

Social Representation of Disability in Animated Movies

Abstract

Social representations are the collective thoughts and feelings by social actors that are ascribed to a social object such as disability. Whilst social representations can facilitate communication and understanding of the world, they also give rise to stereotyping since the collective thoughts are fragmentary.

Animated movies reflect the various social representations of disability. This paper has selected three animated movies produced by Disney, one produced in the 1930s, one in the 1960s and one in 2003. Prior to the rise of the disability movement in the 1960s, disability tended to be portrayed in animated movies tended to reflect moral and medical models of disability. After the 1960s, there was a gradual shift in attitudes towards disability. Yet, prejudices still remained particularly in the film industry, which appear to care only for the marketability of their products than making a better world.

However, there is evidence that filmmakers can produce animated movies that are profitable but at the same time presenting alternative social representations of disability. This paper has also made some recommendations – such as using an original story-line, focusing away from the impairment, and involvement of persons with disability in the production of animated movies – which could help avoid the pitfalls of continuation of age-old stereotypes.

Keywords: Disability, Animated Movies, Social Representations

Introduction

This study will be focusing on representations of disability in three animated movies produced by Disney in order to obtain a partial insight in this regard, including the changes in the way persons with disability are represented over time. It will also seek to explore the cultural contexts at the time of their respective production, the reactions to these movies and their legacies.

In order to understand social representations, one needs to have a basic understanding of what culture is all about. It should be acknowledged that culture reflects the human need of belonging, and is seen as so fundamentally important that is worth fighting for (Cronk, 1999). Yet, culture is not something monolithic and stale, but is subject of heated debates and change in terms of beliefs, morals and values (Cronk, 1999; Weedon, 2004). This has the particular implication that the commonsense assumption that human beings are governed by will-power, reason, knowledge, experience and emotions without being influenced by culture in some way or

another is misleading (Weedon, 2004). At the same time, it not to be construed that human subjectivity within any given culture is non-existent, as evidenced by identity formation of constituent individuals within any given cultural context (Weedon, 2004).

One reason why cultural influence should not be overlooked is because one has to use language – itself a cultural product, and thus value-laden – in order to convey thoughts and feelings, (Wendell, 1996; Weedon, 2004). Furthermore, individuals acquire knowledge through various agents of socialization – including parents and education – in addition to subjective experience within a given cultural context (Weedon, 2004).

At this point, it is useful to come up with a definition of culture. There are many and varied definitions of culture (Cronck, 1999; Storey, 2010). There is also evidence of individual authors giving different definitions of culture (Storey, 2010). A useful definition of culture is the one proposed by Williams (2009, cited in Storey, 2010, p. 2), where culture is defined as

a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture ... the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate.

This definition of culture is useful in three important ways. First, this definition does not limit itself to “high culture”, namely in terms of forms of art, literature and other products that reflect the highest human achievements (Storey, 2010). This definition is also important since products – such as animated movies – are not created in a vacuum, but reflect a particular cultural context, which also includes their production and their consumption (Storey, 2010). Most importantly, this definition elucidates then notion that culture is not something neutral, but as imparting a complex system of meanings and values that would influence not only the production and consumption of various cultural products, but also influencing the behaviours of constituent individuals and institutions within any given cultural context (Storey, 2010).

It should be kept in mind that the cultural meanings and values do not arise in a vacuum, which in turn leads us to social representations. Whilst there is no universal definition of social representations, one may define social representations as being “the ensemble of thoughts and feelings being expressed in verbal and overt behaviour of actors which constitutes an object for a social group” (Wagner et al, 1999m p.96). As can be implied from the definition, social representations comprise of a variety of collective value and meaning systems, which are always related to social, cultural and symbolic objects in any given society or social group (Höijer, 2011). Social representations also serve to achieve cultural cohesion inasmuch as possible in two

ways (Höijer, 2011). This is because social representations serve to orientate the constituent individual in a material and social world, and master it (Moscovici, 1973, cited in Höijer, 2011). In addition, social representations serve to facilitate communication across individuals, enabling them to naming and classifying objects unambiguously (Moscovici, 1973 cited in Höijer, 2011).

Notwithstanding this, social representations vary not only across cultures, but also within any given culture (Wagner et al, 1999; Höijer, 2011). This is because the collective thoughts within any given culture have historical roots and macro social conditions that are unique for a given culture (Wagner et al, 1999; Höijer, 2011). This is complemented by social representations as being the result of collective co-operation between individuals and groups within any cultural setting that varies across time (Höijer, 2011). This has the implication that social representations can change through time, besides comprising various thought fragments that are inherent with intersections and contradictions, which in turn give rise to stereotypes (Wagner et al, 1999; Höijer, 2011).

There are two distinct sets of mechanisms that give rise to social representations, namely anchoring and objectification (Höijer, 2011; Wagner et al, 1999). Anchoring is a group of mechanisms that seek to map unfamiliar events, phenomena or objects with those that display a similar characteristic but at the same time being familiar. Wagner et al (1999)'s example could be useful here: when AIDS became public knowledge for the first time, some people attributed it as a sort of a venereal disease (since like syphilis, it could be sexually transmitted), whilst religious-oriented people attributed it as a punishment from God (particularly because this kind of disease could have fatal consequences).

On the other hand, objectification is a group of mechanisms where unfamiliar objects are rendered familiar by turning abstract ideas into something concrete that can be easily perceived and understood (Höijer, 2011). Objectification is a more active process than anchoring because in order to transform an abstract idea into a concrete object, it has to construct a metaphor, trope, or icon that is easily recognisable to the social group (Moscovici, 2000 cited in Höijer, 2011; Wagner et al, 1999). Jodelette (1991)'s research on social representation of mental health conditions in a farming community can be used as an illustration. Farmers likened this phenomenon to curdling of milk, since milk is an everyday occurrence to this community and thus facilitating understanding of it to this community (Jodelette, 1991 cited in Wagner, 1999).

The next section will be analyzing three animated movies, namely *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), and *Finding Nemo* (2003). It will

compare and contrast the social representations of disability that emerged, their respective cultural contexts, reactions towards these animated movies, and their legacies.

Social Representations of Disability in Animated Movies

Darke (2004) asserts that persons with disability in all forms of media – which also includes animated movies – predominantly consists of stereotyped representations. Stereotyping of persons with disability – and to the effect any other minority groups – may arise from the process of classifying and naming social objects or groups (Lippm, 1922 cited in Höijer, 2011). This is because labelling someone is not something neutral, but “loaded with preferences, suffused with affection or dislike” (Lippm, 1922 cited in Höijer, 2011, p.8). This has the implication that the value-laden nature of classifying and naming give rise to power difference, where persons labelled as “deviant” – such as persons with disability – are marginalized (Pickering, 2001 cited in Höijer, 2011; Darke, 2004). As we have already seen, social representations are collective thoughts which are fragmented, with the implication that stereotyping gives an illusion of reality in defining and evaluating people (Barnes, 1992; Pickering, 2001 cited in Höijer, 2011).

Since by their very nature stereotypes are illusions of reality, they are fraudulent and dangerous in two ways (Höijer, 2011). First, people labelled as “the other” are assigned taken-for-granted attributes that give the impression that such attributes are natural (Höijer, 2011). Another danger is that stereotypes tend to be used over and over again, reinforcing the illusion of reality and the unequal status quos in the social structure (Höijer, 2011).

As we shall see hereunder, there is evidence of ages-old stereotyping of persons with disability in animated movies that were produced since the late 1930s. At the time, one should also acknowledge of the existence of alternative forms of representations of disability, with the implication that social representations are not something static but can be subject to change.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)

At this point, focus will be made on Dopey, a short-statured character with intellectual disability. This is because the appearance of this character was markedly different from the rest of the little men. In addition, the mannerisms displayed by this character – and his relationship with the other characters – give particular insights on the assumptions about persons with intellectual disability in the 1930s.

At the time this animated movie was released in 1937, the moral and the medical models of disability were prevalent, with disability being perceived either as divine punishment or as

something to be eliminated through medical approaches (Kirkpatrick, 2009; Norden, 2013). It should be brought to attention that in early 20th century, there was a strong eugenics movement where a number of countries within Europe and some parts of the United States adopted oppressive measures such as sterilization of persons with intellectual disability (Barton and Oliver, 1997; Kirkpatrick, 2009; Priestley, 2010). Eugenic ideals were particularly sinister in Germany under the Nazi regime that culminated in the genocide of thousands of persons with disability, which was halted on their defeat in 1945 (Barton and Oliver, 1997; Kirkpatrick, 2009).

Historically, persons with disability – particularly those with intellectually disability – were treated as objects of freak shows, even during the 1930s (Schwartz, Lutfiyya and Hansen, 2013; Barton and Oliver, 1997). It should be kept in mind that the animated movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) – itself an adaptation of Grimm and Grimm’s (1812) *Little Snow White* – was the first of its kind, so much so that it was dubbed as “Disney’s folly” at the time of its production (Schwartz et al, 2013; IMDb, 2014c). Given the risky venture, Schwartz et al (2013) assert that Disney included the character Dopey to create novelty and humour, but in so doing intellectual disability was portrayed in various stereotypical ways.

One misrepresentation of intellectual disability that has emerged from this animated movie is it was portrayed as being an object of ridicule (Schwartz et al, 2013). To start with, the term “dopey” means stupid (Schwartz et al, 2013). Various mannerisms adopted by the character Dopey also reinforce this stereotype. Schwartz et al (2013) show that, amongst other things, Dopey ends up with his head stuck between railings, has a tendency to trip while walking, and on one occasion ends up with a pot stuck on one of his legs. Somewhat complementing with this stereotype is the depiction of intellectual disability in terms of empty-headedness. This was particularly evident in that scene when Dopey accidentally swallows a bar of soap, with a giant bubble momentarily replacing his head (Schwartz et al, 2013).

Intellectual disability as “animal-like” is another representation that emerges from this animated movie (Schwartz et al, 2013). Dopey’s appearance is revealing: This little person is depicted with a protruding tongue, and with large ears that wiggle (Schwartz et al, 2013). This also extends to mannerisms adapted by tis character, which Schwartz et al (2013) likens to that of dogs, which includes – but not limited to – panting, drooling, walking on both arms and legs besides lacking the ability to speak. It should be noted that this animated movie also portrays intellectual disability as a sort of eternal childhood (Schwartz et al, 2013). Dopey’s eye colour is cornflower-blue, which elucidates innocence (Schwartz et al, 2013). Unlike the other little people, Dopey does not have a beard, has a bald head except for a handful of short hairs, and has

one upper tooth that makes him appear like an overgrown baby (Schwartz et al, 2013). Various mannerisms – such as Dopey’s habit of wiping his mouth with his sleeves, and sleeping like a baby – also reinforce this stereotype (Schwartz et al, 2013). Disney’s toying-up with the stereotypical representations of intellectual disability – both as “animal-like” and “child-like” – reflects society’s lack of acceptance of persons with intellectual disability through a collective defence mechanism of denial. This implies that adult persons with intellectual disability were being denied of being considered as adults by mainstream society during the 1930s.

Schwartz et al (2013) show that Dopey is also depicted as a person lacking abilities, where he tends to fall behind when venturing out of the cottage, and tends to experience problems performing the simplest of tasks. In addition, Dopey tends to be assigned tasks that are dangerous, which conveys the message of persons with intellectual disability as ‘expendable’ (Schwartz et al, 2013). A scene that illustrates this notion is that, upon suspecting that there might have been an intrusion in the cottage, the little men shove Dopey at the upper floor against his will in order to investigate (Schwartz et al, 2013). Furthermore, there is at least one occasion where Dopey ends up as a human ladder for the others to climb on (Schwartz et al, 2013). The particular dangers of these representations lie in the underlying message that persons affected with intellectual disability as ‘worthless’, and perhaps it was this assumption has led to various cruel measures such as genocide and sterilization of such persons.

The notion of expendability also complements the stereotype of intellectual disability as object of violence (Schwartz et al, 2013). The same authors assert that this movie is replete with scenes reflecting this stereotype, such as being smacked on the head by one of his mates for playing with gems in one occasion, while on another occasion Dopey receives a beating by his mates who initially mistook him for a monster upon returning to the cottage.

It should be pointed out that this animated movie has received considerable praise for the graphics and musical scores, where some critics labelled this film as a Disney classic (IMDb, 2014c; Schwartz et al, 2013). At the same time, some reviewers on IMDb (2014c) pointed out that this animated movie has sexist overtones. Whilst there was just one reviewer on IMDb (2014c) who remarked that the little people in this movie were depicted as child-like, there were some comments within the same movie database that reflect dominant disability discourse in the kind of language used, particularly those levelled at Dopey.

There was criticism levelled by disability activists about this animated movie. Packer (2010) asserts that there were negative views in the way little people were depicted. This was

exacerbated by the fact that all little people are depicted as having some kind of impairment, which is out of proportion and which only serves to convey the notion of otherness (The World According to Disney, n.d.)

There are a number of legacies associated with this animated movie. Schwartz et al (2013) assert that Disney had subsequently produced characters that depict stereotypical representations of intellectual disability, particularly Gus in *Cinderella* (1950), and LeFou (a play on a French term, meaning the fool) in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). Another legacy from this animated movie is that one of the antagonists in the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) was modelled after Dopey, and was named Stupid (Schwartz et al, 2013). Legacy is also traced in various merchandize associated with this movie – including DVDs and stuffed figures – that convey these misrepresentations in a subtle way (Schwartz et al, 2013).

The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996)

The cultural background in various countries around the world at the time this animated movie was produced was markedly different from the time Disney has released their first full-length animated movie. In the 1960s, various countries around the world saw the rise of the disability movement, where persons with disability began to challenge traditional assumptions about disability (Barnes, 1997). Rather than perceiving disability in terms of morality, disease or chance, persons with disability began to perceive disability in terms of cultural, economical and social barriers (Barnes, 2007). Guided by the Social Model of Disability, disability activism flourished in the 1980s that culminated in the enactment of anti-discrimination laws around various countries such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) in the United States and the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) in Britain (Barnes, 2007; Barnes, 2012). Moreover, disability activists in various countries around the world also campaigned for greater involvement in the development and delivery of services for persons with disability that culminated in measures such as direct payments, and integrated housing schemes for persons with disability and non-disabled people in the United Kingdom (Barnes, 2007; Barnes, 2012).

Prejudices against disability still remained, as reflected in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996). This animated movie is loosely based from Hugo's (1831) *Notre Dame de Paris*, where initially the producers planned to release along with a live-action version thereof (Norden, 2013; Borthaiser, 2012). Right from the start, the producers saw the inherent difficulties in adapting this dark novel, so they decided to discard the live-action film altogether (Norden, 2013). In order to make the film more child-friendly, Disney opted to model the film's story line on *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), which was popular with the general audience.

Notwithstanding the producers' efforts, this movie has a number of pitfalls particularly when it comes to the portrayal of disability in this animation. To start with, the producers were adamant not to change the film's title notwithstanding protests (Norden, 2013). In addition, this animated movie was riddled with stereotypical representations of disability, with disability as 'sub-human' being one of them (Norden, 2013). The name of the character with disability is an evidence of this stereotype: Borthaiser (2012) suggests that the name Quasimodo, as adopted by the original novel, means half-formed. Although Disney adopted an abridged version of the name – Quasi – the name of the character with in this movie still suggests that the character is not considered as fully human because of his spinal deformity (Norden, 2013). The appearance of Quasimodo – and a figurine model of this character that also featured in the film – appear to convey a rather strong message that Quasimodo's body image as less than human (Borthaiser, 2012; Norden, 2013).

This stereotype is also underscored by phrases used by various characters – human and inanimate objects – throughout the film (Norden, 2013). There were several instances where Quasimodo refers to himself as being deformed and ugly, while his stepfather – Judge Frollo – once refers to the infant Quasimodo as an unholy devil that deserves to be destroyed (Borthaiser, 2012; Norden, 2013). Furthermore, one of the gargoyles likened Quasimodo's body shape to a croissant (Norden, 2013).

There are a number of scenes that convey the stereotypical representation of disability as "object of violence". One particular scene involves the attempted drowning of the infant Quasimodo by his step-father, who was stopped short of doing so by the Archdeacon (Borthaiser, 2012; Norden, 2013). There is also another scene, where during the Festival of the Fools, Quasimodo is taunted by the crowd, pelted with tomatoes and vegetables, and ends up pilloried once his impairment is revealed (Borthaiser, 2012; Norden, 2013). Together with the representation of disability as being less-than-human, Disney conveyed the message that a body which does not conform to societal expectations is seen as unacceptable, and to be shunned by whatever means.

The theme of the super-crip in animated movies is not uncommon, and which harks back as far as *Dumbo* (1941) (Kirkpatrick, 2009; Borthaiser, 2012). In this animated movie, Quasimodo uses his extraordinary strength to advantage in order to rescue Esmeralda from a fiery end, which was depicted in a dramatic way (Borthaiser, 2012; Norden, 2013). To an extent, this movie has parallels with *Hercules* (1997) and *Dumbo* (1941), with the underlying message

being that only through control of one's own body and exceeding societal expectations would persons with disability be accepted in mainstream society (Borthaiser, 2012).

The portrayal of persons with disability as 'eternal children' in animated movies harks back to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Quasimodo's depiction as child-like constitutes this film's greatest irony (Borthaiser, 2012; Norden, 2013). This character's relationship with Esmeralda appears childish and does not develop anywhere in the film (Norden, 2007). Quasimodo's mannerism towards Esmeralda somewhat mirrors a scene in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) during which LeFou's attempt to drink beer comes to nothing because the beer is taken away from him, or else it gets spilled over (Schwartz et al, 2012).

Such representations convey the message that persons with disability lack agency, which somewhat complement with the representation of persons with disability as isolated beings (Barnes, 1992). Norden (2013) points out that for most of the time, Quasimodo's companions are three gargoyles, which are inanimate objects, which is exacerbated by the fact that his first venturing-out of the cathedral ends up being humiliated by a hostile crowd. It is also aggravated by internalized oppression, brought about by Frollo in order to ensure that Quasimodo never ventures in the outside world (Borthaiser, 2012).

The film was rated at 6.8 out of 10 by 66,589 users (IMDb, 2014d). This was lower when compared with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), which was rated at 7.7 out of 10 by 93,304 users (IMDb, 2014c). Whilst there was praise for its musical scores and graphics, there was criticism that the film was not suitable for children due to evidence of themes of sexuality, morality, and genocide (Borthaiser, 2012; IMDb, 2014d). It is also worth pointing out that notwithstanding Disney's promises that persons with disability will be represented in a dignified manner in this movie, such promises proved to be hollow (Norden, 2013). Disney did not bother to change the film's title despite strong protests by disability activists at the time of its production, let alone hiring persons knowledgeable in disability issues to ensure non-stereotypical representations (Norden, 2013). There was also strong criticism about this film by disability activists due to its various stereotypical representations of persons with disability (Norden, 2013).

There are legacies associated with this film that are worth mentioning. The One in Eight disability pressure group awarded this film with the Raspberry Ripple award for its misrepresentations of disability, particularly where it comes to formation of adult relationships (Norden, 2013). In the United Kingdom, this animated movie was linked to disability hate crimes

against persons with spinal deformity in the months immediately following the release of the film in question (Norden, 2013). It is also worth pointing out that Disney released *The Hunchback of Notre Dame II* (2002) sequel, which was received rather positively by persons with disability because it conveys the message that persons with disability are able to form intimate relationships (Norden, 2013).

Finding Nemo (2003)

As has already been discussed earlier on in this paper, a number of countries such as the United States had enacted anti-discrimination legislation in the 1990s (Barnes, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2009; Barnes, 2012). Although the enactment of such legislation was influential in shifting attitudes, it should be acknowledged that attitudes are hard to change (Kirkpatrick, 2009). This is particularly so in the filming industry, where producers – such as Disney – are more concerned with the marketability of their products (Smoodin, 1994 cited in Kirkpatrick, 2009). As various academic sources appear to suggest, the underlying morals of the filmmakers has rather less to do with making the world a better place, but has more to do with making money (Kirkpatrick, 2009).

Yet, film-makers have the potential to balance between non-stereotypical representations of minority groups in their products, and at the same time generate profits. This is particularly so for the animated movie *Finding Nemo* (2003), which made instant success when it was released while at the same time it does not portray disability in stereotypical ways (Millett, 2004). One positive feature in this film is that it celebrates diversity, unlike many animated movies, including those mentioned in this paper. Besides the clownfish Nemo, there are vegetarian sharks, a sea-horse that is H₂O-allergic, a regal tang with short-term memory loss, and a squid with a lazy tentacle (Millett, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2009; Borthaiser, 2012). It also conveys the message of persons with disability as having agency: Dory – the regal tang fish – displays various abilities such as ability to read written English, and even speaks whale (Millett, 2004). Nemo is shown as being resourceful and capable to take calculated risks, where he even manages to save Dory and a considerable number of other fish from being trapped in a net (Millett, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2009; Borthaiser, 2012). Crucially, this animated movie emphasizes on the notion of disability as a social construct (Millett, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2009; Borthaiser, 2012). It is due to Marlin's over-protectiveness that his son Nemo gets caught by a scuba-diver, which in turn leads to Marlin's quest in retracing his son (Millett, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2009; Borthaiser, 2012). On another occasion, Marlin ignores Dory's advice, which nearly cost their life following a severe jellyfish attack (Borthaiser, 2012). What is particularly interesting that during the quest for

rescuing his son, Marlin eventually deconstructs his assumptions about disability (Borthaiser, 2012).

The vegetarian sharks deserve some attention here. On a superficial level, they appear to serve as plot devices to parody shark-horror movies. As a matter of fact, Bruce – the great white shark – was named after the shark that featured in *Jaws* (1975) (IMDb, 2014a). More importantly, they convey the message of the futility of persons with disability to force-fit in society in order to gain acceptance. The sharks' pledge "[if] am to change this image, I must first change myself" turns out to be hollow when Bruce attacks Marlin and Dory upon the smell of blood. This is because that the environment has not changed to suit the sharks' needs of socializing with the other fish (Borthaiser, 2012). Likewise, persons with disability can have a meaningful life only if society is more flexible when it comes to the fulfilment of their needs.

The movie was very well-received by the general public: So much so that IMDb (2014) rated it at 8.2 out of 10. There was also praise about this film by persons with disability: O'Toole (2004) for instance liked this animated movie because disability is not being portrayed simply in terms of bodily deformity. This animated movie has also legacies associated with it. This animated movie has won an Oscar and 37 other awards, and received 37 nominations for awards (IMDb, 2014). There are also plans to release a sequel, named *Finding Dory*, which is scheduled for release in 2016 (IMDb, 2014).

Conclusion

Darke's (2004) assertion that merely promoting for more positive representations of disability as counter-balance to traditional representations as naive appears to be valid. This is because by the very nature, naming and classifying creates dichotomies, which in turn gives rise to stereotyping. Thus, 'sanitized' representations of disability would not be covering a plethora of realities experienced by persons with disability, with the result that these representations would be as unrealistic as the traditional representations of disability (Darke, 2004). The same author adds that 'sanitized' imagery on disability would create ideals that few persons with disability might reach, which in turn would lead to reverting to the individual model of disability. In addition, western media is governed by capitalist philosophy, where profit is what truly matters (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

As we have already seen in this paper, social representations are not immutable, but can be subject to change. It is also evident that an original story-line – as in the case of *Finding Nemo* (2003) – has the potential to avoid continuity of perpetration of traditional stereotypes on disability (Kirkpatrick, 2009). There should also be focus away from the individual model of

disability, where impairments should neither be minimized nor over-emphasized. It is also sensible that media producers should adopt emancipatory approaches to involve persons with disability– or at least actively consult with them – to ensure realistic representations inasmuch as possible.

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