

Cartoons and Education: a World Told through the Animated Films

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| abstract

The educational role of cartoons is relevant for children because it is one of the very first media languages with which they interface and also because it has always been connected to a wide play and merchandising circuit (Rosa, 2012). The narratives proposed by cartoons, as well as the stylistic and technical choices used, represent important instruments of value mediation, and contribute to the construction of social representations and collective imaginaries (Tagliapietra, 2019). Starting from the definition of cartoon language, too often underestimated, and limitedly known, the contribution intends to analyse some cultural and value elements proposed in Disney cartoons since 1927. The analysis values chosen, from a media-educational perspective, are connected to the 2030 Agenda.

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Introduction

The process of raising children involves different figures, groups, institutions and educational mediators. Cartoons belong to the latter group and present a continuous and varied flow of messages, suggesting lifestyles, models of behaviour, notions and values.

Each cartoon, as Zanotto argues, contains a precise ideology and «its own unique set of values» (Zanotto, 1968).

The strength and importance of these media tools also derive from the fact that cartoons are one of the first media languages that children approach independently, becoming expert and up-to-date users.

There are many reasons why children love cartoons. First cartoons offer a lens through which children view much of the world, particularly those parts of the world that they have little or no direct experience with.

Secondly, the ability of cartoons to transform. Cartoons allow imaginative metamorphoses denied to other genres and, at the same time, the theme of change is inherent in the journey of each character. Transformation then becomes a way of making the transition to adulthood a reality, the search for one's own identity. Moreover, the world of cartoons, although imaginative, is not unregulated. On the contrary, it is a world with internal limits and action takes place within a disciplined context (Malchiodi, 2009). We can therefore say that just as in fiction, in cartoons there is an idea of rule "to be chal-

lenged” in a healthy dialectic between the child and adult universe. But unlike written texts, children can access the cartoon text autonomously, reviewing the same message over and over again.

The relationship between children and cartoons does not end in the space and time of enjoyment. The characters and stories that cartoons tell become an integral part of children’s lives, which they rework through free play or related gadgets.

However, cartoons are not just a harmless pastime, dedicated to the youngest children, and the universe of cartoons, although widely and universally known, is often underestimated by both school and family educational realities.

The heroes drawn or made of plasticine propose precise universes of values and specific readings of reality that go to make up the cultural substratum and the way children approach the world around them.

The cartoon has a precise biographical starting point and is the result of the cultural, social and religious background of its animator or production company. Each animator chooses to convey a precise message, and does so through multiple languages, primarily the language of images, drawings and colours. Nothing is left to chance the graphic traits of the characters (expressions), the settings, the shots, the movement of the images (fast or slow), the noises and the music (which create a specific emotional climate), together with the dialogues and the plot, collaborate to convey the soul of the cartoon by coming into contact with its deepest part: emotions (Cardamone, 2015).

Based on this awareness, which is now widely spread, the present paper intends to question how and according to which perspectives, some of the theme’s object of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development goals have been addressed in almost 100 years of animated films by Walt Disney.

The decision to analyse some of the values of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Disney cartoons stems from the fact that these values adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. For this reason they have been incorporated into the educational aims of many institutional and non-institutional educational systems.

We find it interesting to consider how these values have been narrated in animated products aimed at children because the reflections elaborated could support media education paths related to the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

The choice of analysing the products of Walt Disney, and not those of other major production companies, is determined by the fact that it is universally recognized as the premier creator of modern children’s media, and family (Giroux & Pollock, 2010).

Moreover, the longevity of Disney’s activity allows for a diachronic reading of its animation products’ influence on the international cultural landscape.

Disney has based its entire creative project on fun and wholesome family entertainment.

Disney factory has carefully been promoting this feeling of trust since Walt Disney founded the company and began curating a specific image of childhood innocence that can only be shielded by healthy children’s entertainment.

However, no media message can be considered objective, and Disney’s animated products do not escape this consideration. The messages presented in cartoons are characterized by specific intentions and points of view.

Many of the cartoons produced by Disney, for example, propose a Eurocentric world-view that places white European-American stories the prominence and proposes biased

and prejudiced views on issues of gender, race, and culture. The Eurocentric model of the world locates Europe (and the United States) as the centre of modern civilization from which all meaningful progress flows (Blaut, 1993).

Although this statement has been uncontroversial for much of Disney's history, a gradual opening up to diverse cultural realities can also be detected.

In addition, certain values, such as ecology, mutual respect, and affection, are today pillars of the Disney Universe.

Disney executives are aware of the power they hold in both representing and even forming cultural ideals. In 1989, former Walt Disney Company CEO Michael Eisner admitted to the power of "American entertainment" in globalizing Western (Eurocentric), implying an awareness of what Western values Disney is trying to spread (Breanne, 2019). We can therefore hypothesise that, according to the same logic of globalisation of power and values, the more or less widespread sensitivity towards the goals of the 2030 Agenda is also partly the result of the media exposure of which Disney cartoons are part. We do not want to identify simplistic links of cause and effect, but rather subtle lines of connection.

Methodology

Literature reviews about the value and educational content proposed by animated films from a historical perspective provide an interesting and multi-perspective view of a communication phenomenon aimed at children. Literature reviews can help to reveal the current status of knowledge related to this focal topic and provide a rationale for future research directions. In addition, they can serve as a theoretical background for the design of media education pathways. A literature review is a process composed of different actions: material collection, descriptive analysis, category selection and material evaluation, leading to the identification of patterns, themes and issues within the literature (Seuring, 2008). The literature review presented in this paper has been conducted in two distinct stages. In the first one, an initial overview of academic literature related to the value and the educational content proposed by animated films from a historical perspective.

This activity entailed a search of Scopus, Google Scholar, SBN and OPAC using combinations of the following words: animated films, animated films history, media education, cartoon characters and cartoon history. In total, this first search led to the identification and acquisition of 200 documents, including articles and chapters. In the second phase, articles describing manga cartoons have been excluded from this review. More attention was paid to Disney products (Pixar products were not excluded because since 2006 it has belonged to the Walt Disney Company). After a preliminary analysis of these papers, the issues addressed in the 2030 Agenda and the cartoon analysis themes were cross-referenced. The cartoons mentioned in the literature were analysed using structured observation tools.

The aim is to identify how the issues in the 2030 Agenda have been addressed, presented and reworked in cartoon narratives.

In September 2015, the United Nations approved an action plan to address sustainable development in different contexts and dimensions until 2030, (Szopik-Depczyńska, 2018; Stafford-Smith, 2017). This action plan, known as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, incorporates 17 SDGs that cover all aspects of sustainability, and are unfolded in 169 targets, which are usually regarded as important objectives to be ac-

completed in terms of environment and human development up to 2030. These goals, adopted by almost all the countries of the world (Annan-Diab et al., 2017). These goals can be considered a global awareness and more generally an important goal of civilisation. Given the importance of these objectives, numerous initiatives have been set up to make them known to students. Some of the issues defined in the Millennium Goals have long been the subject of media attention. This contribution aims to explore how these issues have been addressed in cartoons through a historical reading of Disney productions.

Among the goals of the 2030 Agenda, the goals related to gender equality and reducing inequalities (goals 5 and 10) were chosen for this analysis. At the same time, goals related to ecological sensitivity were chosen (goals 6, 7, 12, 13, 14 and 16).

There is a wide range of cartoon analysis literature on the issues related to these values. Rarer is the literature that investigates the themes of poverty, hunger, education and more generally the quality of life.

Moreover, these issues are often only hinted at in cartoons and not infrequently in a sugar-coated manner. For this reason, they were excluded from this first phase of analysis.

Disney Princesses and Gender Equality

Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda states “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. Considering the aim of this paper it is interesting to reflect on how female figures have been represented through an analysis of Disney princesses.

In Disney’s history, the protagonists of the feature films belong mainly to the male universe (about two thirds) but female protagonists, especially the princesses, have entered the common imagination with their potential role in the process of growing up like girls (Coyne et al., 2016; Rozario, 2004).

The analysis of the representation of Disney heroines is also important because in Disney’s logic there is a correlation between physical and character traits within an imaginative universe in which «good guys are good-good guys, bad guys are bad-bad guys» (Pellitteri, 1999).

This analysis starts from the first Disney animated feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* based on the 1812 German fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm.

When we talk about *Snow White*, the image we think of is that of the Disney protagonist. The film was hugely successful and it won a “Special Award” at the 1938 Oscars for being «recognized as a significant screen innovation which has charmed millions and pioneered a great new entertainment field for the motion picture cartoon»¹.

In 1937 the sweet *Snow White* embodied all the values of the ideal woman of the 1930s: caring, humble and skilled in domestic chores even though she was of royal lineage. For her features, the designer’s Joe Grant and Albert Hurter used the actress Marge Champion as a model. For her chubby cheeks, however, they based themselves on those of the baby star Shirley Temple.

In the opinion of the authors, this mix could highlight her naïve, fragile and defenseless nature (*Snow White* does not rebel but runs away).

1. Experience over nine decades of the Oscars from 1927 to 2022, http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas_awards/DisplayMain.jsp?curTime=1398663181823 (accessed April, 2014).

Thirteen years later, the second Disney princess also possesses extensive skills in housework, which she performs while humming happily.

Cinderella (1950) is the dreamer par excellence, whose dreams are realized through external, magical support. She was drawn on the features of Helene Stanley's face, which also inspired the features of Aurora in the film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

Cinderella, however, has more childlike features, while in Aurora's drawings one can see more graphic signs of feminine and a more sinuous body.

In 1989, the first princess to rebel against a destiny determined by others was proposed. The mermaid Ariel (1989) is impulsive, stubborn and curious. She contrasts with the female model of the sisters who sing and perform. Although her features remain bewitching.

Belle (1991), from *Beauty and the Beast*, is the first non-noble-born protagonist whose intellectual gifts (she loves books and reading) and sensitivity stand out more than her beauty. Belle is in some ways the first emancipated character even though she is ready to sacrifice herself for her father and her family.

In *Aladdin*, Jasmine (1992) is the first Oriental princess to be represented by Disney.

Jasmine's sensual gaze, captivating movements and bare belly marked the end of the classic Disney female model.

Pocahontas (1995), the only Disney princess to have existed, is a free spirit: slender and barefoot with a tiny Indian tunic. *Pocahontas'* narrative is a break from previous princesses in that she prefers her people and her land to her beloved.

At last, a princess who does not ask to be rescued but, on the contrary, is capable of courageous and challenging gestures.

The story of *Mulan* (1998), whose character is based on a legendary Chinese heroine, tells of a princess who has to deny her femininity to assert herself.

Tiana (2009), the protagonist of *The Princess and the Frog* is the first African-American protagonist, intelligent and determined. Tiana dreams of becoming a chef like her father and opening her restaurant (called *Tiana's Palace*).

This divergent narrative could suggest that protagonists of colour are not entitled to a life of leisure and privilege that white Disney princesses enjoy (Lauren & Streiff, 2016).

But there can also be antithetical readings. In the final scene, she does not dance in a great hall of a castle owned by a man (her father or husband), but in the hall of her restaurant.

This ending can be read also as a story of emancipation in which work and commitment are rewarded.

Both in *Mulan* and *Princess and the Frog*, Disney eschews, therefore, a traditional fairytale ending involving palatial opulence by substituting an alternative narrative.

Mulan after sharing victory with male companions gladly returns home to domesticity and the confines imposed by her gender. Tiana like *Mulan* is driven to please her father.

According to many authors although protagonists with more realistic lives could potentially enhance viewers' connection with them and model a work ethic or commitment to life these heroines seem to display a willingness to settle for more modest aspirations in stories, often, replete with stereotypical gender and race-bound tropes.

Rapunzel (2010) is the first Disney princess to be endowed with magical powers and because of this she is kidnapped and locked in a tower until she comes of age.

Rapunzel's dress is undoubtedly more modest than her colleagues, in fact, she wears a traditional German dress. Curiously, this Princess is a fighter, able to defend herself, but she does so through a frying pan.

The protagonist of the film *Brave* (2012) is undoubtedly the most rebellious princess and convinced in her desire for self-determination (Rosa, 2014). Merida has typical Scottish features: blue eyes, freckles and thick, curly red hair. She is the only Disney princess who wears a dark dress and does not reflect the classic canons of beauty and perfection.

In the film *Frozen*, the protagonists are two sisters, Elsa and Anna (2013), who are opposites in terms of appearance and temperament. In this product, aspirations, commitment and a sense of duty become central. The myth of Prince Charming has been demolished by its creator. The princesses save themselves and the final kiss is secondary.

How the Disney princesses have been represented accounts for the evolution of a precise gender ideology.

It is not possible to accuse Disney cartoons of supporting the persistence of a “status quo”, but certainly not the merit of having proposed a different and deeply innovative.

It is, therefore, possible to say that the proposed gender representations have not contributed, for a long time, to raise the awareness of younger audiences to Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. However, an analysis of the history of the representations of the Disney Princesses supports awareness of how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

Cartoon and Environmental Issues

Natural landscapes and anthropomorphic characters are elements that characterize many Disney productions, as well as all narrative production aimed at children. It is possible to say that the historical analysis of Disney cartoons outlines the evolution of the relationship between Western man and nature, or at least its social representation.

Before delving into this historical evolution, it is possible to aggregate the role assumed by the natural elements in Disney’s stories within three groups. Nature as a setting for the narrative with mainly aesthetic ends (*Cinderella*); anthropomorphized animals that tell their point of view on reality and especially on man (*Lady and the Tramp*); nature as a central element in the relationships between characters (*The Lion King*).

From the first films made in the “classic” Disney period, as Disney was first exploding in popularity, and while Walt Disney himself oversaw the company it’s possible to immediately see an evolution of perspective.

While *Snow & White* (1937) evokes the age-old world-view, in which nature is “happily subjected” to humankind.

The subsequently produced films are placed in a different perspective, so in *Dumbo* (1941) the criticism towards the exploitation of animals is clear. The following year *Bambi* (1942) underline the importance of upholding a conservative view of nature and a land ethics.

The Disney films of this early period reflect on the one hand the traditional cultural visions of the world of nature as subservient to man, which was widespread in the 1930s and early 1940s, and on the other hand, they try to challenge these perspectives by sensitizing younger audiences to respect for nature.

From the first films produced in the classical period, we can immediately see an evolution of perspective, which however seems to stop for about 30 years. In the films made between the 1950s and the end of the 1980s, anthropomorphic animals come to the fore.

Humans are observed by animals. Examples of these productions are: *Lady and the Tramp* (1951); *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), *The Aristocats* (1971), *The Rescu-*

ers (1977); *Oliver & Company* (1988). Interestingly, the protagonists of these cartoons are almost all dogs or cats, animals that are traditionally very close to humans.

Against this trend are the cartoons *The Jungle Book* (1967) and *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) in which the contrast between human and animal life is portrayed.

Especially in films in which the protagonists are anthropomorphized animals, according to some studies, sometimes Disney portrayals of nature are biologically deterministic, because they describe certain oppressive cultural attitudes and behaviours as “natural” (Sturgeon, 2009). Various criticisms have rallied against Disney for its use of ethnically coded speech, especially for evil characters (Lippi-Green, 2012). Examples of this are: the hyenas of *The Lion King*, voiced by Whoopi Goldeberg using a New York accent and Cheech Marin with a Mexican one. According to Breanne, «This usage of ethnically accented voices serves to orient the white American male as the pinnacle of strength and morality, even when the heroic character himself is non-white or even non-human» (Breanne, 2019).

The period from 1989 to 1999 is called the “Disney Renaissance” (Pallant, 2011) because Walt Disney Feature Animation returned to producing successful animated films that were mostly based on well-known stories. During this phase, ecological issues make their way into Disney production.

The Little Mermaid (1989) advocates a world-view of superficial consumerism, Ariel plays with what has been thrown into the sea by man and considers it a treasure.

In *The Lion King*, the spaces of wild nature are essential for the film’s communicative effectiveness. Little-known animals appear, and they are rarely exploited in Disney cartoons.

The conception proposed is diametrically opposed to that of the dominant man. Famous is the dialogue in which the cycle of life is explained² and the importance of all creatures within a complex system. A system of delicate balances is thus represented.

This product has received a lot of criticism because the characters’ behaviours aren’t of animals they portray.

The characters in the *Lion King* exhibit behaviours that are uncharacteristic of the animals they portray.

First, the mix of the animal kingdom presented is fake. Antelopes, elephants, leopards, lions live in the same place but not together. Males often kill other males’ offspring and cubs’ survival is a constant struggle (Wong, 1999). However, *The Lion King* is not a documentary; an imaginative and creative part is, therefore, inherent in the logic of the product. In 2006, Disney purchased the company, Pixar, a pioneering computer animation studio, and *Wall-e* is the result of this acquisition.

WALL-E (2008) is undoubtedly the cartoon in which the green message is most explicit even if “nature” is almost entirely remiss from the movie’s images.

WALL-E cartoon challenges that world-view and advocates a deeper awareness of the negative environmental externalities of consumerism. It subverts Disney’s typical setting by portraying a troublesome, almost lifeless future.

WALL-E takes place in the far future when largely due to the influence of megacorporation Buy ENE Large and excessive human consumerism have left the planet Earth lifeless, trash-filled, and desert. Humans have since relocated to space stations far away, leaving *WALL-E* (Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth Class) robots to clean the trash.

WALL-E’s plot explains the dangers of consumerism on the environment. It encourages children to look at human consumerism beyond its superficial allure, and consider

2. Mufasa: «Everything you see exists together, in a delicate balance. As king, you need to understand that balance, and respect all the creatures – from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope. Simba: But, Dad, don’t we eat antelope?».

its real environmental consequences. It focuses on the dangers that consumer behaviour poses for the environment through its creation of trash, but also depicts worrying images related to sedentary and unhealthy lifestyles.

Although in a softer mode, also in the *Frozen 2* cartoon the attention and listening to the natural elements are key elements of the narrative. Elsa, the main character listens to the call of the natural elements, her sister Anna sees the destruction of a dam (representing the hand of man to control nature) as the only solution.

Finally, Elsa chooses to stay close to the people who have always lived in close contact with nature, following its rhythms and respecting the elements.

The evolution briefly described here allows you to say that there has been a progressive mirroring of Disney's contents concerning ecological ideals. While most media production companies may have limited opportunity to challenge the cultural sentiment in matters of ecology, Disney's enormous power and knack for engaging childhood fascination enable it to express positive, progressive environmental views that can be both commercially successful, and culturally influential.

It is useful to quote David Whitley's thoughts regarding Disney's power on these issues as it effectively synthesizes different reflections and outlines a future perspective.

According to Whitley that rather than rely only on technological pursuits to save humans and the planet from environmental disaster, there needs to be a whole revolution in sensibility and value systems that underpin [human] lives (Whitley, 2012).

He points out that Disney is a powerful media force that effectively speaks to the emotions of the public in its output. For this reason, it could play a vital role in changing the human world-view to become more environmentally conscious. Rather than simply practising "direct transmission of social ideologies", Disney could use sentiment to change people's understanding of the environment.

Disney's engagement with the morality and emotions of young audiences could be especially effective for inculcating respectful world-views of nature.

These reflections, as well as the evolution of the Disney cartoons presented, make explicit the usability of Disney cartoons in education and awareness-raising on environmental issues in the 2030 Agenda.

Media Education and Cartoon

The reflections presented so far have shown how cartoon narratives and characters have offered specific points of view and analysis on important issues. Among these themes we can also include those values related to the Millennium Goal.

The proposed realities, as has been said many times, not only play an important role in children's lives, but can also become cultural models.

The presented role of Disney in the process of cultural creation (Lacroix, 2004) has been the subject of much controversy and criticism because, in almost a century of activity, the Walt Disney Company has acquired a near-monopoly on the visual media consumed by children (Giroux & Pollock, 2010) also through strong merchandising operations. The cultural vision connected to the West or in any case the proposals of parcelled out realities have undoubtedly garnered the majority of criticism and perplexity.

Disney's power over cultural construction is, however, a fact, and attempts at boycotts are hardly feasible, because it is not a question of banning the viewing of one or more cartoons, but rather of renouncing a horizon of meaning that Disney cartoons also created.

The answer can only be educational. It is necessary to provide the widest possible number of children with the tools to read media texts. In this way, the values proposed will be identified and understood, without losing the pleasure of cartoon viewing.

It is also essential to be aware that any media production company does not invent the values it proposes, but rather, codifies and disseminates part of the experiences and of the common feeling of the society to which the producers belong.

The educational response must be structured and comprehensive, bringing together schools, families and local educational bodies. This means supporting children in their choice of cartoons and using cartoons in school and local educational programs. In this way, it is possible to provide young people with the media skills (Buckingham, 2003) that are indispensable for reading and interpreting the messages of cartoons, which are often enjoyed independently.

Media education aims precisely at this ambitious goal, through the acquisition by children of cognitive tools and skills useful not only for understanding what cartoons explicitly want to communicate but also the symbolic systems connected to them, as well as the economic interests, ideological aims and cultural perspectives that condition their structure.

These are skills for decoding, analysing, evaluating and producing messages (Aufderheide, 1997) as well as autonomous reflection on the aesthetic, ethical and socio-cultural dimensions that each message proposes.

The acquisition of these tools of understanding allows approaching critically and consciously the universe of cartoons, which are no longer considered harmless pastimes but real cultural and socialization products.

Moreover, media skills are not only functional for understanding and interpreting the surrounding universe, but also for participating in the life of one's community and the global community.

The school can become the more active player in this process of community emancipation, both because it is the repository of specific reading and writing skills and because it represents a space for study and comparison among peers. The historical analysis of the way reality is represented in cartoons enables us to understand how these processes have always been inherent in cartoon language and it would allow a better understanding of specific cultural movements.

Educational paths described can be configured as a stimulus to collective growth in the broader vision of civic education. Within this broader vision of civic education, activities to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda Goals can find in cartoons valid allies and analysis tools. Through a historical analysis of cartoons, it is finally possible to understand how the attention to the values of the 2030 Agenda is the result of a cultural process of which the media have been part.

Conclusion

Disney's products offer multiple points of educational reflection. The characters depicted are now a common heritage and have become part of the collective imagination. Knowing how they have evolved can be an initial element of reflection, both in terms of the narrated themes and in the identification of unrepresented themes. The latter have their influence precisely because they are not represented. In Disney cartoons, for example, poverty is simply mentioned and mostly underestimated. Cinderella sings happily

while sweeping the floor with her lacer clothes, in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* the poverty of Paris at the time is not considered. We can therefore detect an overall commitment to the protagonist's redemption and for his difficult situation but no real attention to such an important social issue as misery and poverty. In this sense, the Goals of the 2030 Agenda were not supported. Similarly, the ways and efforts to achieve a common peace seem to be secondary to the dominance of the strongest and the victory of the protagonist. On the other hand, many themes and values have been recounted and emphasised. The present work, without any pretension of being exhaustive, has therefore intended to put into historical perspective the issues represented in animation products aimed at children, focusing on Disney products. The latter can be an opportunity for reflection and growth. At the same time, the "forgotten" themes must be highlighted, both because of a presumed right of representation and because of the hope that these themes can be narrated in the future, maybe from today's children.

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