

Research on the Educational Value of Animation in Contemporary China and Its Innovative Development

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Abstract: The Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism holds that “the world is an organic whole with universal connections, and everything is interconnected with its surroundings. Therefore, problems should be viewed from the perspective of interconnectedness.” This principle also applies to the study of humanities, where different disciplines interact and should not be confined to one specific field. This paper is grounded in the Marxist philosophy of interconnectedness and employs interdisciplinary research methods, drawing from disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, and linguistics, to analyze and discuss the educational value of animation, exploring how animation positively influences the mind and body of individuals. Considering the characteristics of contemporary society, the paper examines the path to realizing the educational value of animation through an analysis of outstanding domestic animation works from the perspectives of cultural content, artistic aesthetics, digital technology, and more. This research aims to better utilize the educational potential of animation, fostering well-rounded socialist builders and successors who excel in morality, intelligence, physical fitness, aesthetics, and labor. Furthermore, it promotes the preservation and innovation of Chinese animation culture, encouraging it to stay true to its roots, absorb external influences, face the future, and contribute to the inheritance and innovation of our culture while facilitating the global expansion of outstanding Chinese culture.

Keywords: Animation, Education, Heritage, Innovation

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

A nation without spirit is not strong, and a nation’s strength is always supported by cultural prosperity. Achieving the great rejuvenation of a nation requires a high level of cultural confidence and the flourishing of culture. The mission of ‘achieving cultural inheritance and development, promoting cultural prosperity and abundance’ is well within the reach of Chinese animation. Unbeknownst to many, Chinese animation has a history spanning over a century. From the release of ‘Princess Iron Fan’ in 1941, touted as ‘the first feature-length animated film in Asia,’ to the introduction of the classic ink animation ‘The Little Tadpole Looking for Mom’ in 1961, and the highly acclaimed ‘Black Cat Sheriff’ in 1984, to more recent entries in the new era such as ‘NE ZHA: I am the destiny’ and ‘Yao-Chinese Folktales,’ the steady progress and vigorous development of Chinese animation is

evident. However, concurrently, some parents resist animation, deeming it too childish and lacking educational value. While the quality of animation indeed varies due to differences in creators' cultural literacy and professional competence, it should not lead to a blanket dismissal of all animation. Doing so would overlook the significance of this unique form and the positive impact that exceptional animation can have.

1.2. Research Objectives

Lenin once said, "The truth is made up of the sum total of all aspects and relationships of phenomena, of reality." Therefore, in this context, this paper employs interdisciplinary research methods to explore how this unique form of animation influences the minds and bodies of individuals within the intersection of the humanities. The aim is to develop a truthful understanding of the educational value of animation and to attempt to find the path toward the future development of animation and the better realization of its educational value.

2. Main Text

2.1. Characteristics of Animation

Animation is a comprehensive art form that integrates various artistic disciplines such as painting, film, photography, music, literature, mathematics, and more [1]. Animation differs from video in that each frame of animation is generated manually or by a computer, whereas video frames are obtained by capturing real-time natural scenes or objects in motion. Therefore, when it is necessary to depict events that occurred before the invention of the camera, capture scenes beyond the reach of the camera, or illustrate intangible but genuine psychological experiences, animation, as a unique form, can be employed. It possesses a creative compensatory function and a narrative advantage that live-action images do not have [2].

2.2. Educational Value of Outstanding Animation

According to the broader educational concept in pedagogy, any purposeful activity aimed at increasing knowledge and skills, influencing thoughts and ethics, nurturing aesthetic sensibilities, or refining individual personality, whether organized or unorganized, constitutes education [3]. So, how does this unique form of animation influence the mental and physical development of individuals, realizing its inherent educational role? The following discussion will be based on the Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism [4], and will draw from multiple disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, and linguistics.

2.2.1. From a Psychological Perspective

Animation aids in memory, especially image-based memory. Image-based memory refers to the memorization of specific characteristics and appearances of objective things, such as shape, size, volume, color, sound, hardness, and more. Based on a comparative analysis of data from the experiment known as the Sivrel illusion conducted by the 19th-century Australian chemist Sivrel, it can be concluded that, in human memory, image-based information is many times more abundant than linguistic information. Furthermore, image-based memory is the most active and potentially profound form of memory in the human brain, making it the most suitable method for the right-brain operating mode [5]. Animation, with its rich colors, distinctive character designs, and varied artistic styles, facilitates deep image-based memory in viewers, enabling them to deepen their understanding and contemplation of the rich content it conveys over time and through the passage of years.

2.2.2. From a Philosophical Perspective

Outstanding animation can subtly lead individuals to grasp and contemplate the dialectical relationships between various elements. The highly acclaimed episode “Summer of Little Monsters” in the animation “Yao-Chinese Folktales” narrates the story of a humble pig demon who, despite a lowly status, serves the Demon King in the demon world under the influence of worldly beliefs and the need for livelihood. However, this pig demon maintains a clear sense of right and wrong, preserves a pure benevolent nature, and, at a crucial juncture, chooses to assist the benevolent Tang Monk and his disciples. As the story concludes, the malevolent monsters, solely driven by the desire to harm others to attain immortality, face retribution, while the steadfast pig demon, holding onto his benevolent nature, is saved by Sun Wukong. The animation introduces a pivotal twist where “Sun Wukong, on the surface, appears to have killed the pig demon, claiming it is a monster and can be defeated with a single blow. In reality, he is staging a ruse for other monsters, ultimately releasing the pig demon and gifting him three strands of life-saving fur.” Sun Wukong is often perceived as clever, courageous, and extraordinarily powerful, earning the title “the Monkey King who Defeats the Buddha.” However, this title is not a testament to his superior combat abilities, but to his profound understanding of the significance of combat and protection. This narrative design allows the audience to witness the depths of Sun Wukong’s character—his abhorrence of evil combined with a compassionate inner world. It also emphasizes and elevates the animation’s theme of “retribution for good and evil, the law of cause and effect.” Through this story, the audience can observe the trials and tribulations of ordinary individuals and understand the relationship between good and evil. The animation encapsulates the view that “ultimately, good and evil receive their due, and those who commit wrongdoing will face consequences,” conveying and inspiring the belief in and pursuit of justice and kindness among the majority of ordinary people. Furthermore, it allows the audience to deeply comprehend the essence of good and evil—distinguishing between kindness and malevolence based on actions rather than social status or position. Additionally, the animation “Yao-Chinese Folktales” features “Goose, Goose, Goose,” which has garnered significant popularity. This animation revolves around the concepts of “desire” and “human nature” and tells the story of a peddler who encounters a fox prince with a lame leg in the eerie and enigmatic Goose Mountain. Ultimately, the peddler forgets the purpose of his journey and becomes lost in Goose Mountain. One of the charms of this story is its lack of a fixed, standard answer; each individual can interpret desire and human nature from different perspectives and dimensions. Some may believe that the peddler forgot his original purpose, ensnared by the desire for “a sweetheart,” leading to the loss of not only the goose but also his sense of self. Others may think that the peddler, upon witnessing the inner turmoil of individuals who have multiple sweethearts, hesitated when encountering love and ultimately missed an opportunity. In the illusion, he not only loses love but also his original courage and innocence. Both interpretations have their valid aspects from distinct angles. However, regardless of the perspective, the interpretations are primarily concerned with the relationship between the illusory and the real. This story raises the question: In the face of numerous absurdities or countless desires and temptations, can one remain as calm and rational as an “outsider” does, breaking free from the constraints brought by external influences or illusions and safeguarding the purity and tranquility within oneself?

These two animations encapsulate the principles of “good and evil” and “illusion and reality,” effectively demonstrating the philosophical value inherent in animation. Although the audience’s cognitive interpretations may vary, especially among teenagers who may not have encountered philosophical concepts previously, it can be inferred, based on educational psychology, that “meaningful learning is the process of establishing non-artificial and substantial connections between new knowledge and the learner’s pre-existing concepts.” [6] Additionally, the role of image-based

memory is critical. Therefore, animation, as an enjoyable form of education, can leave a profound impression on the teenage mind. It aids teenagers in invoking their stored memories when learning related concepts in the future, facilitating a deeper understanding and application of new abstract concepts in the context of their existing knowledge and experiences. As such, it can be deduced that the content and form of animation hold vast potential for conveying philosophical or other complex and abstract subject matter.

2.2.3. From a Linguistic Perspective

Outstanding animation contributes to the preservation of Chinese culture and the continuity of our national spirit. For instance, in the animation “Chinese Choir,” the creation of “Yuan Ri,” themed around the Spring Festival, a special and significant holiday for every Chinese, encapsulates the unique customs, profound and extensive Chinese culture, and rich folk traditions. Notably, the animation prominently embodies the virtuous traditional qualities of the Chinese people, such as “benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness.” For instance, the father educates his child, emphasizing that “taking what is not rightfully yours is not just,” conveying the concept of “righteousness.” The child feeding a stray dog on the street showcases “benevolence.” The various New Year customs, including offerings to the Kitchen God and visits to teachers, represent “propriety.” The teacher’s guidance and adherence to the principle of “in a humble abode, the people are distressed, but their joy remains unchanged” embody “trustworthiness.” As for “wisdom,” the diverse traditional customs and folk traditions portrayed in the scenes demonstrate the wisdom of the ancient working class and intellectuals. Furthermore, the animation frequently uses Wang Anshi’s ancient poem “Yuan Ri” as background music. This not only complements the animation’s rustic and elegant visual elements, providing the audience with a feast of Chinese style, but also serves as a cultural enlightenment tool for children who may not be familiar with this particular poem. In one scene of the animation, “the child contemplates stealing the offerings, but the father promptly stops him and explains why it’s wrong. After seeing the child’s remorse and understanding, the father praises his ability to learn from his mistakes, teaching them a valuable lesson and rewarding them with the Longevity Fruit.” This scenario reflects an educational approach characterized by gentle guidance and patient instruction. It is evident that outstanding animation can convey profound life lessons and promote the cultivation of virtuous character and excellent culture through the simple actions and words of its characters.

2.3. Approaches to Better Realize the Educational Value of Animation

2.3.1. Animation Core: A Fusion of Eastern Romanticism and Western Aesthetics

In 2023, China witnessed a sudden surge in popularity for an animation titled “Yao-Chinese Folktales.” This animation not only garnered the affection of Chinese audiences but also attracted the attention of foreign friends and media. Foreign viewers who watched this animation expressed admiration, with comments such as: “Completely blown away by the first two episodes. These stories are so beautifully told.” “The second episode of the animated series is even better than the first episode.” One animation segment frequently mentioned by both Chinese and foreign audiences is “Goose, Goose, Goose,” which was even selected for the Zagreb International Animation Festival. The Zagreb International Animation Festival is the second oldest film festival in the world dedicated to animation and one of the four major international animated film festivals. The reason behind the significant success of “Goose, Goose, Goose” lies in its ability to “remember its origins while absorbing external elements.”

“Remembering its origins” refers to its deep-rooted connection with Chinese traditional culture. Firstly, the animation draws inspiration from the tale of the “Goose Cage Scholar” in the

“Continuation of Qi Hexie” by Wu Jun from the Southern Dynasties. Director Hu Rui stated, “The reason for choosing this story is that it not only showcases the extraordinary imagination of ancient literati but also contains profound reflections on human nature, which still hold strong relevance today.” However, inheritance does not equate to replication, and paying homage does not mean reproduction. In the original “Goose Cage Scholar” story, the peddler remained an observer throughout, watching the scholar take a woman out of his mouth, the woman subsequently taking a man out of her mouth, and this nesting cycle continued. In the adapted animation, the peddler himself gets entangled in the process, engaging in a conversation and resonance with the final appearing girl. When the girl requests the peddler to take her out of the mountain, he hesitates, and at this moment, the scholar awakens and swallows the girl. At this point, the subtitle reads, “Just now, you lost three geese,” suggesting that the peddler lost something besides the two geese he initially transported. This adaptation not only preserves the original tale’s fantastic style, prompting the audience to contemplate human nature, but also allows today’s indecisive or lost audience to emotionally resonate with the protagonist in the second person [7]. Secondly, it concerns artistic style and creative techniques. This animation extensively employs black and white imagery, carrying the aesthetics of traditional Chinese ink painting. Chinese ink painting is a distinctive style of Chinese art. The Northern Song dynasty’s Shen Kuo once described the ink effect of Chinese ink painting as “dilute ink and light mist forming an integral whole.” This harmonious and dynamic artistic effect is particularly adept at representing the characteristics of objects that resemble but do not resemble. This animation employs the ink painting style to illustrate the protagonist’s surreal yet real experiences. It also combines the technique of whitespace often used in Chinese artwork. This not only ensures balanced visual composition, reducing the sense of overcrowding in the composition, but also creates a sublime ambiance of “something in nothing,” leaving ample room for the audience’s imagination regarding the theme and characters.

“Absorbing external elements” signifies that it incorporates elements from Western culture. In terms of artistic aesthetics, this animation ingeniously utilizes representative elements of Gothic aesthetics. Gothic aesthetics originate from Western architectural culture and generally symbolize darkness and mystery. To effectively depict the characters’ despondency and inner turmoil, the director employed this aesthetic, giving the typical “dark circles” element to the animated characters. This deepens the depiction of characters while also complementing the Chinese ink painting style. Through a seamless fusion of Chinese art and Western aesthetics, the animation emphasizes the story’s eerie style.

2.3.2. Animation Form: Combining Animation with Digital Technology

Recently, a work titled “Sinking Sandalwood VR,” created by a teacher from the Beijing Film Academy in China, was selected for the 80th Venice Film Festival and the Venice Biennale XR Competition Unit. The Venice Film Festival is the premier among the world’s top three veteran film festivals, indicating the exceptional level of creative quality and undeniable international influence of this work. What makes this animated film so influential, and what sets it apart? First, it breaks away from the linear narrative structure of traditional cinema, allowing the audience to explore autonomously in the first-person perspective. During this autonomous exploration, the audience can ride on a crane, freely choose their spatial location and perspective, and independently accelerate or decelerate the temporal progression, resulting in a fully immersive and breathtaking experience. Second, it introduces an entirely new multi-mode combat experience. Audiences can not only observe battles from afar but also experience impactful interactions like fighting shoulder to shoulder or facing opponents head-on. Third, it integrates China’s latest HDR Vivid (High Dynamic Range Display) and Audio Vivid (Spatial Audio) technologies, further enhancing the audience’s sensory perception and the realism of their immersive experiences [8]. The distinctive aspects mentioned above mainly

result from the use of cutting-edge metaverse technology to showcase the grand world of Chinese mythology.

So, what is the metaverse? The “metaverse” refers to the future fusion form of all the essential elements of the internet, including virtual reality, immersive experiences, blockchain, industrial internet, cloud computing, and digital twins. Its primary characteristic is the high synchronization and interconnectivity of the virtual space with the real world. Based on this characteristic, users can engage in independent observations and exploration in the first-person perspective. Users can decide what they want to observe, from which angle, and in what order, all from their own first-person perspective. From the perspective of the development logic of Web 3.0 on the internet, the individual’s independent status and autonomy form the foundational structure for the future development of the internet world [9]. Therefore, it can be inferred that technology related to the metaverse, such as “blockchain, human-computer interaction, digital twins, artificial intelligence, networking and computing, the Internet of Things,” can offer advanced media that allows for independent and autonomous exploration experiences. By combining this technology with animation, it can enable animation to better “face the future” and continue to progress steadily.

3. Conclusion

3.1. Theoretical Value of Research Findings

Based on the analysis of the characteristics of animation and psychological experimental data, we conclude that if one wishes to express or convey specific knowledge or meaning, the use of the visually intuitive form of animation is conducive to deep-seated memory retention. By combining interdisciplinary studies and case analysis, we link the conclusion that animation has the potential for conveying philosophical or other complex or abstract disciplinary knowledge to educational psychology’s “meaningful reception theory.” This suggests that animation not only has the potential to transmit knowledge in disciplines but also has the charm of inheriting China’s excellent culture and continuing the spirit of the Chinese nation. It is conducive to producing positive and far-reaching effects on individuals’ knowledge, skills, qualities, emotions, aesthetics, and personal development.

3.2. Practical Value of Research Findings

Efforts should be made to create excellent animations that harness the educational function of animation. By enriching the content of animation and promoting the fusion of animation and advanced technology like the metaverse, we can not only enhance the audience’s sense of realism but also empower them to actively participate in exploration and independently construct their understanding and contemplation of the advanced culture embedded in animation. Furthermore, we can use advanced media to promote Chinese culture on the international stage, bringing a comprehensive, multimodal, immersive Chinese-style audio-visual feast to audiences worldwide. This will enable more people to better appreciate the unique charm of Chinese culture.

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