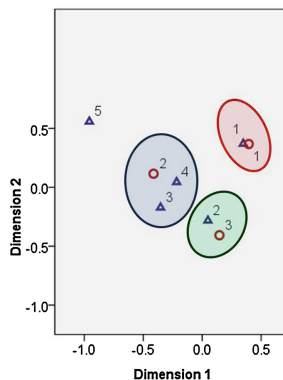
Fig. 1. The willing of audiences to rewatch the Little mermaid after knowing *Repenting Magdalene* was in the film.

Thanks to the development of the media and internet, American mass culture has been spread worldwide. Above all, Disney animation is one of the most successful in its industry. However, the success of the Disney Corporation appears not only due to the prosperity of the company but also the wide dissemination of American mass culture. Most children nowadays are familiar with the big-eared black mouse who wears red shorts and yellow shoes and talks with abnormal high pitch. While our children are watching their films they are learning the American culture and values at the same time, which will shape their ways of thinking and habits of consumption in future. This is what Zbigniew Kazimierz Brzeziński had mention in his book " Between two ages: America's role in the technetronic Era", "As a sweeping generalization, it can be said that Rome exported law; England, parliamentary party democracy; France, culture and republican nationalism; the contemporary United States, technological scientific innovation and mass culture derived from high consumption" [4].

2.2   Mass and Elite Culture Elements in Disney Animations

Even though Disney animations are classified as mass culture, the themes which have been used in Disney animations often contain numerous elements from the western tradition of culture and arts. By the time an audience watch these cartoons, those elements are also beginning to implant in their minds. The book "Da Vinci code", which was published in 2009, has these two following paragraphs:

Most of Disney's hidden messages dealt with religion, pagan myth, and stories of the subjugated goddess. It was no mistake that Disney retold tales like Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White—all of which dealt with the incarceration of the sacred feminine. Nor did one need a background in symbolism to understand that Snow White—a princess who fell from grace after partaking of a poisoned apple—was a clear allusion to the downfall of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Or that Sleeping Beauty's Princess Aurora—code-named "Rose" and hidden deep in the forest to protect her from the clutches of the evil *witch—was the Grail story for* children.

When Langdon had first seen The Little Mermaid, he had actually gasped aloud when he noticed that the painting in Ariel's underwater home was none other than The Penitent Magdalene by seventeenth-century artist Georges de la Tour—a famous homage to the banished Mary Magdalene—fitting decor considering the movie turned out to be a ninety-minute collage of blatant symbolic references to the lost sanctity of Isis, Eve, Pisces the fish goddess, and, repeatedly, Mary Magdalene. The Little Mermaid's name, Ariel, possessed powerful ties to the sacred feminine and, in the Book of Isaiah, was synonymous with "the Holy City besieged". Of course, the Little Mermaid's flowing red hair was certainly no coincidence either [3].

The topics of Disney animations are multiple. Either they adapt classical literatures into films, (e.g. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Hercules and Beauty and the Beast*,) or directly use art works in the cartoon, for example, Georges de La Tour's *Repenting Magdalene* as above. Inside Disney's films we can usually catch a glimpse of traditional western culture elements. Compared to mass culture, elite culture usually

represents a world which is not familiar to the public. Yet, would it be easier for the public to approach elite culture if it were hidden under the surface of mass culture? While Disney animations became more and more popular all around the world, has it successfully introduce western traditional culture to Taiwanese? Could it be possible for Taiwanese animation industry to spread our traditional culture to the public by the same means? (Fig. 2).

2.3   Animations in Taiwan

The first Disney animation shown in Taiwan cinemas was the Little Mermaid in 1989. Disney authorized the copyright to Taiwan in 1991 for VHS and soundtrack, and in 1995 the Disney channel started to appear on TV, which was also a turning point for Disney walking into Taiwanese homes (Fig. 3).
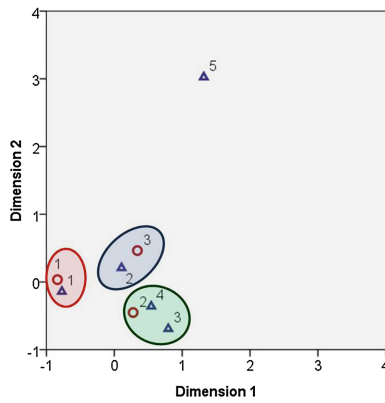
Fig. 2. The willing of audiences to rewatch the Little mermaid after knowing the film was adapted from *Little mermaid.*
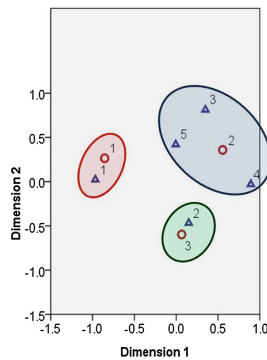
Fig. 3. The willing of audiences to rewatch the lion king after knowing the story was enlightened from Hamlet.
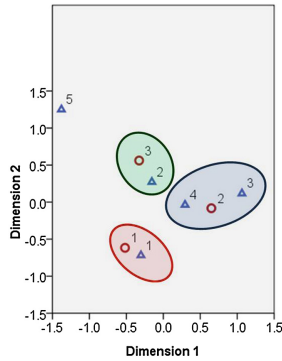
Fig. 4. The willing of audiences to rewatch Beauty and the beast after knowing *Girl with a Pearl Earring* was in the film.

The domestic Taiwanese animation industry begin in 1950s, which was later than Disney company by more than thirty years. The first animation released by a Taiwanese company was a ten minute long black and white adaptation of the classic Chinese folk tale *Wu Song Fights the Tiger*. The first color animation was *The Race Between Turtle And Rabbit*, released in 1969. In recent years, two long feature animations, based on traditional Chinese and Taiwanese stories were released: *Butterfly lovers* and *Kavalan.* The latter was an adapted story based on a modern Taiwanese novel, the main plot of which was about the time traveling adventures of an aboriginal teenager. Even though Taiwanese animators tried hard to develop the domestic industry, box office receipts are yet to show substantial improvement. Hopefully the successful experience of Disney company and the result of this study could be applied to the Taiwanese animation industry and one day animations could be used to introduce Taiwanese traditional culture to the public (Fig. 4).

3 Research Methods

In this study I intend to analyze how Disney animation use elite culture to enhance the quality of their films, and how elite culture can be introduced to the world through a free of ambiguity approach. My methodology can be divided into three main stages as below:

First, I chose five Disney animations which had been released in Taiwan after 1989 (The year in which the first Disney animation was released in Taiwan) to analyze how they put the three main visual arts elements (architectures, painting and sculpture) and the origin of the story – literature into the films [5]. At the same time, I will study existing research on the culture industry, elite culture and The Frankfort School to deeply understand the development of the theory and the status it holds in society nowadays (Fig. 5).

Second, I used the knowledge that I gained from the above stage to make a questionnaire presented to college students from Taiwanese universities. The reason
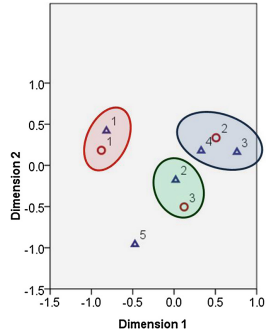
Fig. 5. The willing of audiences to rewatch Beauty and the beast after knowing the story was adapted from *Beauty and the beast.*
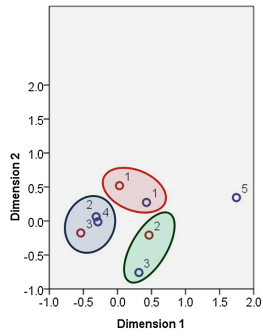
Fig. 6. The willing of audiences to rewatch Hercules after knowing the wide differences between the original story and the cartoon.
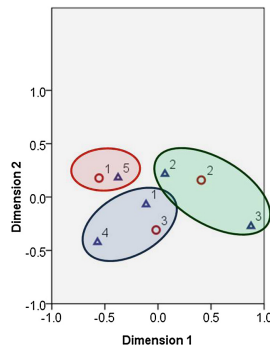
Fig. 7. The willing of audiences to rewatch The Hercules the film was adapted from the Greek legend.

why I chose college students as the participants was their wider knowledge of western traditional culture than the younger students. Moreover, since all the Taiwanese universities prepare a school e -mail account for their students, it will be more effective for me to approach the participants (Fig. 6).

Last, I will use SPSS to analyze the questionnaire results and a draw conclusions on how Taiwanese audiences respond to western traditional culture elements in Disney animations. Moreover, I will compare the result of the students from different subjects to see if the study background would impact the reactions of the audiences (Fig. 7).

4   Results and Discussions

The five animations that I chose were all adapted from classical western literature :*The Little Mermaid*(adapted from Hans Christian Andersen's *The little Mermaid*), *Beauty and the beast*(adapted from traditional French fairy tale which written by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont and published in 1756), *The lion king* (the story was inspired by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), Hercules(adapted by the story of Hercules from Greek legend) and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*(adapted by *Notre-Dame de Paris* which written by Victor, Marie Hugo) (Fig. 8).

My questionnaire was completed by 133 subjects, most of them from arts related departments or social science related subjects. The questionnaire includes 42 questions. Except for the background of the subjects, the questions can be sorted into four types: 1. If the subjects had seen the animations and the original literatures 2. If they noticed the classical elements that had been used in the films. 3. Would the knowledge of the element's presence affect the willing of watching the animations 4. What are the main methods that subjects usually use to see the films (Fig. 9).

According to the results below, we can see that the number of respondents who had seen the animation was higher than those who had read the original literature (Fig. 10).

In the questionnaire, there were 13 questions which pointed out the classical elements that had been used in the animation. According to the data, the subjects who
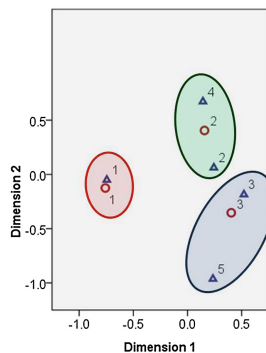
Fig. 8. The willing of audiences to rewatch The Hunchback of Nortre Dame after knowing the wide differences between original literature and the cartoon.
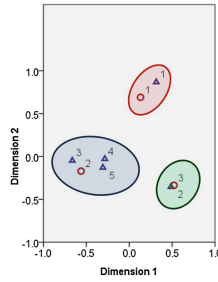
Fig. 9. The willing of audiences to rewatch The Hunchback of Nortre Dame after knowing the real use of Gargoyles.
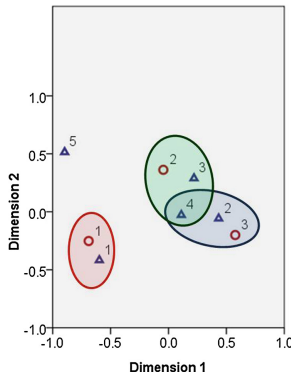
Fig. 10. The willing of audiences to rewatch The Hunchback of Notre Dame after knowing the story was adapted from *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

recognized them are mostly from arts related subjects, but a majority of the subjects, no matter what study back ground were they from, didn't noticed the appearance of the elite culture's elements (Fig. 11).
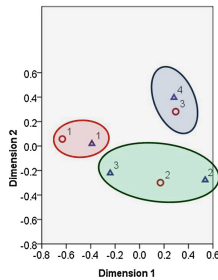
Fig. 11. The reasons for audiences from different education background to watch Disney animations.

In addition, a technique of correspondence analysis was employed in this study to identify systematic relations between participants' study background and their responses. ● refers to study background. 1 refers to subjects from arts related departments, 2 refers to subjects from social science departments, and 3 refers to others (Table 1).

▲ refers to the subjects willing to re -watch the films after knowing the appearance of the elite culture elements. 1 means "will watch again", 2 means "perhaps will watch again", 3 means "perhaps will not watch again", 4 means "will not watch again", and 5 means the subjects had already known the existed of the elements so it makes no difference to them (Table 2).

Through two-dimensional graphics, the data demonstrated that, subjects from arts related department tend to have more willing to watch the animations again after they have been told of the elite culture elements in the films. In the contrary, subjects from social science related departments chose not to re- watch the movies even they know the existence of these elements (Table 3).

Table 1. Have you seen the following Disney animations?

Items	Yes	No
The little mermaid	121	12
	91.0 %	9.0 %
The lion king	119	22
	84.4 %	15.6 %
Beauty and the beast	110	22
	83.3 %	16.7 %
Hercules	66	65
	50.4 %	49.6 %
The Hunchback of Notre Dame	50	84
	37.3 %	62.7 %

Table 2. Have you read the following literatures?

Items	Yes	No
The little mermaid	1067	27
	9.7 %	20.3 %
Hamlet	46	87
	34.6 %	65.4 %
Beauty and the beast	44	89
	33.1 %	66.9 %
Hercules	76	57
	57.1 %	42.9 %
Notre-Dame de Paris	16	117
	12.0 %	88.0 %

Table 3. Would you buy the media products of animations?

	Yes	No
Experiences of purchasing media products of animations	43	80
	35.0 %	65.0 %

Table 4. The reason you do not buy the media products of animations?

	Too expensive	Not worthy to collect	Can be downloaded on line
Reason of not buying	18	41	42
	17.8 %	40.6 %	41.6 %

Table 5. What kind of media products of animations you buy most?

	DVD	Blue -Ray	Soundtrack
Types of media products bought	33	10	20
	52.4 %	15.9 %	31.7 %

The following figure shows the reasons for watching Disney films amongst subjects from different education backgrounds. Subjects from art related majors tend to watch Disney animations because of the story's plot, while those from social science department's subjects see the movies due to the subjects of the stories and the painting styles (Table 4).

Lastly, according to the data, more subjects tend not to buy the media products related to the animations (DVD, blue ray, soundtracks etc.). The reason is because they think they are not worthy to keep and people can download them on line instead (Table 5).

Yet, for those who still willing to buy the media products of animations, their most favorite choice would be DVD, and then soundtracks. If Taiwan animation industries want to release media products to approach to the market, following the consumer's preferences would give them more chances.

5   Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the previous study, we find that people are more likely to gain their knowledge of the story from the film than from the original literature. Yet, the appearance of the elite cultural elements can increase the willingness of specific groups to re-watch the film.

Since to the emergence of the internet, the willingness of people to purchase media products has decreased due to their online availability. On the bright sight, it means that inside films containing elite elements are more attractive to audiences, however, in contrast, if those who watch the films online are getting the animations for free, then it

will lower the income of animations industry, which may cause the risks in long term. Nevertheless, I also discovered that people would not notice the classic cultural elements which were hidden in the films unless others point them out. This means that even though using the elements in the animation can expand the population that become more familiar with, how to present them effectively to the audience will be another task.

Additionally, the questionnaire results reveal that people nowadays prefer to watch the films on TV or on the internet (the number was over 70 % of the subjects). In this case, I think Taiwan animations industry, may start their work from the small screen, which can lower the manufacturing budget and also make for more effective access to public attention. After Taiwan's audiences are familiar enough with Taiwan-domestic animations films, they may be more willing to pay for the movie tickets to see the cartoons in a theater.

Lastly, the plot and subjects of the animations are the two main elements which could affect the willingness of the audience to watch, so if Taiwanese animations industry wants to develop the quality of the cartoons, these are the two parts that animators should be working on, and accompany them with a unique painting style that can attract the audience.

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