



Disney animation: Global diffusion and local appropriation of culture

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Abstract

Children's media products reflect the cultural values of their producers and the social, political and economic conditions under which they were produced. Watching an animated cartoon, therefore, cannot be regarded as an innocent and simple act of consumption. It rather involves a complex process of coding/decoding and appropriating cultural meanings. Disney films are not only global means of entertainment but they can also function as an ideological apparatus. In an era of globalisation where the boundaries and divisions between entertainment and material consumption are blurred, Arab audiences are faced with a one-way flow of seemingly alien ideas and values that are disseminated through Disney stories, images and narratives. The relation between structured patterns of communication under globalization, on one hand, and the local conditions under which Disney cartoon products are marketed and consumed in the Arab world, on the other, can be understood as the main axis of globalised diffusion and localised appropriation of American cultural values and lifestyle among Arab societies.

Keywords: Globalization; children; media; Disney; Arabs; cross-cultural communication.

Introduction

Animation, as part of media, can be regarded as an industry that commercializes and standardizes the production of culture. Apart from being a business that produces, distributes and sells marketable products, animation has another equally important feature, which stems from its cultural value and nature.

Cultural products, more than any others, reflect the cultural values of their producers and the social conditions under which they were produced. Thus, it is arguable that a viewer who watches a movie is not just engaging in the simple process of consuming an innocent product. Rather, such a viewer can be said to be involved in a complex process of decoding cultural meanings and appropriating

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them. Consequently, analysing the impact of Disney products (for example) on consumers worldwide is necessary for a better understanding of how US cultural and consumer values transcend the borders of the US to reach different regions including the Arab world, in the light of globalization.

Using discourse analysis, we analyze tropes for cultural values and identity articulation in a select group of Disney animations which prevail in the global market. Considering Walt Disney as one of the leading purveyors of globally consumed media in the form of animation, this work points at instances where Disney products function as an apparatus that potentially prescribe consumerist ideologies and individualist ethics beneficial to the US as a group in power over dominated and less powerful groups, specifically in the Arab World. In an era of globalisation where the boundaries and divisions between entertainment and material consumption are blurred, Arab audiences are faced with a one-way flow of seemingly alien ideas and values that are disseminated through Disney stories and narratives. The question to ask here is: why should one focus on Disney, given that other US corporations can be argued to be equally as influential?

In fact, in a world where families book vacations to Disneyland or Disneyworld theme parks, where Disney movies are collected and passed down from one generation to another, and where children compete to buy Disney toys and video games, the influence of the Disney Corporation and their products cannot be denied. The Corporation maintains enormous corporate and cultural influence as seen by the existence of its \$44 billion empire at the beginning of the 19th century (Kramer, 2000: 45). The Disney Corporation owns a major television network, cable television networks, and radio stations (Tanner *et al.*, 2003). The reach of Disney does not stop here; it has also further proliferated into the consumer market by selling cartoons, books, computer games, backpacks, and clothing (Tanner *et al.*, 2003: 357). Marketing tactics used by the Disney Corporation encourage identification with Disney products and stories. The most popular of all its products sold remains the Disney animated full length feature film (Tanner *et al.*, 2003: 373).

Disney is the closest challenger to Time Warner for the status of worlds' largest media firm. In the early 1990's, Disney successfully shifted its emphasis from its parks and resorts to its animated film and television divisions. In 1995, Disney made the move from being a dominant global content producer to being a fully integrated media giant.

In 1996, Disney reorganized itself, putting all its global television activities into a single division. Its first order of business was to expand the children and family-oriented Disney Channel into a global force, capitalizing upon the enormous Disney resources. Consequently, focusing on Disney animation as a major global force that spreads US values and ways of life across developing

countries, more specifically in the Arab world, is of great significance. The Disney Corporation has consistently marketed itself to children and parents (Kilbourne, 1999; Kimmel, 2004). Disney has sold itself « in the guise of innocence, packaging itself for mass appeal and the reinforcing of the status quo American family values » (Giroux, 1995). Disney, since the depression era in the United States, has attempted to give the consumer audience fancy tales with happy endings that often come at the expense of common sense knowledge about reality regarding gender, family structures, and race (Kilbourne, 1999; Kimmel, 2004). Current Disney movies, while sometimes embracing updated attitudes towards these concepts still embrace traditional stereotypes about the self and the other that are being consumed in large quantities by children worldwide.

1. Global Impact and Local Animation: From Resilience to Resistance

US animation, as a global entertainment form, has considerably changed over the last forty decades, reflecting for the most part huge changes in technology, media infrastructure, and entertainment content. In the 1960s, the development theory was born, a theory that assumed the developing world should imitate the West (Blackley, 2001). The corner stone of the theory lay in good communication as a way to fix what some (Curran, 2000; Park, 2000) had described as the most important social problem of the time, the modernization of the world. This Communication and Development theory hinged on the implementation of modern media systems in impoverished and developing countries (Blakley, 2001). The transition from tradition to modernity, based on a model of the Western World, was crucial to the theory, which devalued tradition in economically undeveloped countries (Blakley, 2001).

From the late 1960s onwards, this development theory gave way to the argument that modernizing developing countries, rather than creating self-sufficiency, merely fostered dependency within an exploitative system of global economic relations (Blakley, 2001). This dependency was supported by a one-way flow of technology and animated products coupled with the continuous flow of Western cultural products into poor countries. Academic work produced in the mid 1970s to the late 1980s tackled the effects of this one-way flow on local cartoon production, television programming and consuming habits of audiences and children in particular. Critics (Leys, 1996) of the development theory are especially anxious about cultural imperialism or media imperialism, which was often equated with US values such as consumerism and individualism. They argued that third world countries were developing even more slowly than they would have if they had not been forced to adapt to an alien culture and its technological manifest destiny (Blakley, 2001).

However, it is worth mentioning that many Arab countries mainly in the Gulf region have created protectionist policies to maintain control over indigenous cultural content and to foster to a certain

extent a type of nationalism among their own animation producers. This is not to deny the fact that Arab nations have an unbalanced flow of information from Disney into their television sets, cinemas and computers. Yet, despite this influx of sophisticated and expensively produced catchy cartoons, local animation products have become increasingly popular in home countries mainly because they offer a caricature of common daily life issues and therefore allow the viewers, children and adults alike, to identify easily with the cartoon story and characters.

Emerging local producers are finding new ways to indigenize US cultural content in animation to suit their own tastes. Apparently, they have understood that what makes the US cartoon industry popular and global is the universality of its themes and situations. Thus, Arab producers have decided to tackle local issues and deal with up-to-date themes mostly related to religion, economics and politics in the area but with a global vision. A striking example illustrating this point is the recently produced feature length cartoon *the Land of Olives* (Ardu Al-zaytoun). The film portrays the Palestinian- Israeli conflict through a story that takes the issue beyond its local context to reach universality making the audience identify with the characters at a human level. Applying similar tactics in cartoon production may probably help Arab animation gain a global appeal in the future.

Actually, media scholars (Kramer, 2000; Giroux, 1996) argue that the legacy of the West was not only ideological but economic as well. It is a model built upon the exploitation of entertainment content in order to attract audiences and enhance their consuming habits regarding animation products. Consequently, the appropriation of such marketing technique by Arab producers is a clear manifestation of the impact of Disney global force on audiences in the Arab world. It also demonstrates an act of Arab resilience regarding media globalisation.

Furthermore, I think that language, as a means of communication can be a powerful instrument facilitating the appropriation of imported cultures and values. Part of the cultural localization process is the reproduction of these cartoons into local dialects as it is the case in Egypt, Jordan, KSA, and recently Morocco where originally US-English speaking animated shorts are dubbed into Moroccan Arabic (Darija). Using language in this way maintains Disney's power over Arab consumers as it eases the children's assimilation of the cultural messages and values disseminated in these animated films. Children identify more with the mediated animated images when they are expressed in their mother tongue, as they look more familiar to them. Although dubbing cartoons into local dialects may seem to demonstrate a degree of flexibility and resistance in dealing with a dominant global force, it actually further empowers Disney, as a producer of meaning, at the expense of children, the inexperienced viewers and passive consumers of meaning. In fact, Giroux (1996) reported that the principles of Disney's animated movies include issues regarding the social

construction of gender, race, class and many other aspects of self and collective identity. Disney images are significant in children's construction of desires, imaginations, roles, interests, behaviour, and hopes.

Thus, despite the diversified forms of resistance against the invasion of Disney products to local markets, its impact on children cannot be ignored. In fact, within the animated product, a whole set of US values and lifestyles are transmitted to the audience that is likely to embrace and spread them in return.

2. Beyond the Animated Text

In fact, Disney impact can be better understood with regards to the way children articulate their social identity and embrace new cultural values as they grow up in a given media environment where Disney animated feature lengths are available for repeated home viewing. Following Disney marketing policy, Arab producers exploit the popularity of cartoon characters to open new horizons to increase their revenues. Therefore, local consumers are faced with hundreds of products that would range from cartoon DVDs to clothes, backpacks and food brands all featuring a major iconic Disney figure.

Advertising plays a significant role in broadening the scope of production and making propaganda for Disney. Disregarding the changes in cultural perceptions and social identities that children face has become commonplace. Advertising reinforces and strengthens the consumption of foreign cartoons at the expense of local products making it quite difficult to resist the change in children's lifestyles and also ideological and cultural values. It affects the way they perceive themselves and their identity as well as their view of the other and the world around them.

A great deal of Disney cartoons, mainly the classics like *Aladdin*, broadcast on local television channels deal with the representation of the Arab character. Yet, they recycle all the deep-rooted stereotypes and clichés to present a biased image of Arabs. Demonising Arabs and Muslims showing them as violent creatures bent on death and destruction not only provides misleading images about Arabs for Western audiences but it also affects the image Arabs have of themselves and of one another. Arab women are often represented as either oppressed and rich women or sexually attractive belly dancers, while men are overweight ugly sheikh, aggressive and violent (Gilman, 1985). Obviously, Disney does not only sell marketable products but also disseminate a whole set of ideas and beliefs about the Arab persona, the non-American other in a rather global context.

In reproducing and maintaining similar images about the 'Other', Disney cartoons serve an ideological function whereby the individual subject takes an assumed privileged position or perspective compared to the represented other. Based on the Lacanian notion of the imaginary the self and the other, I use 'Other' to refer to the imaginary or symbolic entities that are conceptualized or stereotyped in the subject's mind, specific images with which the subject mistakenly yet firmly identifies, in order to articulate its own subjectivity. Sander Gilman (1985) argues that, in stereotyping, an essential dichotomy exists between the self and the other. The 'Other' constitutes a projection of a group's own insecurities concerning its potential loss of power onto the world. This projection takes the shape of that 'Other' through which it imagines itself threatened. The 'Other' becomes an alien and cohesive power, its ascribed difference menacing ideological negotiations of reality, another way of describing what Gilman (1985) calls «society's communal sense of control over its world». Disney narratives and images articulate a craving desire to manifest itself as an ideological globalizing force.

The recurrence of similar negative and clichéd portrayals reduces the Arab child self-esteem and makes it harder for him or her to identify with Arabs, his or her own people. Sturken (2001: 58) has observed « if someone lived in a country town where there were no, say Irishmen, and the only Irishmen he or she was familiar with were those in the movies, he might grow up thinking that every Irishman was a drunk ». The images projected in movies, whether positive or negative, can be endorsed as ideas and opinions about a particular group of people and consequently proliferate through a system of misleading generalizations. Given the fact that children have neither the critical skills nor the full awareness necessary for a safe watching experience and because stereotypes operate more at a subconscious level, exposing them to similar cartoon images cannot be risk free.

However, children are not the only ones likely to be affected by Disney's racist representations; some Arab producers have also embraced those representations and started reproducing them in the form of local products. Making it clear that the ideological impact of Disney continues in a new certainly more effective way, hence alienating any attempt of a powerful resistance towards this massive flow of wrong assumptions and value judgments.

In analysing the way Arabs represent themselves, their culture and their crises in animated cartoons, we discover a new more rational trend of production. Religion and politics constitute seemingly its major motivation. In fact, the majority of animated features released on DVDs or broadcast on TV channels include direct references to Islam and politics in the Middle East especially after 9/11 (Giroux, 1996). A great deal of these productions is mainly an attempt to correct the image non-Muslims have about Islam and Muslims. Yet, in my own judgment, in following such a strategy

many stereotypes and prejudices come into play and unfortunately are accepted as true depictions by large audiences. Political implications in Arab cartoons are worth analysing as they reveal patterns of thinking embraced by Arab producers and transferred in one way or another to local children.

In the absence of the good model Arab character in cartoons, children can identify easily with the powerful, stimulating, supernatural and perfect foreign cartoon heroes. The process of identification implies that children will not only seek to embrace the values and beliefs of their heroes but may also follow their way of life including dressing codes and eating habits advertised on national and international Arab television channels.

The Barbie character in Disney films, for example, stands for the beautiful, adorable and elegant female protagonist that every girl looks up to and tries to emulate in both looks and behavioural attitudes (*Barbie and the Nutcracker*, 2001; *Barbie: a fairy secret*, 2011; and *Barbie and the Diamond Castle*, 2008). In many Arab countries, Disney was successful in marketing the Barbie character not only through the animated movies but also through commercializing the Barbie doll. For many years, it was the most preferable iconic figure, in fact, Disney's mascot par excellence in the eyes of many Arab little girls. In 2005, however, the Barbie doll had to leave the shelves of many stores in the Middle East allowing the new Fulla doll to shine (Zoepf, 2010).

For some, Fulla is the Muslim version of Barbie as it roughly shares its size and proportions except that she is always displayed wearing a black 'abaya' (long garment) and matching headscarf. However, according to Fawaz Abidin, the Fulla brand manager, « it is not just about putting the hijab on a Barbie doll, but rather creating a character that parents and children alike will want to relate to» (Zoepf, 2010). Fulla is a girls' doll with not only Muslim outfits but values as well.

Shortly after its introduction to the markets in the Middle East and North African region, Fulla has become a best seller. Apparently, the creators of Fulla were able to meet the expectations of the Arab market and thus provided a character that can compete with Disney's Barbie on Arab ground providing a local model character for children to aspire to, which did not exist few years ago.

Advertising for Fulla is based on the image of an honest, loving, and caring girl who respects her parents and takes care of her younger siblings. The process aims at conveying positive messages about the character of Fulla and reflecting her good Muslim values. On popular children's satellite channels in the Arab world, Fulla advertising is incessant. In a series of animated commercials, a sweetly high-pitched voice sings the Fulla song in Arabic. the famous line in the song reads :« She will soon be by my side, and I can tell her my deepest secrets », while a cartoon Fulla glides across the screen, saying her prayers as the sun rises, baking a cake to surprise her friend Jasmine, or

reading a book at bedtime. The animated scenes are made in such a way to convey Fulla's typical values and consequently incite the viewers to display similar behavioural traits in their daily lives.

It comes as no surprise that even conservative parents do not mind paying for a modest doll that has her personal tiny prayer rug. In fact, children who want to dress like their dolls can buy a matching girl-size prayer rug and cotton scarf set all available in pink. Actually, in 2003 the Newboy Company has launched a special line of Fulla clothing that has quickly become fashionable and popular among girls in the region. Yet, for some Barbie character is still the favourite and Fulla is no more than a symbol of a trend toward Islamic conservatism sweeping the Middle East. The success of Fulla character, whether represented as a doll or an animated cartoon figure, remains an exception.

Undeniably, The Arab world witnesses an overflow of Disney products that have a wide appeal among children and even adults. Disney successfully transmits American values and consuming habits through its different strategies to the world. As a globalizing force, Disney imposes the appropriation of a particular life style and adherence to some norms, values, and ideas that are alien to the Arab culture. However, in the quasi-absence of local Arab animated productions that would present the alternative; local consumers are likely to assimilate the culture of the western 'Other' at the expense of their own.

In today's Arab world, animation and children's entertainment industry are putting into practice the commercial Disney legacy that advocates the idea that everything is marketable especially in children world. Selling cereals for breakfast featuring iconic cartoon heroes like Spiderman or Batman for that matter is a manifestation of global impact on consuming attitudes in the Arab world. Advertisements for toothpaste, toothbrush, or even diapers featuring *Barbie*, *Totally Spice* or *the Simpsons* are all over TV. This shows that through the manipulation of the animation tool, children are encouraged to adopt aspects of an imported so-called modern lifestyle since their very early age.

In addition, the dressing code is equally important in demonstrating the extent to which global animation can be manipulative in its quest for economic benefits and revenue growth. In fact, in the Arab world almost every single animated character is used to advertise a particular product. Clothes, perfumes and accessories carrying the brand name of *Spiderman* or *Twinks*, for example, are made available in Arab markets and assure home delivery upon purchase locally and to neighbouring countries as well. I think that because of media and animation globalization in particular, it is likely to notice certain uniformity in dressing styles among different age groups all

over the world. It is obvious that globalization is a complex set structured around different components ranging between ideas and values to goods and people.

Conclusion

To sum up, I think that Disney impact on Arab World audiences is major in different ways. Undeniable is the fact that there are various forms of resistance characterising Arab cartoon production. Through the process of selection, modification and appropriation, Arab producers are finding new ways to indigenise American cultural content in animation to suit their own tastes and objectives. In other words, they are more aware of the fact that not all Disney themes and stories are appropriate for Arab audiences and therefore modifying and contextualising them can open new perspectives for Arab cartoon production, reflecting patterns of a growing cultural awareness.

The current situation for global Animation is as conceptually complex as it is economically vibrant. In a world of converging media, the potential value of tapping into transnational subsets of the new global market, that is, audiences that reside in different regions and countries but share a common identity, religion or language (as in the case of the Arab world) is greater than ever before. This audience defies national boundaries and often uses the internet and satellite TV to carve out its own cultural niche, quite independent of physical location.

Looking into world media landscape for children presents two opposing yet significant themes: opportunities and risks. Globalization of media and animated cartoons specifically, on the surface level, brings new opportunities to broaden children's outlooks and visions, and provides broader and equal access to information. However, it also threatens cultural identification and values. Technological advances in animation industry bring the promise of new skills and greater youth participation in society, but also increase the risks of child manipulation and informational divide. There is an urgent need for societies to both protect children and help them shape their own media environments and build their own views and perceptions of the world around them. This can only be achieved through providing competitive local animation products that will stimulate the interest of children and equip them with enough knowledge and skill to enjoy a 'safe' watching experience throughout their life.

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2.

2.1. Disney animation: global diffusion and local appropriation of culture

2.2. Children's media products reflect the cultural values of their producers and the social, political and economic conditions under which they were produced. Watching an animated cartoon, therefore, cannot be regarded as an innocent and simple act of consumption. It rather involves a complex process of coding/decoding and appropriating cultural meanings. Disney films are not only global means of entertainment but they can also function as an ideological apparatus. In an era of globalisation where the boundaries and divisions between entertainment and material consumption are blurred, Arab audiences are faced with a one-way flow of seemingly alien ideas and values that are disseminated through Disney stories, images and narratives. The relation between structured patterns of communication under globalization, on one hand, and the local conditions under which Disney cartoon products are marketed and consumed in the Arab world, on the other, can be understood as the main axis of globalised diffusion and localised appropriation of American cultural values and lifestyle among Arab societies.

3.

3.1. Social sciences; media literacy; communication

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