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Highlighting Racial Demonization in 3D Animated Films and Its Implications: A Semiotic Analysis of *Frankenweenie*

Abstract

This article focuses on a semiotic analysis of *Frankenweenie*, one of Disney Picture's 3D animated films. Anchored within the psychoanalytic film theory, the aim was to highlight how animated films, as colorful and comic as they are, can demonize a certain group of people. Studying how animated films can do this can lead to an important understanding because children's exposure to modelled behavior on television and in movies has the potential to influence a wide range of attitudes and behaviors, cause victimization, alter their perceptions of reality, reinforce stereotypes and make them acquire such negative emotions as fear and anxiety, and behaviors like retaliation and passivity. The possibility of these adverse effects is even of greater concern in Africa and similar contexts which are at the receiving end of cultural products such as films that emanate from the West. The findings suggest that the negative portrayal of 'people of color' or other characters that represent them, by American film producers and directors seems to be a reoccurring phenomenon. Significantly, from an African perspective, this study corroborates scholars' position that Disney has continued to portray 'people of color' negatively over the years.

Keywords: Racial demonization, 3D animation, racism, semiotic analysis, children, films.

Introduction

A film is a bed of meanings, from the manifest to the hidden. While the eyes and ears are easily caught by the film aesthetics of color, light, sound, the overall fineness of the storyline and finesse in which the characters play their roles, there are meanings that often lay latent. Films can harbor ideologies, empathy, misconceptions, beliefs and stereotypes which can only be uncovered with more critical eyes. While telling a story, filmmakers can as well demonize a certain group of people by the way they present characters that represent them. Animated films, as colorful as they are, have portrayed certain groups of people in a negative light

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(King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2010) and this light may illuminate what children see or think of these people in real life.

Understanding demonization in animated films is important for some reasons. Firstly, as Fouts et al. (2006) argue, children's exposure to modelled behavior on television and in movies can influence their attitudes and behaviors, cause victimization, alter their perceptions of reality, and reinforce stereotypes. This can happen after a repeated exposure to animated characters that model the demonization. Overtime, they learn cynical attitudes and stereotypes about individuals who inflict harm without a rational motivation; learn such demonizing labels as 'devil', 'wicked', 'evil', and acquire such negative emotions as fear and anxiety, and behaviors like retaliation and passivity. Secondly, as the scholars also argue, demonizing certain people in animated films can spur such negative consequences associated with stereotypical beliefs and the labelling of others as alienation and segregation, and when children who belong to the demonized groups are called such names as 'monster' or 'evil', their self-esteem and self-concept are attacked. Thirdly, children are susceptible to effects of negative media portrayals because they can constitute an active audience. Livingstone (2000) argues that children can be curious, anxious; in all, resourceful viewers in a way that counters the idea that television viewing is an effortless experience. As Lemish and Götz (2017) note, children can make meaning out of their media experiences in ways that serve their needs, creativity, and life experiences through processes which may include resisting traditional conventions and interpreting them in creative ways. These views about children as active television audience suggest that when they are presented with animation films, they have the ability to look in-depth to discover latent meanings and can find out when any group of people are demonized.

The negative effects that demonization of certain groups of people in animated films can have on children is therefore worth some reflection, more so due to the overwhelming global influence being exerted by such big media companies as Disney. Modern-day advancement in technology means that messages which demonize certain groups of people can also be distributed through DVDs, video and Internet games, satellite television, and mobile phones, which make for a global reach, and which ultimately serve the economic as well as the discursive agendas of their powerful owners.

In addition, commercialization seems to give oxygen to animated films and film companies, making them exert even more influence. Despite successful efforts to change 'traditional media offerings' (stereotypes, portrayals and presentations), commercial forces still dictate how animated films are produced, distributed and experienced by their audiences. Potter (2017) gave the instance of *Thunderbirds Are Go*, which though considerably more balanced in its representation of female characters and their appearance and behavior, was still influenced by a highly gendered children's television merchandise. She notes that the belief that children prefer gendered television programs and associated merchandize appears to prevail among many producers, distributors and marketing teams, and exert considerable influence in retail and marketing sectors. Consumer products such as toys which emanate from television merchandising and licensing therefore remain a crucial component of the funding of much contemporary children's television, with their success vital to the sustainability of popular series. These popular animated films may also include those with contents that demonize 'people of color'. This makes one wonder if children actually prefer racist television content and if the belief of the existence of such preference has also prevailed among film

producers, distributors and marketing teams, making them dwell on animated films that seem to demonize 'people of color'. Remarkably, however, animated films (no matter the content), according to Turkmen (2016), seem to be children's favorite. This preference makes them exposed to the influence of these films.

In Nigeria and undoubtedly parts of Africa, children are exposed to animated films (Oyero & Oyesomi, 2014; Okoro & Onakpa, 2016), and Disney has over the years played a prominent role in this exposure as some of these children live in middle-class families that can afford satellite television and other platforms. The very popular ones include *Cinderella, The Jungle book, The Lion King,* the colorful and high-grossing *'Frozen'*, to mention a couple. A very competitive telecommunications sector which has made high-speed Internet and satellite television available and relatively cheap to access, has equally increased exposure to these animated films. Not much is however known about the availability, accessibility, and popularity of animated films produced by Nigerian film companies. This one-sided exposure, when repeated overtime, means that the ideologies and perceptions related to issues such as race, gender, class, sexuality among the child- (and even) adult-audience may be constructed and shaped by the predetermined reality which such animated film companies as Disney present to them, with no alternative for contrary or multiple viewpoints. Negative racial portrayals as presented in these animated films may therefore be viewed as factual by children and this forms the basis for all adverse effects associated with them.

Rationale for the study

Demonization of races, as a severe aspect of racialization has had a long history, and has been perpetuated in Disney animated films. King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) argue that in such movies as *The Lion King* for example, the hyenas who speak in an inner city African-American dialect are presented as treacherous, and evil Uncle Scar's mane is black. King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) are of the view that Disney's attitude towards 'people of color' has not changed much along the years. In this context, the fact that racist, stereotypical, and sometimes demonizing content may depict real-life situations may not be good enough justification to produce them. The focus is meant to be on such adverse effects as low self-esteem, self-doubt and prejudice which these contents may have on children.

Instances of nuanced racial demonization in animated films may not have been highlighted or acknowledged much in the literature, especially as it concerns such audience as children in Africa. This has become imperative as children generally fall within an uncritical audience for whom such film companies as Disney produce many of the animated films they are exposed to. It is interesting to note that Disney launched a Disney Africa channel in 2014, bringing the popular television channel closer to children in Africa. This raises the need to highlight this sort of representation using such research method as semiotics. The aim of this study is therefore to determine racial demonization inherent in *Frankenweenie*, one of Disney's 3D animated films. At the 85th Academy Awards organized to honor the best films of 2012, *Frankenweenie* was nominated for the Best Animated Feature – the only animated horror film in that category. Since a horror film has the potential to vividly present a contrast between good and evil – one which can make demonization glaring – *Frankenweenie* was selected as it was the only animated horror film nominated as one of the best in 2012.

Ideologies in Walt Disney animation films: The hidden and manifest

Walt Disney and his brother, Roy, set up a cartoon studio in Hollywood in 1923: the Disney Brothers' Studio. After 14 years, their first animated feature-length version of *Snow White* was released. The film's phenomenal success at the time (earning $8 million on its initial release and winning a full-size Oscar statuette and seven miniature ones) heralded a golden age of animation and a rising influence of the Disney movies. By the mid-1970s, Disney studios started growing significantly (Elnahla, 2015). Today, Disney films have grown remarkably, exerting great influence in America and around the world. Although Disney animated films can be perceived as mere children's stories since they come with lovable characters and 'happily ever after' storylines, there are many underlying messages in them.

In-between the film aesthetics, Disney conceals, for example, strong themes of hierarchy in different variations. Artz (2002) argues that Disney's animated features promote ideologies supportive of capitalist globalization. *The Lion King*, one of Disney's most successful animated films shows the 'upper class' (lions) prey on the 'middle class' (antelopes and zebras) and the 'lower class' are the grasses that give life to the middle class.

Apart from messages on the different variations of hierarchy, Disney animated films also hide away gendered messages and by so doing, reinforce some gendered stereotypes. Disney films present women as weak and overly dependent on the masculinity of the males to survive. From Snow White who needs a princely hero to save her, to the princess in the *Princess and the Frog*, Disney sends messages to the world that women are frail and must find a princely hero to save the day. In *Snow White*, Disney also suggests that women can be childish. Snow White was shown to be so childish that even after the dwarfs repeatedly warned her to be careful and not let anyone into the house before they left for the day's work, she lets an old woman in.

Furthermore, Disney animated films conceal a beauty ideal – that which upholds fairness, red lips, large eyes, long hair, pointed nose and hourglass figure. These features as possessed by such notable female Disney characters as Snow White, Cinderella, Belle (in *Beauty and the Beast*), Ariel (in *The Little Mermaid*) and Aurora (in *Sleeping Beauty*) are definitions of beauty and anyone who wants to be seen as 'most beautiful' must possess them. Beauty, by any other standard, is therefore not good enough. Solis (2007) argues that children might learn that being just beautiful is not as good as being the most beautiful, and that attempting to become the most beautiful is worth taking risks, and even worth dying, for.

On a cursory look, one may not see these messages but is rather carried away by the storyline and endearing characters which the filmmaker wants the reader to see. But the reader is not to be confined to the filmmakers' preferred reading, for no image has a single meaning. For Barthes (1977), the image is polysemic**.** This means that it shares with other signs, including linguistic signs, the property of being open to multiple significations. As Barthes suggested in *Rhetoric of the Image*, the observer's perception can be coaxed into a preferred reading of the image. But in the end, the observer has the power to make his/her own choices by reading his/her own meanings into any text.

However, animated filmmakers may not always create animations for their preferred reading to prevail over the audience. Animations may mirror the culture, realities, concerns and interest of the audience in any given society or a particular section, thus leaving messages manifest and easy to grasp. For Freeman (2005), children's animation films are like 'portable professors'. Freeman's notion suggests that the film industry will reflect those issues and interests

which the audience will most readily engage with and be most concerned about; children's films are akin to being a finger on the societal pulse. This seems to be the filmmakers' sort of defense for production of content which may be described as racist or stereotypical. Joseph Barbera who was responsible for some stereotypical content in *Tom and Jerry*, claimed that the racial gags did not reflect his racial opinion but what was common in the society and cartoons at the time, and were meant to be humorous instead (Maltin, 1997).

For decades and till date, racism is one issue of concern in the United States of America. Racism, in this sense, transcends mere hate or disapproval of a certain group of people for no reason to include giving reasons, no matter how subtle, on why they should be avoided by the rest of the world. King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) note Disney's importance in providing both children and adults with a reinforcement of ideologies concerning race. They see animations as socializing agents that guide children through the complexities of highly racialized scenarios, normalizing certain dynamics while rendering others invisible. They argue that these films teach children how to manoeuver within the terrain of race, and that films, in their role as agents of socialization, provide children with the necessary tools to reinforce expectations about normalized racial and sexual dynamics.

Apart from capitalist and gender ideologies, Disney animations embody stereotypes associated with different minority groups such as Blacks, Asians or Latinos. King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) argue along this line. According to them, racialization takes place on many levels within animated films and it serves as a tool to teach children to maintain racial ideologies and by so doing, reinforces the status quo.

Empirical review

Unearthing the apparently hidden meanings of media texts has been a focus of a significant array of research. The aim of one of such as conducted by Devlieger and De Coster (2009) was to find out the multiple meanings of such disabilities as sexual impotence, albinism, blindness, deafness and difficulty in movement in African films. The study employed a semiotic analysis of the following films: Sembene Ousmane's *Xala* (1975), Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni* (1982), Falaba Issa Traore's *Gombele* (1994), Dan Koyate's *Keita* (1995), Djibril Diop Mambeti's *La Petite Vendeuse de Soleil* (1998) and Saadi Jilaani's *Khorma* (la bêtise) (2002). The researchers found that disability is understood as loss and also the possibility for regeneration in *Xala'* and as genuinely accepting gifts from God in *Wend Kuuni*. They also found out the ordinariness of disabled people and how people have misguided perceptions about them in *Gombele*. Disability was also found to be an overcoming of barriers in *Keita*, an enlightenment for a rather dark world in *La Petite Vendeuse de Soleil*, and positive despite people's disruptive tendencies in *Khorma*.

Cartoons can be used to satirize. This is evident in findings from a study conducted by Sani et al. (2012). The study aimed at analyzing the linguistic elements used in cartoon written texts to illustrate how Nigerian cartoonists specially use language to construct satire as a means that could be used to initiate positive social and political reforms in Nigeria. Findings from the study showed that Nigerian cartoonists use interjections frequently in the cartoon written texts to create satirical impressions about political leaders. Cartoons can also convey societal perception. This was shown in a study conducted by Ulubeyli, Arslan and Kivrak (2015) aimed at finding out society's perception of the responsibility of workers for occupa-

tional health and safety as presented in cartoons. The study involved a semiotic analysis of seven cartoons exhibited in the International Construction Accidents Contest held in Turkey. Findings from the analysis showed that construction-based occupational health and safety perceptions of countries as shown in these cartoons did not change significantly and that workers were perceived as being careless about safety.

The focus of such scholars as Turkmen (2016) was on animated films specifically. The researcher employed content analysis with the aim of uncovering violent acts in 23 of such films which were chosen from a list of 100 most popular films of all-time. The content of the films was examined using categorical and frequency analysis, and the number of violent actions was used as the unit of analysis. Findings from the analysis showed that 1, 245 violent acts were recorded in the 23 films. There was an average of 54 violent acts in each film – one violent act was shown, on average, every 1.7 minutes. When the form of the characters perpetrating acts of violence in the films was investigated, findings showed that 540 violent acts (43.4%) were by characters in animal form, 268 (21.5%) by characters in fantastic form, 88 (7.1%) by those in form of creatures or monsters, and 349 (28%) by human characters. With regards to the gender of characters committing the acts of violence, findings from the analysis showed that 65.9% were carried out by men, 13.8% by women, 8.8% by a group and 11.5% by unknown gender. The researcher concluded that parents who wish to protect their children from violent content should watch and check films prior to their children viewing them; obtain information from magazines, television programs, and the internet and watch films together with the children, comment and answer questions while doing so, as it would aid children in separating fantasy from reality. The author added that film studios and production companies should be more responsive and careful about the content of their animated films and cartoons. The need for such proactive measures rises when considering that violent content in animated films, according to American Psychiatric Association, as cited by the researcher, can make children who are exposed to it perceive the world as a dark and bad place.

In another study, Lawson and Fouts (2004) examined the prevalence of verbalizations about mental health in animated feature films of Walt Disney Company. The researchers coded 34 of these films for mental health references. Findings from the study showed that 85% of the films contain verbal references to mental illness, with an average of 4.6 references per film. According to the researchers, some characters were distinguished and denigrated by these references. They concluded that these findings have implications for child viewers in terms of their potentially learning prejudicial attitudes and distancing behaviors toward individuals perceived as being mentally ill.

The purpose of a study conducted by Fouts et al. (2006) was to access the prevalence of demonization in two major media used by young children – television and movies. Two content analyses were conducted using 34 animated feature films by Walt Disney Company and 41 after-school cartoons. Each was coded for the modelling of the use of such words as 'monster', 'devil', 'demon' and 'wicked'. Findings from the analysis showed that 74% of the Disney films contained verbal references or the modelling of demonizing, with an average of 5.6 references per film. Results from the study also showed that 44% of the after-school television cartoons contained the modelling of demonizing, with the average of one demonizing reference in one half-hour program. The study concluded that parents need to be aware of demonization in children's movies and should not only become their critical consumers, but also teach their children to analyze and evaluate the media so that they may be less vulnerable to the impact of messages demonizing others.

The literature shows that media texts, including cartoons and animated films especially, have been subject to research methods aimed at uncovering their apparently latent meanings. However, the focus of most of the reviewed studies has been on issues other than demonization. Though scholars like Fouts et al. (2006) looked at this issue, their study was not narrowed to racial demonization. In addition, there seems to be a paucity of evidence on apparently hidden meanings in 3D animation films that does not correspond with the rate at which they are churned out yearly with the aid of advancements in computer technology and special digital effects. Hence, the present study's semiotic analysis is aimed at highlighting the presence or absence (as the case may be) of racial demonizing content and meanings in *Frankenweenie* and hopes to contribute some evidence in this regard.

Theoretical framework: The psychoanalytic film theory

In this study, we explore the psychoanalytic film theory as a framework upon which early analyses of films were based and to see the connections this may have for the present study. According to McGowan (2011), Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, and Laura Mulvey were the main figures in the first wave of psychoanalytic film theory which began in the late 1960s and early 1970s and focused on a formal critique of cinema's dissemination of ideology. These scholars took their primary inspiration from the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, and they most often read Lacan through the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's account of subject formation (McGowan, 2011). Early applications of psychoanalysis to cinema focused on unmasking the latent meanings behind screen images, before they were considered as representations of fantasy (Lapsley & Westlake, 2006).

The second wave of psychoanalytic film theory, which had its main proponents as Joan Copjec and Slavoj Zizek, also had its basis in Lacan's thought, though with a significantly different emphasis. Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the second wave of psychoanalytic film theory, shifted the focus from cinema's ideological work to the relationship between cinema and a trauma that disrupts the functioning of ideology. Psychoanalytic film theorists continue to discuss cinema's relationship to ideology but have ceased looking for ideology in the cinematic apparatus itself but in filmic structure instead (McGowan, 2015).

According to Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis (2005), the 'imaginary signifier' is in a way the primary text of psychoanalytic film theory. The scholars suggest that the theory acknowledges the ability and choice of the spectator to see a film whichever way he/she chooses to see it. They chose to present the psychoanalytic film theory to justify the freedom to make meaning of text and acknowledge the rich insights such textual analysts as Christian Metz have brought to the understanding of media texts and how the latent meanings that lay in them can be exhumed.

Methodology: Making textual meaning

This study focuses on *Frankenweenie* because Disney, the producer of the animation film, is a major global producer of full-length animated feature films that children watch in large numbers (Giroux, 1999). Secondly, full-length animation films make for the establishment

of its characters. In these films, characters and their roles are well defined, letting the audience to know or suggest who they really are; "thus, feature-length movies likely foster a greater sense of familiarity and identification with the characters, thereby creating a situation in which the happenings, emotions, and potential lessons in a movie may have a greater impact on children than any other medium" (Fouts et al., 2006, p.16).

This study adopts a Barthesian approach to semiotics in a bid to uncover the hidden signs demonizing 'people of color'. The study also makes the assumption that animation films provide lines of power on which the dominant groups in a society can peg ideology and as well reinforce hegemony. Ideological approach was followed in data analysis. Ekwenchi, Adum and Uzuegbunam (2013) highlight the beauty of ideological analysis when they state that:

> Within the ideological approach the critical reader is thus afforded the freedom not only to explore the possible meanings that might be embedded in the texts without having to worry about the restraints which coding would have placed on him/her, it also offers such a reader the freedom to be a creative meaning producer (p.168).

This study highlights the role of the critical reader in revealing the concealed messages in texts, while marginalizing that of the active media audience. According to Ekwenchi, Adum and Uzuegbunam (2013), this is a methodological decision that will, no doubt, stir up all the old scholarly arguments about location of textual meaning and the central role of the active audience in meaning production. For Gripsrud (1995), there is no point for scholars to undergo rigorous academic training to acquire the necessary skills for textual criticism if media audiences can be competent critical readers of media texts.

The first step in reading the selected text, *Frankenweenie*, was watching the animation film six (6) times. The next step was to select 'very important portions' which bore the chunk of the messages the filmmaker conveys. Johnstone (2008) describes this process as 'entextualization' which allows the analyst to make choices about how chunks can be selected and delimited out of the flow of talk or writing. The study looked out for scenes/sequences that showed characters as playing roles that could be described as demonizing. All characters' actions including words and gestures were studied. A plot summary was then presented alongside the denotative and connotative meanings in the film. The signifiers made up the denotative while the signified were the connotative. The next step was the interpretation of ideology as produced by Disney and Tim Burton in *Frankenweenie*.

Data presentation

Character demonization

This study sought to find out various acts that demonized the major animated human characters in *Frankenweenie*. The acts that were categorized as demonizing were those that depicted confrontation, wickedness, blackmail, use of frightful/violent words/tone, mischievous gesture/laughter, arrogance/rudeness, intrusion and selfishness. A total of 27 acts that depicted demonization were recorded.

Table 1. Character demonization.

Demonizing action	Victor	Nassor	Toshiaki	Mr. Franken-stein	Mrs. Franken-stein	Mr. Burger meister	Edgar	Total
Confrontation	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	**3**
Wickedness	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	**4**
Blackmail	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	**1**
Frightful/violent words/tone	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	**5**
Mischievous gesture	0	0	5	0	0	0	1	**6**
Mischievous laughter	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	**1**
Arrogance/ Rudeness	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	**3**
Intrusion	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	**3**
Selfishness	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	**2**
Total	N=0 0%	N=7 0%	N=14 26%	N=0 0%	N=0 0%	N=3 11%	N=3 11%	N=27 100%

Table 1 presents data on the frequency of demonizing acts and the characters involved. As shown in the table, a total of 27 of these acts as it involved the major human characters in the animated film were recorded. The table shows that Toshiaki (a boy who appeared to be of Japanese descent) was involved in 52% (n=14) of the demonizing acts, followed by Nassor (a boy who appeared to be of Egyptian descent) who was involved in 26% (n=7). In addition, Mr. Burgermeister and Edgar were each involved in 11% (n=3) of the demonizing acts However, Victor, Mr. Frankenstein and Mrs. Frankenstein were not involved in any demonizing act. The results showed that Toshiaki and Nassor alone were involved in 78% (n=21) of the demonizing acts highlighted in this study and suggested that they were deliberately demonized to show them as antagonists and contrasting from the other characters in the film.

Plot summary

Frankenweenie is a 2012 American 3D horror comedy produced by Walt Disney Pictures and directed by Tim Burton, an American. In the plot, Victor, a young filmmaker and scientist who lives with his parents in a town called New Holland, loses his dog named Sparky. Inspired by his science teacher, Mr. Rzykruski's demonstration of the effect of electricity on a dead frog, Victor digs up Sparky's corpse, brings him to his makeshift laboratory and brings it back to life with lightning. He is then blackmailed by Edgar, his peer, into revealing how

his deceased pet was resurrected. The two reanimate a dead goldfish, which turns invisible due to an error with the experiment. Excited Edgar brags about the fish to Toshiaki and Bob which inspires them to make a rocket out of soda bottles. Bob is strapped to the improvised rocket by Toshiaki which causes him to break his arm, and Mr. Rzykruski is blamed and fired for inspiring children to involve in deadly experiments.

Edgar is confronted by Toshiaki, Nassor and Bob on the baseball field at school and he accidentally reveals Victor's secrets, inspiring them to try resurrecting dead animals with electricity themselves. Victor's parents discover Sparky in the attic and are frightened, causing the dog to flee, and while they go in search for Sparky, Victor's classmates invade the lab, discovering Victor's reanimation formula. The classmates separately perform their experiments, which go wrong and turn the dead animals into monsters. Mr. Whiskers holds a dead bat while it is electrocuted, resulting in him fusing with it and becoming a monstrous bat-cat with wings and fangs. Edgar turns a dead rat he found in the garbage into a monster rat, Nassor revives his mummified hamster, Colossus and Toshiaki's turtle Shelley is turned into a giant Dinosaur-like monster. Bob's Sea-Monkeys grow into amphibious humanoids. The monsters break loose into the town fair where they wreak havoc. After finding Sparky at the town's pet cemetery, Victor sees the monsters heading to the fair and goes with his classmates to help deal with them.

Reading 1: The syntagmatic and paradigmatic

Syntagma in film deals with the combination of sound, images and other filmic elements to form a narration. These elements may not make meaning when they stand on their own the same way a shirt, trouser, shoe, tie and hat may not make meaning individually until they come together to form a dress code. Paradigma, on the other hand, has to do with choices and omissions or absences. In film, a certain sound, color and character may be chosen over others to achieve desired results. Through paradigmatic and syntagmatic operations, films can produce discourse (Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis, 2005).

Frankenweenie is not bereft of syntagmatic and paradigmatic operations. In fact, these operations are what form the messages conveyed by the producer and director. The evil perpetuated by Toshiaki and Nassor is in syntagma with their persona (that of rudeness and arrogance which is very evident in Nassor's never-to-smile face), the lightening and the pet cemetery which all combine to give the film the frightening, gothic look the producer and director may have intended to achieve. In this frightening gothic look, Toshaiki and Nassor's evilness glares. The 'weird girl' owns a cat and cats have been combined syntagmatically with characters in such Disney animation films as *Cinderella* and *Alice in Wonderland* to complete an evil persona. Cinderella's wicked step-mother, Lady Tremaine has a cat named Lucifer and the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland,* has Cheshire Cat. On the other hand, Sparky the dog, is in syntagma with such ideal families as the Frankensteins. Dogs are kind, loving and adorable just like the family that owns them. In addition, Victor's small science laboratory shows that he is very interested in science and his sense of dressing is in syntagma with his persona – that of a good and lovable child.

Paradigmatic manipulations in Disney animation movies are not new. According to Edgerton and Jackson (1994), Disney narratives feature some characters, events, and perspectives, instead of others, in order to entertain and to communicate a particular meaning. They add that Disney presents some characters and events as more entertaining, dramatic, humorous,

or enlightening, while suppressing other characters or events as less important, less enter-taining, indeed uninteresting, even boring. Disney can also present some characters in a neg-ative light instead of others, the way it did Toshiaki and Nassor, who are 'children of color' instead of the other characters. They choose to present a 'white American' family, the Franken-steins, as the ideal American family when an African-American, Asian-America, Native-American or Hispanic-American family could have been presented instead. This sort of choice which sidelines the representation of 'people of color' in a positive light has marked how they are being represented in mainstream American media over the years, and is a compo-nent of a sort of media bias. The paradigmatic absences left after the choices have been made are such that seem to favour the 'whites' both in frequency and manner of representation. As Weaver (2016) suggests, 'people of colour' seem underrepresented in the media compared to the 'whites'; and even when they are represented, the portrayals are most times negative and bereft of nuances.

Reading 2: The Denotative and Connotative

The plot of *Frankenweenie*, a typical 'good triumphs over evil in the end' storyline and all the filmic aesthetics that make it up may just be the filmmaker's preferred reading. On a cursory look, one sees the signifiers or the forms which the signs take in the animation film. They include the storyline itself, the characters (Victor Frankenstein, Ben Frankenstein, Su-san Frankenstein, Sparky, Nassor, Toshiaki, Rzykruski, Elsa Van Helsing, Sparky, Persephone, Bob, Edgar, Mr. Whiskers, Mr. Burgermeister, Colossus, Shelley), the soundtracks, 'black and white' pictures, language, scenes and visual effects. All these signifiers invent all the de-notative meanings the film has.

These signifiers must be combined with the signified for the signs or meaning to emerge. On the one hand, the Frankenstein family – Ben, Susan and Victor Frankenstein – is a repre-sentation of 'white America'. They speak in a 'General American' accent which Disney, ac-cording to Sønnesyn (2011) have used to portray heroes/heroines in their animations over the years. Victor's family is very accommodating, and this may be what Disney and Tim Burton intend to tell about America – loving and hospitable. Edgar, Victor's friend is allowed to come to Victor's house anytime he chooses. He interacts freely with Mrs. Frankenstein and can tell her about Victor's secret. Edgar is so comfortable around Mrs. Frankenstein he even asks her for a cookie. In addition, Victor is willing to teach Edgar his science in his makeshift labora-tory. His willingness seems to connote America's willingness to teach people its science – per-haps the reason why its educational system is open to international students who are keen and privileged to migrate.

On the other hand, Toshiaki is selfish, rude, sinister, conniving, and arrogant. He always says, "I know" but ends up causing havoc. He forced Bob to an improvised rocket experi-ment which led to his injury. Nassor, his ally has a frown perpetually stamped on his face. He is also selfish, rude and power hungry. These traits seem to paint 'people of color' as evil since these characters were created to represent them. These demonizing traits tell of a racist ideology which is the basis of the negative perception and maltreatment of 'people of color' in America. This ideology, in turn, inspires the negative portrayal of 'people of color' in an-imation media like the portrayal of the hyenas that speak in an inner city African-American dialect in Disney's *Lion King* as treacherous and evil Uncle Scar's black mane. Interesting-ly, these demonizing portrayals of 'people of color' in animated films can help sustain this

racist ideology as they can serve as a subtle reminder to children and even adults that there exists a certain class of people who are capable of evil and should be avoided. As King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2010) note, racialization in animated films serve as a tool to teach children to maintain racial ideologies and by so doing, reinforces the status quo.

Discussion

Findings after the semiotic analysis revealed the following signifiers: the storyline itself (which ran for 1h:27m), the characters (Victor Frankenstein, Ben Frankenstein, Susan Frankenstein, Sparky, Nassor, Toshiaki, Rzykruski, Elsa Van Helsing, Sparky, Persephone, Edgar, Bob, Mr. Whiskers, Mr. Burgermeister, Colossus, Shelley), the soundtracks, 'black and white' scenes, English language, 3D scenes and visual effects. All these signs combined with the signified to make meaning.

Findings from the study revealed Disney's presentation of the Frankensteins, which seem to stand for America's perception of a good family – one consisting of a father, mother and few children (a child in this case) who can be well-catered for. America's perception of an ideal school setting – that which encourages children to practice science – also seemed to be presented in the animated film. Cartoons generally, are shown to be conveyors of society's enduring ideologies and perceptions in other studies (Devlieger & De Coster, 2009; Ulubeyli, Arslan & Kivrak, 2015).

The study found that racial demonization was perpetrated in the way Toshiaki and Nassor who appear to be of Japanese and Egyptian descents respectively, were portrayed. The evil activities were scripted to be in syntagma with their persona, the lightening and the pet cemetery all combine to give the film the frightening, gothic image the producer and director may have intended to achieve. In this frightening, gothic image, one could see their evilness – Toshiaki forcefully straps Bob to a rocket made from soda bottles, which causes him to break his arm and Mr. Rzykruski is blamed and fired for inspiring children to involve in deadly experiments. Toshiaki and Nassor also confront Edgar and force him to reveal Victor's secrets which inspire them to try resurrecting dead animals with electricity themselves. They lead an invasion into Victor's lab, discovering his reanimation formula. Findings from this study also showed a contrast between Victor, a well-meaning, well-mannered child and evil children such as Toshiaki and Nassor. This contrast served as a technique for demonizing Toshiaki and Nassor. Placing two contrasting personalities side-by-side helps in the seemingly intended racial othering, to clearly highlight what each of them represents, and when any stands for evil, the 'evilness' becomes even more blatant. Demonization is not strange in Disney animated films. It is also shown in studies such as the one conducted by Fouts et al. (2006) though not regarding race.

The two objects of racial demonization in the animated film analyzed, Toshiaki and Nassor are boys. Male gender has also been shown as the dominant objects of negative portrayal in another study but regarding violent acts this time (Turkmen, 2016). These findings seem to suggest that males are key actors when it comes to negative occurrences in society or are perhaps deemed best 'models' for highlighting societal perceptions, misconceptions and prejudices due to the importance that patriarchy and traditional hyper masculinities force on them.

From the findings, it could be deduced that the negative portrayal of 'people of color' or other characters that represent them by American film producers and directors seem reoccurring. This gives credence to the argument by such scholars as King, Lugo-Lugo and Blood-

sworth-Lugo (2010) that Disney's attitude towards 'people of color' with regards to negative portrayal has not changed much along the years. However, this sort of portrayal may not emanate from their individual consciousness or intention but can be driven by a racist ideology. According to Hall (1981), ideological statements are made by individuals, but ideologies are not the product of individual consciousness or intention; rather, individuals formulate their intentions within ideology and speak through ideologies which are active in their society and which helps them to make sense of social relations and their places in them.

Disney has over the years become good at producing cultural products in form of animation films that serve as purveyor of American ideological beliefs. Mitchell (1995) strengthens this argument by stating that a popular cartoon must draw its material from the cultural reality of a large percentage of the population. The way the company projects America's capitalist ideology seems to be the same way it has projected its racist ideology by demonizing minorities, and *Frankenweenie* is arguably a classic example of where it has done so. Animations could therefore be thought-of as mirroring the American state-of-mind.

A racist ideology makes a society paint negative pictures about a certain group of people. This is what Disney and Tim Burton, as representatives of America, may have done in *Frankenweenie*. Toshiaki, a boy of Asian descent is shown as being sinister. This was illustrated when he decides to forcefully strap Bob to a small rocket and launch it off the roof in a bid to win the science fair. Toshiaki seems to embody every negative stereotype against Asian-Americans. The demonization of Nassor, a boy of Egyptian descent, who often wears a sad look on his face, seems to suggest, and feeds into the often pessimistic and stereotypical image which Africa as a continent has in America and Europe for a long time.

Furthermore, *Frankenweenie* seems to present America's cynical view of the use of science by some countries. It seems to suggest that only 'whites' can use science for the benefit of humans, while 'people of color' will use it to cause harm. While Toshiaki and Nassor used science to reanimate monsters that caused havoc in New Holland, Victor used it to reanimate his harmless and friendly dog, Sparky, and also to destroy the monsters. America has for some time beamed its lenses on some countries actively involved in nuclear science as if to suggest that they may pose a threat to the world. *Frankenweenie* seems to highlight an aspect of this American 'police of the world' ideology which harps on the deadly uses of science by other countries (especially Asian and Islamic countries) and why they must be stopped. It is perhaps not coincidental that Nassor is from Egypt which is predominantly Muslim and Toshiaki is Asian.

In addition, *Frankenweenie* presents what seems like America's stance on illegal migration. As Toshiaiki and Nassor lead the other children to sneak into Victor's laboratory to learn his science and eventually cause problems, the film seems to suggest that there is a likelihood that 'people of color' may sneak into America for nothing but to create havoc. This sort of depiction as Fouts et al. (2006) suggest, can influence attitudes and behaviors, cause victimizations, breed low self-esteem, alter perceptions of reality, and reinforce racial stereotypes.

Conclusion

Disney has over the years served as the mirror of American ideology. Through animated films, it projects American ideologies in several aspects of life. Though Disney and the directors that work with them act individually, they seem to be propelled by ideologies shared by the

'white American' society as a whole. One of such ideologies that may have inspired their works appears racist and has been animated and disseminated through *Frankenweenie*, and by so doing, demonizing 'people of color'. Toshiaki and Nassor, characters who appear to be Asian-American and African-American, respectively, serve as the canvas for all the bad pictures Disney and Tim Burton seem to paint about 'people of color'. They appear to be robed with evil personas, so they can play roles that reflect the misconceptions of the racist ideology.

Although the filmmaker may claim that it is reality being painted, greater concern should be on the adverse effects of such racial demonization on children and even adults, especially those found in regions such as Africa where there are not many local animated film companies that can produce content to counter negative racial stereotypes. Of course, these cultural products emanating from America remain quite popular, amassing wide viewership from cable television and the Internet. The implication of a repeated exposure to racial demonization especially in such climes as Nigeria – the most populous African country – is that children therein may begin to perceive 'white Americans' as superior to 'people of color' since the ideas and actions of animated film characters that represent them culminate into the good that always triumphs over evil. They may then begin to watch animated films with the expectation that 'white' should be protagonist and good, and any other color should be the evil antagonist that must be defeated in the end. All these may contribute to the reinforcement of the ideology of white supremacy which not only suggests that 'whites' are superior and more well-meaning, but tries to make 'people of color' believe so through negative media portrayals.

Qualitative research approaches such as semiotics let critical observers see demonization and stereotypes in every guise in creative works, empowering them to see beyond film aesthetics and ultimately become more media literate than ever before. For instance, according to Turkmen (2016), parents should watch these films with their children, and let them know that racial stereotypes in animated films are not always real-life representations; one animation film character is not enough to represent an entire race, and good and bad people cut across all races. The sort of empowerment made possible through semiotic analysis could lead to knowledge and understanding of demonization of 'people of colour' in films and other media texts, which in turn is an important starting point for censorship and advocacies against it.

Acknowledgement

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest in researching and writing this paper.

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