

UC Berkeley

Global Perspectives in Contemporary Art Fall 2018

Title

Representation in Animation: A Great Power and a Greater Responsibility

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0pg148nm>

Author

Choudhury, Ashna

Publication Date

2019-01-25

Art 119: Global Perspectives in Contemporary Art

Representation in Animation: A Great Power and a Greater Responsibility

Ashna Choudhury

January 5, 2019

(2993 Words)

In recent years, Hollywood has been called out for a lack of diversity in its films. Revelations such as the 2016 election and the “MeToo” Movement have made big producers and movie houses accountable for the messages they are sending both off and on screen. As a result, biases, misrepresentations, and privileges of certain groups have been uncovered and put under major scrutiny by viewers. The imbalance of representation for some communities is not new; rather, it has been an unaddressed problem in the film industry for decades. Almost thirty years ago, feminist activist and scholar, Peggy McIntosh, stated that there is apparent white privilege in the film industry as she concedes that “I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented.”ⁱ This, unfortunately, is not a privilege all communities share; as a Bengali-American, for example, I have never seen someone exactly like myself being represented on screen. Even now in 2019, it is clear that many films in Hollywood still do not represent diverse communities and cultures as the Hollywood Diversity Report published by UCLA this past year states that while minorities and women “have made progress, they remain underrepresented on every front.”ⁱⁱ Does the animation industry, however, also suffer from a lack of diversity and representation? In a medium where the artists have endless imagination to create their worlds, do filmmakers use that creative freedom to depict underrepresented communities? In this paper, I will explore the representation of various ethnicities, cultures, genders, and sexualities in animation. I will analyze how well, or poorly, the animation industry represents minorities in their work and discuss how there has been improvement in representation since the early 2000’s, albeit with some caveats. Through this process, I will also discuss the challenges that arise in proper representation in the animation industry.

Answering this question becomes more complex when you consider how rich of an industry animation is: the term can loosely refer to films, TV shows, short-films, commercials, special effects etc. Looking at the scale and size of the production actually gives us an interesting perspective in unwrapping this question. In larger productions, decisions have to be funneled through several departments and approved by producers who invest in the project and therefore have a share of the power. After all, animation is a unique form of art, that is heavily intertwined in commerce and business which, according to art critic Ben Davis, can “open up a potential rift within the identity of art, between those who aspire to be mini-corporations and those who still identify as artisans and intellectuals.”ⁱⁱⁱ Artists have to worry, not just about the content of work they make, but whether audiences will be willing to pay to see their films. As a result, certain ideas, stories, and visions may not make their way to the final product in large-scale productions.

However, in smaller projects, such as those for short films, we see that creators have more freedom to represent issues, communities, and ideas that are dear to them. Within this decade alone, there have been several examples of sincere representation in animated short films from both big and small studios alike. *Sanjay's Super Team* (2015) by Sanjay Patel and *Bao* (2018) by Domee Shi are both short films from Pixar, one of the largest and most influential animation studios in the world, and feature characters from Asian backgrounds. *Sanjay's Super Team* depicts the struggle of a young Indian boy as he tries to find the balance between his love for American culture and his father's dedication to their Hindu roots. Though the short channels this dilemma through Sanjay's admiration for American superheroes and his detachment from mythical stories of Hinduism, it struck a tone with Asian-Americans all over the country.



Figure 1: Sanjay Patel. *Sanjay's Super Team*. 2015

We know what it feels like to be caught between two worlds: to love both but never fully belong in either. We've been through the phase of thinking our own heritage wasn't worthy or "cool enough" for the people in this country. But in this short, we see that there is a way to appreciate and love both sides of yourself, not just as a balance but as a mixture of two worlds. The film was beautifully symbolic and revolutionary in the experiences it depicted. As scholar Aurora Levin Morales discussed in her writings about Raicism, the idea of owning and tracing your cultural and historical background to better know your identity, embracing "the legacy of relationships our ancestors have left us is empowering and radical."^{iv} *Sanjay's Super Team* depicted the journey of finding a connection to your past and culture, and as a result, Sanjay is able to understand himself and his father in a way he hadn't before. He is able to love both halves of his identity rather than having to pick one over the other. As a South Asian-American growing up in this country, I was brought to tears to see aspects of my culture and struggles represented on screen.



Figure 2: Domee Shi. *Bao*. 2018

Bao was also revolutionary, not just for the experiences it represented, but also off-screen for being the first Pixar short to be directed by a woman. Domee Shi illustrates the relationship of a mother and son, and the strain they experience as the son distances himself from his Chinese culture and his mother as an adult. The short was told from the perspective of the mother, and represented a lot of issues that Asian parents feel in raising their kids in America. However, *Bao* presents itself as an interesting example as the short had mixed

responses from audiences. For some people, the cultural references and symbolisms in this short were "too much" for them to understand it fully. They were left confused or uncertain of the

meaning behind the Bao as a metaphor for her son and that has led to strong debate over the short. However, many Asians and Asian-Americans who strongly identified with the story felt that they were being represented in a way that large studios haven't done in a while. The short touched the hearts of many viewers in this country, even if it left others asking questions, and that is why it stands out as such a profound example of representation in animation. The creators and producers of the work decided that it was okay if non-Asian viewers didn't understand the short. They realized that it was more important to represent these experiences, and this culture honestly, rather than market it to a wider audience by "watering it down."

Short films produced by independent creators or small studios have also shown outstanding examples of representation in their work. *In a Heartbeat* (2017) by Beth David and Esteban Bravo stands out as one of the most endearing examples of representation of the LGBTQ community in animated shorts. The short shows a young boy frantically trying to suppress and hide his feelings for the person he likes. The audience is surprised to find out very quickly that he is in love with another boy in his school. Within a span of four minutes, the short depicts the boy's feelings sincerely and honestly, while also



Figure 3: Beth David, Esteban Bravo. *In a Heartbeat*. 2017

alluding to the struggles of suppressing your sexual identity to yourself and others. The short should be applauded, not only for representing a heartwarming example of a gay couple in which the characters actually have a happy ending, but also for how boldly they represent their characters. There is nothing shy or subtle about the film: the creators are proud of the character's feelings, and they present it in a way that audiences of any age can relate to the love they share. All three of these works depict cultures and communities that aren't always seen from larger scale productions and stand as wonderful examples of the progress animation has made in terms of representation.



Figure 4: Michael Di Martino, Bryan Konietzko. *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. 2003-2008

A similar kind of progress can be seen in animated TV shows, a section of animation in which creators often push boundaries of representation. Several animated TV series in the past twenty years have featured a diverse cast of characters and underrepresented communities: the open-mindedness and acceptance that can be found in "children's TV" would put some large studios in Hollywood to shame. Even large, mainstream studios such as Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and Disney have sincere examples of representation and diversity in their shows despite

potential backlash from more conservative groups. For example, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

(2003-2008) by Michael Dante DiMartino & Bryan Konietzko features a wonderfully diverse cast of characters that come from differing backgrounds and cultures. Though the story is set in a fictional world, the main characters, as well as the four nations featured are heavily based on various Asian cultures such as Japan, China, Nepal, India, and various indigenous cultures.

Furthermore, in the sequel series, *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014), the main character was revealed to be bi-sexual in the last season, and is depicted having a loving relationship with one of her closest friends in the series. Both shows remain two of the most iconic, influential, and beloved series within the past two decades. There is a whole generation of people who grew up watching these series, and felt a sense of acceptance and belonging that is not always present on television. Other series such as *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) and *Steven Universe* (2013-) should also be applauded for the way it depicts the LGBTQ community. Both series have women playing pivotal roles in the story as well as prominent characters that are non-binary and identify as they/them. Additionally, both series depict loving relationships between women and various gay and lesbian characters. To see this level of representation and acceptance in these series is heartwarming: it is revolutionary to think that so many children and young generations will grow up loving and appreciating these characters who come from all kinds of ethnicities, backgrounds, and sexualities. They stand as pioneering examples of diversity and representation in the industry, and show that there is in fact, progress being made towards inclusivity in animation.



Figure 5: Michael Dante DiMartino, Bryan Konietzko. *The Legend of Korra*. 2012-2014.



Figure 6: Rebecca Sugar. *Steven Universe*. 2013 --



Figure 7: Pendleton Ward. *Adventure Time*. 2010-2018.

However, while these films and series are promising trends in the industry, it would be naive to think that a majority of works follow in their footsteps. Many major studios still hesitate to create worlds and characters that reflect our diverse reality. Although a few films like *Coco* (2017) and *Princess and the Frog* (2009) have made groundbreaking strides, studios and artists cannot stop after one good example if they are serious about representation in their work. Big studios can suffer from a “checklist diversity” mentality, in which they represent each culture only once on screen, but we know that the world is much richer than that, and our films should reflect that. Miguel and

Tiana should not be the only Hispanic and African-American characters in the Mouse House or any studio. There are still many stories out there, waiting to be heard, and in an industry where creativity and originality is applauded, many studios are failing to realize the vast depth of new and unheard stories.

Additionally, representation is not always met with open arms from viewers, especially when it comes to depicting the LGBTQ community on “family-friendly” movies and shows. The conservative Christian group, One Million Moms, has boycotted and protested several films, series, and other works featuring gay and LGBTQ characters, including *Steven Universe*, *Adventure Time* and the Disney Junior series, *Doc McStuffins* for showing a biracial, same-sex couple. Groups like these promote the idea that members of the LGBTQ community are “abnormal” and “sinful” and serve as a reminder that there are people who are still stuck in conservative and hurtful thinking. In a New York Times article, novelist and activist Salman Rushdie explores the difficulties and obstacles that come in the way of activism. He writes that there are people who are “suspicious of those who take a stand against the abuses of power or dogma.”^v Artists may have the good intentions to take a stand against bigotry, but they will not always be met with applause and praise. In fact, they may be put under severe criticism, controversy, and backlash. In turn, this can discourage producers from investing in diverse projects if they believe the repercussions will hurt them or the business of their product. As a result, some studios, regardless of production size, will downplay or remove characters who are from the LGBTQ community or other, non-majority backgrounds.



Figure 8: Chris Nee. *Doc McStuffins*. 2012 --

Unfortunately, this sometimes leads to not just a lack of representation, but also misrepresentation. In the attempt to bring diversity to their work while pleasing larger, mainstream audiences, studios can fall into a dangerous territory of stereotypes and harmful tropes. An infamous example occurred this past August, when the popular Netflix/DreamWorks series *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (2016-2018) announced that one of their main protagonists of the series, Shiro, was gay. This news was groundbreaking for many fans of the series, and they felt like they finally had a positive hero who was gay that they could look up to. The admiration and

Voltron showrunner apologises to fans after backlash over treatment of gay character

"There is no way for me to take away the hurt some of you have felt."

DS BY JUSTIN HARP 16/08/2018



Figure 9: Justin Harp. *Digital Spy*. 8/16/2018

celebration was short lived, however, when later that month Netflix released season 7 of the show, in which Shiro's boyfriend was killed in an accident. His boyfriend, Adam, was on screen for a total of two scenes, did not have any major dialogue or interactions with Shiro, and was killed off in the same season he was introduced. For many fans, this felt like a major disappointment and another example of queer-baiting (when a studio promises a character from the LGBTQ community, but in the end only hints at their presence rather than depicting it). This controversy is another unfortunate example of the "Bury Your Gays" trope found in many series and films both live-action and animated. This trope is a form of queer-baiting in which a gay character or couple is introduced, only to have one or both of them killed off. It's a harmful trope that sends a wrong message to viewers: gay characters can exist for plot and for diversity points, but not for their own happy ending. What is even more unfortunate in this case is that the creators did not face major external pressure to remove or downplay Shiro's sexuality, but rather they simply chose to kill a gay character for the purpose of the plot. Sadly, even though it is 2019, and many studios have made great progress in terms of representation, there are still groups and companies that are afraid or hesitate to make work more inclusive.

So, this brings us back to our original question: has representation in animation improved since 2000? Have we made any progress in the past twenty years? If that is the question, then the answer is undoubtedly yes: there indeed has been progress and a greater diversity in the voices we hear from the industry, but unfortunately in small, and sometimes backwards, steps. If you had asked me 18 years ago to find a piece from a major American studio that featured an Asian American or non-white protagonist, I may not have been able to answer you off the top of my head. Or if you had asked me to talk about my favorite gay character from animated TV, I don't know if I would have one. Now, in 2019, my answer would thankfully be different. However, that doesn't mean the problem of representation in animation has been fixed. Yes, there are many artists who have created wonderful work, but there is still not enough. The fact that Domee Shi made the short film *Bao* is incredible, but the fact that it took 30 years for a woman of color to direct a short film is concerning. The fact that there are still political and social groups out there demonizing the representation of the LGBTQ community is disheartening. It is 2019, and audiences across America deserve to see characters and stories that reflect their lives, and while we are going in the right direction, we need more. We need more voices to speak louder, more artists to demand their fair representation. If we want the world to become a more accepting, fair, and loving place, then our films and creations should reflect that. According to WochenKlausur, the international artist collective pushing for social activism, art "can change more than is assumed," and therefore art should "devote itself to very concrete strategies of effecting change."^{vi} Animation, though an expansive and intersectional art form, should hold itself to a similar standard of social change. The artist will not always have the most power or the loudest voice in this medium: the influence of investors and producers weighs heavy on our shoulders, but it is our responsibility to keep fighting for the right kind of representation. This industry has the unique power to reach millions of people across all kinds of backgrounds, ages, and demographics and therefore has a profound power to bring positive change to the world's thinking.

Works Cited

ⁱ Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies.” Wellesley College 1988.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Darnell Hunt, Dr. Ana-Christina Ramon, Michael Tran, Amberia Sargent, and Debanjan Roychoudhury, “UCLA-Hollywood Diversity Report 2018.” <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2018-2-27-18.pdf> (2018).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ben Davis, “Commerce and Consciousness.” *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*. Haymarket Books 2013.

^{iv} Morales, Aurora Levin. “Raicism: Rooted as Spiritual and Political Practice.” *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity*. South End Press: 1998.

^v Rushdie, Salman. “Whither Moral Courage?” *The New York Times*. April 27, 2013.

^{vi} Wochen Klausur, “From the Object to the Concrete Intervention,” www.wochenklausur.at, 2005.