

Rethinking Multiculturalism in Animated Film: a case study of the Big Hero 6

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Abstract:

In the contemporary animated industry, multiculturalism has been embraced and practiced. Despite progress with the sensitivity of diversity, the North American animation industry still has the tendency to oversimplify racial struggles and veil identity politics present in current global society. This research explores multiculturalism in animated films, focusing on how it is represented and why it matters in shaping cultural perceptions. It becomes clear that this representation shapes cultural understanding, reinforces or challenges stereotypes, and even influences how individuals perceive themselves and others across different cultures. While contemporary animation projects embrace multiculturalism as a way to reach a global audience, racial struggles and identity politics are often oversimplified or obscured. Through a semiotic analysis, this essay will examine the film *Big Hero 6*, to decode cultural symbols, character portrayals, and visual elements. This study found that although *Big Hero 6* integrates multiculturalism more successfully than other films by naturally blending cultural elements, the seamless cohesion of cultures actually results in a superficial representation of multiculturalism. However, as argued, this film still relies on stereotypes and cultural shorthand to appeal to a wider audience. This research underscores the importance of mindful representation and critiques how, despite growing efforts toward inclusiveness, animated films can still perpetuate simplistic cultural narratives.

Keywords: animated film; multiculturalism; Big Hero 6; cultural inclusiveness

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world marked by intensive cultural exchange, media convergence, and immigration, the representation of people from diverse ethnicities, cultures, and languages has become more prevalent in the global film industry. Among all me-

dia products, films play a crucial role in introducing different cultures to audiences worldwide, regardless of geographical barriers. For instance, animated films such as DreamWorks Animation's *Kung Fu Panda* and Disney's *Mulan*, with their broad appeal and influence, significantly shape perceptions of Chinese people and culture among non-Chinese-speaking

audiences. Historically, racial representation in animation has often been controversial, reflecting how white supremacy has been perpetuated through the film industry and disseminated globally [1]. Multiculturalism offers a critical lens for analyzing these portrayals over time [2]. By examining animation through this framework, one could gain a deeper understanding of how representation influences and reflects racial dynamics.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Multiculturalism as a Critical Lens

Multiculturalism, as a theoretical framework, emphasizes the importance of diverse cultural perspectives and offers insights into how cultures coexist in society. As a political philosophy, multiculturalism encompasses various ideologies and policies, which have been described metaphorically as a 'salad bowl' or a 'cultural mosaic,' in contrast to a 'melting pot [3,4].' The 'cultural mosaic,' a model particularly associated with Canadian multiculturalism, celebrates cultural diversity by recognizing each culture's unique contribution to maintaining social cohesion [5]. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing visual arts, including animation, as it allows for a deeper examination of how racial and cultural identities are portrayed. By applying multiculturalism, we can critique how animation either reinforces or subverts stereotypes and explore the broader implications for viewers' understanding of race and identity.

2.2 Racial Misrepresentation in Film Industry

Racial misrepresentation has been a long-standing issue in the visual arts. Historically, Hollywood and global animation industries have perpetuated racial stereotypes through exaggerated and often demeaning portrayals. For instance, early animated characters like Mickey Mouse and other anthropomorphized figures in Warner Bros. cartoons were frequently racial caricatures, reflecting the prejudices of their time. Comedy of past eras often relied on these exaggerated stereotypes, with little awareness of the harm they caused. Characters like Speedy Gonzales from Warner Bros., originally created as a Mexican stereotype with exaggerated traits like a thick accent and sombrero, reinforced negative cultural perceptions. The use of exaggerated and stereotypical depictions of racial minorities in animation can be traced back to the early 20th century, particularly the 1920s through the 1940s. Cartoons like *Steamboat Willie* (1928) and *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs* (1943) exemplify how racial caricatures were normalized in popular media [6]. Alongside other forms

of entertainment, such as minstrel shows that mocked African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, and other minorities, these animated portrayals mirrored the prevailing racist attitudes of the time. While this trend began to wane in the 1950s and 1960s as societal views on race evolved, its legacy persisted in reruns and lingering cultural attitudes. By the 1970s and 1980s, growing criticism led to more conscious efforts to revise or ban the re-airing of such content.

Over time, these reductive portrayals have faced criticism, and studios have acknowledged their problematic nature [7]. As the animation industry evolves, so does the conversation around racial representation, although this progress has been slow and uneven. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift toward more nuanced and diverse portrayals, particularly with animated characters. For instance, the character Raya in Disney's *Raya and the Last Dragon* was developed with input from cultural consultants to ensure a more accurate representation of Southeast Asian people and cultures. Despite these efforts, many character portrayals still oscillate between authentic representation and stereotypes due to a lack of depth or nuance. By examining modern animated films through the lens of multiculturalism, it becomes clear that contemporary animation studios have sought to address issues highlighted by academic critiques and popular feedback, striving for a more inclusive depiction of race and culture. However, challenges remain, such as avoiding the pitfalls of tokenism and superficial diversity. Incorporating diverse cultural elements into films within the American-based industrialized film industry poses significant challenges. Authentic representation of each culture for a global audience is crucial yet complex, necessitating a delicate balance between artistic integrity and market demands. The ambition to create multicultural animated films drives producers to explore cultural perspectives beyond the American viewpoint.

2.3 Big Hero 6 as a Multicultural Film

The use of language, setting, characters, and animation style in *Big Hero 6* reveals both the progress and challenges in creating entertainment with authentic cultural representation. Directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams and released in 2014 by Walt Disney Animation Studios, *Big Hero 6* attempts to balance the demands of a genuine multicultural experience with the commercial interests of global box office results. Although the film is inspired by a lesser-known Marvel Comics series of the same name, it represents a significant departure from the typical hero formula, adapting the narrative to resonate with modern global audiences. Set in the fictional city of

San Fransokyo, the story follows the protagonist, Hiro Hamada, a 14-year-old robotics prodigy, who teams up with his inflatable healthcare robot, Baymax, and a group of friends to uncover the mystery behind his brother's death. Together, they form a superhero team to confront the film's mysterious villain. While the movie is widely accessible and entertaining to a global audience, *Big Hero 6* distinguishes itself by embedding multicultural themes into the very fabric of the story. From its characters to its setting and visual design, the film reflects a rich interplay between American and Asian cultural elements. However, despite these successes, the blend of Eastern and Western influences raises questions about cultural authenticity.

One of the more compelling aspects of *Big Hero 6* is how it navigates the tension between cultural authenticity and the dominant Americanized film culture. As mentioned earlier, Hollywood films, particularly animated ones, often face criticism for appropriating or misrepresenting non-Western cultures. In *Big Hero 6*, the blending of cultures is presented in a way that feels more collaborative than appropriative. The film avoids reducing Japanese culture to mere exoticism or cultural shorthand, instead integrating it into the story in a more respectful manner. *Big Hero 6* incorporates Japanese culture through the design of San Fransokyo, a creative blend of San Francisco and Tokyo. The elements from both cities come together to create a cohesive cultural representation. This respectful integration helps to avoid stereotypes while adding cultural elements without relying on clichés. Although many characters come from diverse ethnic backgrounds—such as Wasabi (an African American character), Gogo (Korean American), and Hiro (Japanese American)—the film does not heavily emphasize their racial identities. This approach maintains an inclusive narrative but raises questions about the depth of cultural representation. The film does not deeply explore the characters' ethnic backgrounds or cultural histories; instead, it unifies them through their intelligence and problem-solving abilities, which transcend ethnic stereotypes. This reflects the film's attempt to balance cultural authenticity with the demands of producing a globally marketable, Americanized narrative.

3. Multiculturalism in Movie Production

3.1 Multiculturalism in Film Industry

Incorporating diverse and authentic cultural elements into movies within the American-based industrialized film industry has proven a significant challenge. Efforts to

truthfully represent each culture to a global audience are crucial yet often complex, requiring a delicate balance between artistic integrity and market demands. The ambition to create multicultural animated films for a global audience drives producers to explore cultural approaches beyond the American perspective.

Producers of animation films strive to tackle this issue by incorporating more accurate and respectful depictions of cultural settings. Films such as Laika's *Kubo and the Two Strings* and Pixar's *Coco* showcase detailed and culturally specific environments that aim to honor their respective cultural connections. Additionally, the use of language, accents, and multilingualism can significantly impact how cultural identities are portrayed. Historically, animated characters who speak in accents or broken English are often used as negative stereotypes or to present a limited view of non-Western cultures, which can contribute to reinforcing harmful stereotypes and shape the audience's perceptions by devaluing those cultures. This not only perpetuates the 'othering' of certain groups, but it can also undermine the complexity and richness of their identities, which can lead to misunderstandings and biases that persist in society. Such portrayals can limit how some individuals from those cultures see themselves and how they are viewed by others. This can reinforce existing social inequalities.

Cultural authenticity in animation is a critical aspect of respectful representation. While there have been efforts to present more accurate and respectful portrayals of non-American cultures, some animations still fall into the trap of romanticizing or idealizing cultural experiences. Critiquing the utopian and romanticizing ideas through the multiculturalism lens highlights the need for animations to engage with cultural struggles in a more nuanced and authentic manner. It is essential for animated works to balance respect and accuracy with the realities of cultural experiences, avoiding both caricature and idealization. In contemporary animated films, the representation of multiculturalism often reflects an idyllic vision of society where cultural differences are seamlessly integrated and create a so-called "utopia." This portrayal, while appealing, can lead to a romanticization of racial struggles; it passes over the complexities and challenges that accompany true cultural integration. Utopian narratives in animation typically depict a world where individuals from diverse backgrounds coexist peacefully, collaborating to overcome obstacles and achieve shared goals.

3.2 Multiculturalism in *Big Hero 6*: Language, Setting, and Aesthetics

Language in *Big Hero 6* adds another subtle layer of mul-

ticulturalism to the film. While the movie is predominantly in English, Japanese phrases and cultural references are sprinkled throughout. Hiro and his brother Tadashi have Japanese names, and they occasionally interact with their aunt using phrases like “Itadakimasu,” a traditional expression used before eating. However, these moments are not the focal point but rather subtle markers of their Japanese heritage. Although the blending of languages is not central to the story, it reflects the globalized reality of cities like San Francisco and Tokyo, where bilingualism and cultural mixing are commonplace. While this exposure, by including simple Japanese phrases, can increase audience awareness of different languages, Hollywood could often play it safe by only incorporating surface-level elements of other cultures. However, realistic dialogue between characters speaking the same (non-English) language is still rare, and this reluctance to add more in can limit the potential for authentic cultural representation. Instead of fully embracing multilingualism, many films opt for a diluted version of cultural diversity, which feels more like tokenism than genuine inclusion. By doing so, Hollywood reinforces the dominance of English and minimizes the richness of linguistic diversity, missing opportunities for deeper cultural engagement.

The film’s setting of San Fransokyo acts as a visual manifestation of cultural balance. The opening aerial shots of the city showcase this fusion in its architecture: Victorian houses typical of San Francisco are fitted with distinctly Japanese rooftops, the city’s streets are lined with Japanese cherry blossom trees alongside Western-style trams, and neon signs in both English and Japanese dot the landscape. A scene that particularly highlights this balance occurs early on in the film, where Hiro and Tadashi are walking through the streets of San Fransokyo. The bustling cityscape features sushi restaurants next to burger joints, all set against the background of a skyline that mixes American skyscrapers with Japanese pagoda-style roofs. This combination of urban elements isn’t just the backdrop; it also embodies the multicultural essence of the film, where cultures are not in conflict but integrated seamlessly into a new hybrid world. The setting also serves as a metaphor for harmony that can be achieved once different cultures come together.

In terms of aesthetics, *Big Hero 6* draws heavily on both Japanese anime and Western animation traditions. The action sequences, in particular, are reminiscent of the fast-paced, highly stylized battles commonly seen in Japanese anime. Characters like Gogo, with her sleek, speed-based technology, seem directly inspired by anime archetypes. On the other hand, the narrative structure follows a more Western approach, adhering to the familiar arc of the hero’s journey—personal tragedy, growth, and ultimately

triumph. This blend of genres also raises questions about cultural authenticity. While the film borrows from Japanese pop culture aesthetics, it doesn’t fully commit to the narrative complexity or emotional depth often found in Japanese anime. Instead, it maintains the light action-comedy tone typical of Disney films, presenting a more accessible mainstream form of multiculturalism. This dynamic can perpetuate stereotypes and superficial understandings of cultural identities, as audiences may come to view these narratives as representative of an entire community rather than individual stories.

3.1 Critique: The Hidden Racial Struggle

The romanticization of racial struggles refers to the tendency to portray the challenges faced by racial and ethnic groups in a way that highlights resilience and triumph without fully addressing the structural issues at play []. *Big Hero 6*, for instance, presents the fictional city of San Fransokyo as a vibrant “melting pot” of cultures, where characters from various ethnic backgrounds work together to fight evil. The uplifting nature of this depiction can also create an unrealistic expectation of how multicultural societies operate. In reality, cultural integration involves navigating complex histories, power dynamics, and ongoing struggles for equity and representation. By presenting a sanitized version of these challenges, films like *Big Hero 6* oversimplify the lived experiences of individuals from marginalized communities.

In many animated films, characters may face adversity, such as discrimination or cultural misunderstanding, but these conflicts are often resolved quickly and neatly, reinforcing a narrative of individual heroism rather than acknowledging the broader societal forces contributing to these struggles. For example, while Hiro Hamada’s journey in *Big Hero 6* reflects themes of loss and growth, the film does not delve deeply into the complexities of his racial identity or the societal expectations he faces as a Japanese-American character. Instead, it emphasizes a more simplistic narrative of self-discovery and teamwork. This approach can diminish the gravity of real-life racial struggles, reducing them to mere plot points rather than exploring the systemic inequalities that persist in society. Moreover, the romanticization of racial struggles can lead to a commodification of cultural experiences, where the portrayal of diversity becomes a selling point rather than a genuine representation of lived realities.

The issue of racial and cultural representation in animation is complex and has evolved over time. Scholars and critics have examined various aspects of this topic, often focusing on how animated characters can either challenge or reinforce stereotypes. In traditional animation, charac-

ters from racial minorities were frequently depicted with exaggerated features and traits that reinforced harmful stereotypes. This reflected broader societal biases of their time period. These depictions not only entertained but also served to normalize these biases, further entrenching racist ideas in popular culture. By reinforcing stereotypes, early animations shaped how audiences could perceive societal attitudes long after their releases.

Modern animation has made steps toward more authentic and respectful representations by using cultural consultants to ensure accuracy and respect for cultures [9]. This approach aims to move away from stereotypes and toward more nuanced, multifaceted portrayals. Despite good intentions, challenges remain. Critics argue that even well-intentioned portrayals can sometimes fall short of genuine representation. There's a risk that characters are portrayed superficially or in a way that simplifies complex cultural identities. This can lead to a "sanitized" version of cultural experiences rather than a deeper understanding. For example, Disney's *Mulan* has been praised for its portrayal of a strong female protagonist but has also been criticized for simplifying Chinese culture and historical context [10]. Similarly, DreamWorks Animation's *Kung Fu Panda* has been both celebrated for its humor and criticized for reinforcing stereotypes through its characters. These oversimplifications and stereotypes can reduce complex and multifaceted cultures to easily digestible caricatures. When these are repeated to audiences that are exposed to such portrayals, they may come to view these limited representations as accurate or comprehensive, reinforcing shallow understandings of other cultures. This can lead to a narrow and sometimes distorted worldview, where real cultural diversity is flattened into a series of tropes and clichés, contributing to cultural misunderstandings and the persistence of stereotypes.

4. Conclusion

The rise of multiculturalism in animation is not just a reflection of our diverse, interconnected world but also a powerful tool for shaping cultural narratives. Animated films have the unique ability to bridge cultural divides, fostering greater understanding and appreciation by presenting a spectrum of identities, traditions, and values.

Meaningful representation is not merely about inclusion; it is about portraying these stories with depth and authenticity. *Big Hero 6* exemplifies how animation can balance cultural representation and universal appeal. By integrating American and Japanese cultural elements seamlessly into its setting, characters, and narrative, the film underscores the potential for animation to authentically represent a multicultural world without reducing these identities to mere plot devices. In doing so, *Big Hero 6* sets a compelling precedent for future animated films, demonstrating that global appeal and cultural integrity can coexist—and even thrive—in modern storytelling.

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