Research Report

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Title of Research: The Animated Text: Definition, Analysis and Affordances

Purpose of Research: (400 words)

The aim of the proposed research is to offer a theoretical-historical study of animation. This study will focus on a group of animated texts that were produced in the United States from the first industrial animated shorts produced in the beginning of the twentieth century, up to the release of the "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" feature in 1938, and a group of animated texts created in Japan from the (surviving) independent works produced in the late 1920s to the release of the "Momotaro Umi no Shinpei" feature in 1945. The analysis will be undertaken from a technological-textual perspective, demonstrating how the selected texts have contributed to shape the concept of "animation" in both the United States and Japan. By examining the concept in both cultures – both considered today as leading in the global animation industry – through their early animated products, the research will attempt to construct a general academic definition for animation as a text and an analysis method for such text that can be applied to animated texts from other cultures as well. Such universal definition and analysis method for animation does not yet exist in academic literature, and once constructed, will greatly advance the academic study of animation as both art and as a social and cultural product. It will also demonstrate how the process in which Japan became an industry leader in animation is deeply rooted within the country's very first animated productions, and even earlier, in the country's traditional arts. The research will also show how the mutual relationship between the American and the Japanese animation industries are also rooted historically in the early years of animation production in both countries.

Content/Methodology of Research: (800 words)

As noted above, the proposed research will examine, based on theoretical principals from semiotic, technological, art and cinema studies, two groups of early 20th-century animated texts – one from the United States and one from Japan. The aim of this comparative examination is to demonstrate how technical changes in production, both in the United States and Japan, shaped the characteristics of
animation in both states, and led, in both style and contents, to the common cultural perception of what "animation" is. For this reason, the choice of items for the analyzed corpus is based upon the pioneering of new techniques adopted for them, such as sound, color, and issues of design. Among the American corpus, items are chosen from the works of early animators, to the leading studios of the day – from J. Stuart Blackton and Winsor McCay to the works of the Bray, Fleischer and Disney studios, demonstrating how American animation went through its development from "attraction" through "gag" to "narrative". Among the Japanese corpus, items are chosen from the works of individual animators (who worked for studios, yet their individual style is evident in their work), from Noboru Ofuji and Yasuji Murata to Mitsuyo Seo, demonstrating how Japanese animation slowly adopted elements from foreign (mostly American) animation – for example, in moving from paper-cutouts to hand-drawn cells – and how this led to the familiar aesthetic of Japanese animation today.

While most of the items planned for the American corpus are readily available for home-viewing, some items planned for the Japanese corpus are not yet available for such viewing, and are accessible in film-archives in Japan alone – notably pre-1928 animated shorts, and some war-era productions. By accessing both film and document archive in Japan, I have managed to gain access to the corpus items and relevant documents, with the generous help of the Matsushita International Foundation.

**Conclusion/Observation (400 words)**

With the generous help of the Matsushita foundation, I have traveled to Japan for a period of three weeks, during which I have gone over the archive of animated films and books at the Suginami animation museum in Tokyo, and watched a film from the library of the Ryukoku University in Kyoto. A visit to the manga museum in Kyoto also provided me with context about popular trends in design between the 1920s and the 1940s. The main object of the research, however, remained the animated films of the same period, and my visit to Japan enabled me to view many such films that are otherwise unavailable.

One working assumption, based on my familiarity with such animated films before the visit, was that American influence on Japanese animation before and during World War II became more and more dominant as time progressed. A key finding following the visit was that while this assumption is
superficially correct, a closer review of the Japanese animated films from the period reveals a different picture. Early available Japanese animated films (from mid-to-late 1920s) show very little American influence, incorporating techniques that were not common in American animation, such as the usage of paper cutouts, that could be considered technically inferior to American cell animation. However, the narratives of Japanese animation at the time were far more complex than most American animated products, with structured stories and defined characters, as opposed to the stream of gags common in early American animation.

On the other hand, from the 1930s to the mid-1940s, usage of cell animation and American-style design has increased significantly in Japanese animation. However, the narrative qualities of these films weakened, just as their were taking stronger form in American animation: Japanese animators began using animation as a showpiece for spectacles, rather than a storytelling device, perhaps most evident in the episodic nature of the first Japanese animated feature "Momotaro Umi no Shinpei" (1945), when compared to the first American animated feature "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (1937).

This is my major finding upon which my further analysis will be based.