

Interactive Response between Film and Television Creation and Social Reality-- Taking the Evolution of Disney's Female Character Depiction as an Example

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Abstract:

As an important form of cultural expression, film and television creation has received widespread attention for its feedback and reflection on social reality. However, there are still shortcomings in accurately reflecting social changes. This article analyzes the evolution process of Disney's portrayal of female characters and the social reality interactive factors behind it. By comparing classic Disney animated characters with female characters in recent works, this article reveals significant changes experienced by female characters in their portrayal, including a shift from traditional passive roles to active, independent modern images. The analysis found that these changes not only reflect the evolution of society's expectations for gender roles, but also demonstrate the response of film and television creation to social norms. Based on this, this article suggests that film and television creators should actively integrate the concept of social progress, enhance their sense of social responsibility in their works, and better reflect the diversity and equality of contemporary society.

Keywords: Disney, film and television creation, female characters, social reality, gender roles

1. Introduction

Disney films, as an important part of popular culture, have long been not only entertainment works, but also reflections of social values, role models, and cultural evolution. Among them, the most significant is the portrayal of female character images, whose evolution not only reflects the changes of gender roles in society, but also responds to a wide range of social

expectations and cultural backgrounds.

The prototypes of Disney princesses, such as Snow White and Cinderella, initially embodied female ideals centered around beauty, elegance, and the pursuit of romantic love. These characters attract audiences with their timeless stories, while also reflecting that women are often seen as passive characters waiting to fulfill their expectations through marriage. However, with the change in social attitudes in the

second half of the 20th century, driven by gender equality movements and cultural diversity, the portrayal of female protagonists in Disney has also undergone changes [1].

The appearance of characters such as Ariel in “The Little Mermaid” and Mulan in “Mulan” marks an important transformation [2]. These female heroes have demonstrated autonomy, bravery, and a determination to challenge tradition, echoing the increasing pursuit of independence and autonomous decision-making abilities among women worldwide. The stories of these films begin to reflect a broader cultural dialogue involving self empowerment and the changing roles of women in society.

In contemporary times, Disney continues to innovate its female image through characters such as Elsa in Frozen and Mona in Ocean. These characters not only embrace diversity from different backgrounds and challenges, but also redefine the meaning of modern heroines, emphasizing the importance of self acceptance, resilience, and community. Their stories not only resonate with young audiences, but are also closely related to the increasing global concern for representation and inclusivity.

This article aims to explore the dynamic interaction between Disney film creation and the social dynamics it reflects and influences. By examining the evolution of Disney female characters from a historical and thematic perspective, this article aims to understand how these depictions both respond to and shape cultural perceptions of femininity, empowerment, and identity. In addition, this study will highlight the impact of this characterization on media influence, social responsibility of the entertainment industry, and the potential of narrative in promoting positive social change.

Through this exploration, this article aims to emphasize the profound influence of popular media in reflecting, challenging, and promoting social norms, thereby providing profound insights into shaping the collective consciousness.

2. The Evolutionary Characteristics of Disney Female Characters

Disney movies have undergone significant evolution in shaping female characters throughout their nearly century long history. This evolution not only reflects changes in social and cultural concepts, but also reflects Disney’s response to the development of female character roles and audience demands. The following will explore the three main stages of evolution of Disney female characters: early classic characters, the rise of the second wave of female characters, and the modern shaping of contemporary female characters.

2.1 Early Classic Character Features

Disney’s early classic characters were mainly concentrated in the 1920s to 1950s, during which female characters often shared some common characteristics. Typical characters include Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty. These characters demonstrate the general expectations of women in society at that time [3].

During this period, the mainstream ideology of society was deeply influenced by traditional gender roles, and women were widely expected to play the core role in the family, with their social status and personal development limited. After the Great Depression and two World Wars, society’s expectations of women gradually shifted towards traditional family roles, which deeply influenced literary creation and film and television performance at that time.

These early female characters typically had the following characteristics. The first characteristic is dependency, as they often rely on male characters for rescue, limiting their own actions and decision-making abilities. For example, the stories of Snow White and Cinderella both end with them being rescued by male characters and ultimately living happily ever after. The second characteristic can be summarized as virtues and obedience, which often represent the societal expectations of women’s virtues at that time, such as gentleness, kindness, and obedience. They usually win ultimate happiness through selfless behavior and pure character. The third characteristic is that the positioning of Disney female characters is too traditional, mainly set as caregivers or passive recipients in the family, rather than active changers.

The design and storyline of these early characters were deeply influenced by the social and cultural background of the early 20th century [4]. With the passage of time and changes in social attitudes, these traditional gender role concepts have begun to be questioned and challenged. The re examination of these characters by modern audiences and creators has promoted the gradual transformation of female images, thereby driving the redefinition of female characters in Disney and other film and television productions.

2.2 The Rise of Female Characters

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the portrayal of female characters in Disney underwent significant changes, showing more independence and self-awareness. The characters of this period marked the gradual infiltration of feminism in animation creation, reflecting the changing expectations of society for female characters. For example, Merida in “Brave Legend” and Esmeralda in “Clock Tower Freak” are typical representatives of this change. Although these

two works come from later eras, the characteristics of female characters they depict can be traced back to the influence of this period.

The female characters in this stage have some significant characteristics. Firstly, they demonstrate strong autonomy and self actualization, breaking through the previous reliance solely on male roles. This transformation responded to the call for women's independence in the women's liberation movement from the 1960s to the 1980s. For example, Merida's story showcases her rejection of traditional marriage arrangements, as she seeks freedom and purpose through personal efforts, thus embodying the autonomy of female characters. This change is closely related to the actual situation of women striving for equality and independence in society at that time.

Secondly, the complexity and multidimensionality of female characters have significantly increased, displaying more realistic and three-dimensional character images. This change responds to society's demand for diverse representation of female roles. Esmeralda's character is not only entangled in the relationship with strange people, but also deeply reveals social injustice and individual struggles. This multidimensional portrayal is consistent with the increasing acceptance of women's multiple roles in society. The growth trajectory and flaws of characters make them more authentic and trustworthy, reflecting society's expectations for the authenticity and complexity of characters [5].

In addition, female characters during this period often played a proactive role in the story, driving the plot forward rather than simply waiting for rescue. This change corresponds to the recognition of women's agency in society at that time, reflecting the new status of women in family and social roles. Their actions directly affect the direction of the story, reflecting the initiative and positivity of female characters, which is in line with the redefinition and expectations of female characters in society at that time.

These changes not only enrich the audience's understanding of female images, but also reflect the gradual changes in society's expectations for female roles. From this period of history, Disney's portrayal of female characters has indeed responded to the call of the times for women's independence and diversity to a certain extent.

2.3 The Modern Shaping of Contemporary Female Characters

After entering the 21st century, Disney's female characters underwent a modern transformation, demonstrating greater diversity and inclusivity. The roles in this stage not only focus on personal identity, but also reflect society's

higher expectations for female roles [6]. Anna and Moana Ocean are representative examples.

This change is closely related to the increasing global attention to gender and cultural diversity in the early 21st century. During this period, literary and film works began to emphasize broader cultural backgrounds and social responsibilities in response to the increasingly diverse demands of audiences. The portrayal of female characters in Disney also reflects this trend.

Firstly, Disney has made significant progress in character diversity and inclusivity. For example, Moana comes from Polynesian culture, and her story not only respects different cultures, but also emphasizes the importance of cultural identity. This reflects the global focus on inclusivity and diversity, and provides viewers with a richer and more authentic character experience.

Secondly, contemporary characters place greater emphasis on self exploration and personal growth. Anna and Aisha realized their personal values and understood the importance of sisters' deep feelings by challenging themselves in "Strange Encounter in Ice and Snow". This growth process reflects the emphasis on personal growth and inner strength, which is in line with the society's emphasis on individual independence and self realization at that time.

Finally, these roles often shoulder social responsibilities, focusing on themes such as environmental protection, equality, and social responsibility. For example, Moana not only embarked on a journey for personal growth, but also actively devoted herself to saving her home, demonstrating a sense of responsibility towards society and the environment.

Overall, the evolution of Disney female characters reflects changes in society's perception of female characters. From early dependence and tradition, to mid-term independence and complexity, to contemporary diversity and social responsibility, this evolution demonstrates Disney's response to social change, while also reflecting the progress of social culture in the continuous development of female images.

3. Reasons for Changes in Character Development

3.1 The Impact of the Women's Rights Movement

The women's rights movement has had a profound impact on the portrayal of female characters in Disney. This influence can be traced back to the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, which propelled a re examination of gender roles and women's status in society. Subsequently,

the third wave of feminism and modern gender equality movements further propelled the transformation of female roles. These social changes have prompted Disney to re-examine and adjust its portrayal of female characters, gradually shifting from traditional dependent roles to modern images with autonomy and decision-making power.

In early Disney animations, female characters often relied on men to save them, such as Snow White in “Snow White” and Aurora in “Sleeping Beauty”. However, with the advancement of the women’s rights movement, Disney began to give female characters more initiative and independence. For example, Merida (*Brave Legend*, 2012) and Esmeralda (*Clock Tower Freak*, 1996) represent new standards for women’s independence and self actualization. The setting of these roles not only reflects society’s recognition of women’s independence and abilities, but also embodies expectations and respect for women’s diverse roles in modern society.

3.2 Cultural Diversity and Adjustment of Global Market Strategies

The expansion of the global market and the awareness of cultural diversity have prompted Disney to place greater emphasis on diversity in character development. With the acceleration of internationalization, Disney not only hopes to attract global audiences, but also needs to respect and reflect the values of different cultures. For example, Moana in “Ocean Romance” not only embodies the uniqueness of Polynesian culture, but also demonstrates respect for cultural diversity. This adjustment not only enriches the image of female characters, but also helps Disney win more recognition and love from audiences in the global market.

3.3 The Response and Discussion of Society to the Changes in Character Characterization

The strong response of society to the changes in character portrayal not only drives Disney’s character development, but also influences audience expectations and cultural concepts. The public’s dissatisfaction with traditional female character images has prompted Disney to incorporate more modernity and diversity into character development. The positive discussions and criticisms of female characters by audiences and critics have prompted Disney to constantly adjust its character designs to better meet the expectations of modern society for female imagery. For example, criticism of early role stereotypes prompted Disney to introduce more multidimensional and autonomous female characters in *Frozen* and *Ocean*, reflecting a sensitive response to social discussions and feedback.

4. Inspiration: The Sense of Social Responsibility in Film and Television Creation

4.1 The Potential Social Influence of Film and Television Creation

Film and television works are not only entertainment products, but their potential social influence cannot be ignored. Character shaping and storytelling can deeply influence the audience’s values and social cognition. For example, Disney’s adjustment of female character images not only reflects social change, but also has a profound impact on audiences’ gender concepts. Therefore, film and television creators need to recognize the shaping role that each character setting and story narrative may have on public opinion and cultural cognition. In the creative process, creators should be responsible for the social effects of their works and have a deep understanding of their role in shaping public opinion and cultural cognition. To fulfill this responsibility, creators should take some key measures. Firstly, they need to conduct in-depth research on social dynamics, understand the main issues and changing trends in current society, to ensure that their works can keep up with the times and truly reflect the social situation [7]. Secondly, it is crucial to regularly collect and analyze audience feedback so that creators can understand the audience’s reactions to the characters and storyline, and adjust their creative strategies accordingly. Finally, actively participating in social discussions and public dialogue is also very important, as it not only ensures that creative content meets entertainment needs, but also promotes social progress and cultural awareness. Through these practices, creators can better understand and leverage the role of film and television works in society.

4.2 Exploring Expressions of Diversity and Inclusivity

Exploring diverse and inclusive ways of expression has become an important direction in modern film and television creation. By showcasing characters from different cultures and backgrounds, film and television works can not only attract a wider audience, but also promote social understanding and respect for multiculturalism. Disney showcases rich cultural and social backgrounds in “Ocean Quest” and “Zootopia”, reflecting exploration of diversity and inclusivity. This kind of creation not only enriches the audience’s perspective, but also enhances their sense of identity towards diversity and inclusivity. In order to better explore and express diversity and inclusivity, film and television creators can take some measures [8]. Firstly,

form a creative team composed of members from different backgrounds and cultures to ensure the diversity and authenticity of the works. Secondly, conduct sufficient cultural research before creation to ensure respect and accurate presentation of different cultural backgrounds. Finally, actively introducing more characters from different cultures, genders, and social backgrounds into the work to ensure that these characters have rich personalities and important storylines.

4.3 Advocate and Practice Social Responsibility

Film and television creators should advocate and practice a sense of social responsibility. In the design process of characters and storylines, their potential impact on society should be fully considered, and it should be ensured that they conform to the ethics and values of modern society. Disney's performance in the transformation of female characters not only responds to the needs of social change, but also reflects its sense of social responsibility. By paying attention to social discussions and audience feedback, film and television creators can better fulfill their social responsibilities, promote cultural progress, and promote social equity. Specific practical measures include establishing an ethical review mechanism to ensure that works comply with social moral standards and avoid negative impacts [9]. Advocate for social equity, reflect support for social equity and justice in the plot and character design, and actively address social issues; And provide regular social responsibility training to the creative team to enhance their awareness and sensitivity to social impact. Through these measures, film and television creators can not only demonstrate a sense of social responsibility in their creations, but also actively promote social progress and cultural diversity through their works [10].

5. Conclusion

The evolution of Disney female characters reflects changes in social and cultural concepts. Early characters displayed traditional dependence and obedience, followed by gradual emergence of independence and multidimensionality, while modern characters place greater emphasis on diversity, personal growth, and social responsibility. This

process was influenced by the women's rights movement and cultural diversity awareness. Disney characters have shifted from traditional images to more autonomous and diverse ones to adapt to changes in audience expectations and social values. Film and television creators should pay attention to social dynamics and audience feedback in character creation, actively promote cultural progress and social equity, in order to enhance the social value and influence of their works.

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