

Panel C2

Sala delle Colonne 1

More Perspectives on Women and Animation

Gabriela Sá

Female representation on mainstream animation film of the past 25 years



This research began as the support for an MA project on how to develop non-stereotyped female characters for mainstream animation. We needed to understand if this was a real issue that was spread-out across the industry and what were its effects on society, if there were any.

We started by defining the differences between sex – “the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women” – and gender – “the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women” (World Health Organization). It’s important to also consider that in most contemporary western societies there’s an expectation for correspondence between one’s sex and gender identity. This way, every man should present masculine features and women should present features generally associated with femininity, turning gender into a binary concept that allows only one of two options.

The social pressure for correspondence between sex and gender identity is usually reflected on mainstream cultural productions. As Heritage noted, mainstream animated movies will show their audiences a hetero-cisnormative representation of society, where all characters are heterosexual and cisgender. Social concepts represented on film are usually a reflection of the societal views at the time of production, which leads to evolving and adaptable representations. However, mainstream animated movies won’t show radical or innovative representations, if there’s a chance it will compromise the box office revenue. Hess and Grant (1983, 371) said that “television may not only reflect contemporary standards in gender roles, but may also generate such standards.” And this goes for cinema as well. Some learning theories also agree that cultural productions can and will have an effect on its viewers, especially the susceptible younger ones. As Benjamin R. Barber said, “it is time to recognize that the true tutors of our children are not schoolteachers or university professors but filmmakers, advertising executives and pop culture purveyors.” If the narratives and characters portrayed in mainstream animated movies are so important for the personal development of its young viewers, studios need to acknowledge the impact of their creative work and make inclusive, innovative and forward-thinking gender representations.

To understand the contemporary status of gender representation on mainstream animation film, we focused our research on the past 25 years and listed every animated movie released between 1992 and 2016 (to be continued in 2017), that did not have any live action footage and that reached a minimum of 15 000 ratings on IMDb. We reached a total of 196 animated features.

The first factor that came to our attention was the distribution of directing credits. During the last 25 years, only one woman was given a solo directing credit – that’s Jennifer Yuh Nelson with Kung Fu Panda 2 (2011) –, in contrast with the 97 solo directing credits given

to men. We also accounted for the 10 co-directing credits given to women and the 186 co-directing credits given to men. The male predominance within the production teams is reflected on the narratives of the films, which are more male-driven. Looking at what we considered to be the main characters we got a total of 204 male protagonists and only 46 female ones.

There's an obvious lack of female representation on mainstream animated movies and the representation we do find is often stereotyped and redundant. The fact that production teams are mainly constituted by men leads to repetitive female representation, as most artists agree that it's more difficult to draw the opposite sex and so there's a tendency to use tested formulas. We analyzed and simplified female facial features from our list of films and found a recurrent model of round faces, tiny noses and big eyes. Gardam (2015) also said that "female characters are given distinctive hair colors and styles instead of distinctive silhouettes".

Female character design needs an intervention that will force it to break and expand beauty concepts. We need to amplify the visual code that audiences worldwide associate with the female sex – as well as broadening the meaning of female gender and understanding it as a wide spectrum of different identity manifestations.

Biography

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Gabriela Sá was born in the spring of 1992, in Porto, Portugal.

Sá earned a BA in Fine Arts from FBAUP, Porto (Portugal), after completing a semester of animation studies abroad, under the Erasmus program, on KASK Gent School of Arts, Belgium. She's currently finishing her MA in Illustration and Animation at IPCA, Barcelos (Portugal).

Sá has worked as a freelancer illustrator and as an animation workshop teacher for the last two years. She participated in 2016 CONFIA - 4ª Conferência Internacional em Ilustração e Animação - as a first-time speaker, publishing her first scholarly article: *Fantastic Mr. Fox: estudo visual de pontos-chave da adaptação cinematográfica*.

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