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Representation in Animation

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2020
Communication
Representation in Animation

Abstract

In this paper I'm addressing what is missing in representation in films today. I take the shows Avatar: The Last Airbender, Steven Universe and Fairy Tail to explain what proper representation should look like in the media. I look at this with the perspective of rhetoric as a communication major. Providing my comment on the shows. I'm examining this show with three factors. Do they have women in roles of leadership? Are characters overcoming adversity? Are there male characters experiencing complex emotions? I'm comparing these shows with most western films. That would usually tell stories through the white cisgendered straight male. I take examples from each show to how these characters are a step in the direction of proper representation. The paper addresses characters such as, Steven, Garnet, Pearl, Lapis, Rose and Greg in Steven Universe. Aang, Katara, Zuko, Iroh, Teo, Katara and Toph in Avatar: The Last Airbender. Erza, Mirajane, Gildarts and Gray from Fairy Tail. I conclude with my take on why these shows are a step in the right direction but where we need to go from here.

Introduction

I'm going to discuss representation in the media. I'm looking at a more accurate form of representation through three different animations. The shows, Avatar: the last airbender, Steven Universe, and Fairy Tail. I will be judging these shows with three factors to consider. First, we'll be looking at examples of women in roles of leadership. Secondly, are there characters overcoming adversity? Adversity could mean mental illness, disability, discrimination and/or mourning the loss of loved ones. As far as representation the last factor is whether or not we are seeing male characters experiencing complex emotions. Keep in mind that there will be spoilers for all three of these shows throughout the paper. Why is it important to consider representation in the media? Many would argue that film should not be taken seriously as far as representation. Television is present in almost every home in America as well as many other Westernized countries. A lot of times it is the only source of entertainment and/or outside information for many families. As much as we like to dismiss it's credibility. People absorb information from television, whether it's consciously or unconsciously. We have barely entered into an age where film has people that actually look and behave like the rest of us. A majority of the time we mostly see strong, straight, white men in film. The truth is not even those men are properly

represented. bell hooks has advocated for critical thinking when it comes to television and film. “The critique hooks encourages involves not only an interrogation of cultural products such as television and film but of the thoughts and actions of individuals.” It is important to care about what is on our television.

Show Summarization

Avatar: The Last Airbender is a show about a young boy named Aang who must master all four elements to defeat the villain Firelord Ozai. An avatar is a reincarnated individual who can master all four. The second show is Steven Universe. This about a boy named Steven who was born into a world of humans and aliens called gems. Steven is raised by three gems named Garnet, Pearl and Amethyst. The third show is called Fairy Tail. Fairy Tail is a show about a young woman named Lucy who joins a guild called Fairy Tail. The show consists of characters that possess the ability to wield magic. There are subgroups of characters within the show that go on job requests together.

Observations of Fairy Tail

I’d like to examine each show and vouch for their representation. There are definitely some criticisms for fairy tail. Even though I enjoy this show, I’ve been a bit embarrassed to tell people about it. Largely due to the fact that the most animation of the women is highly sexist. There are several cases where the women in outfits are showing so much skin, that the outfit has become impractical. There is also the fact that this is a japanese cartoon. Taking that into consideration, I can’t really speak for japanese culture. So why have I considered this show as an example for representation? While there are reservations to have, there is a lot of potential. Usually in western film, a woman is seen as an addition to the male lead. We admire her for her looks and/or the fact that she follows orders. In Fairy Tail, the women are valued for their looks, but always play a strong contributing role in the dilemma. When people are in trouble, or when there is a threat, the women don’t wait to be told what to do. Some of the women take charge in fighting the threat, and some are even better at fighting than the men. Others take initiative to help civilians. It’s also worth mentioning that male characters in this show actually have more than two emotions unlike western films. In the series you see men crying, mourning, giving up, and looking out for each other. Sometimes the men are even saved by the women.

Observations of Steven Universe

Steven Universe is one of my favorite examples of representation. Looking at the show with a critical perspective here's what I see. Steven is a young man being raised by three women. Steven is not being raised by his father Greg, due to the fact Greg is not responsible to raise a thriving boy like Steven. Despite that, Steven has a high quality relationship with his father. Through the show you see representation such as queer visibility, disability, foster youth, mixed race identity and many more. One of the more important things to touch on is that the families on this show are not always the nuclear model. That sometimes that's actually for the best. In western films you see countless examples of nuclear families working things out no matter what the conflict. While on the other hand, you have shows that don't have the traditional mom and dad model, where something always seems to go wrong and can't be resolved. Steven Universe is one of the few shows where I've seen non traditional families be better off. Steven had two parents. His mom Rose Quartz and his dad Greg Universe. Throughout the show you see countless examples of both of them being terribly irresponsible people. While Steven was growing up with Garnet, Pearl and Amethyst, he became a thoughtful, critical and brave young man. We don't get to see enough examples of families like this. There are plenty of families out there that don't have both parents in their lives. Or families that blended, meaning a marriage with children from previous marriages. Some children aren't with their parents at all. They need representation for their lives. According to a study done by the Kentucky Journal of Communication, "Cultivation theory posits that repeated television viewing cultivates distinct perceptions of the world." (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1980, 1986). We are affected by what we see on television. As a child of divorce with emotionally distant parents, I can vouch that this show made me feel seen. Instead of making me want the family I didn't have.

Observations of Avatar: The Last Airbender

Avatar has examples of asian and indigenous people. Aang and his friends travel the world to meet people of all shapes and sizes. They meet warriors that are collectively women, children with disabilities that are capable, and get to see a villain's humanity. Avatar is one of the shows that teach you that it's about the journey, not the destination. You get to witness these young people grow into themselves. Aang not only struggles to master all four elements, he struggles

with his moral compass as the Avatar. His companions, Katara and Sokka struggle with their place in the world as well. While they do have each other, the show doesn't forget that they are children. That they make mistakes. The effort to grow is especially hard for them because they're only other guides are children who are also finding their way. Occasionally they come across a wise old man to offer sage advice, but for the most part they must learn for themselves.

Representation of Female Leadership

One of the reasons all three of these shows made the cut for representation is they all have women in roles of leadership. As I said previously, there are too many times where the female character is usually an attachment to the male lead. Most of the time that female character hardly says anything or doesn't say anything at all. These animations have many examples of women in roles of leadership. Here are some examples. There's Katara, and Toph from Avatar. Erza, and Mirajane from Fairy Tail. Then there's Pearl, and Garnet from Steven universe. In Avatar, Katara is usually rotating leadership with Sokka and Aang. In season 2 episode 11, Katara must take the lead in getting everyone out of the desert. The rest of party becomes incapacitated due to dehydration, emotional turmoil and physical disability. Katara must lead them out of desert, ration water, assist those who can't help themselves, and remain calm throughout the obstacles. In the episode The Blind Bandit, we meet Toph. Toph is a young blind girl who was born into an incredibly wealthy family. The trio go to an earthbending wrestling show to look for an earthbender that will teach Aang to earthbend. Towards the end of the wrestling show, Toph shows up with the stage name the Blind Bandit. Low and behold the blind girl ends up being the best earth bender there. Toph has kept her earth bending a secret because her parents have been overprotective of Toph her whole life. Due to the fact that Toph is blind, her parents kept her existence secret and have strict rules to keep her from overworking herself. Throughout the show Toph shows us her standoffish personality, through her character arc we learn that Toph is so defensive because of the way she was raised. She is so incredibly frustrated with the fact that people doubt her capability. Even though Toph is blind she proves her capability time and time again. Her earth bending is so valued that she has proven that only she can be Aang's earth bending teacher. As I mentioned before, what I appreciate about the show Fairy Tail is the amount of female leadership in the show. Throughout the show, we see Erza

Scarlet as one of the strongest wizards at the guild. In the earlier seasons we see her as the overwhelmingly strong authority figure that the other wizards fear her to be. Later on we get to learn Erza's origin and how she came to be the wizard she is. In the episode, The Tower of Heaven we see flashbacks of Erza's childhood. The show reveals that Erza used to be a slave along with many others. As children, Erza and her friends attempt to escape the island where they are being held. In the midst of being caught, an old man with a fairy tail emblem sacrifices himself to save Erza. She becomes so overwhelmed with grief that Erza expels an overwhelming amount of magic that puts out the slave masters. Erza then starts a revolt to free the rest of the slaves. Episodes like these allow us to have a richer understanding of female character development. In the first season, we meet Mirajane Strauss as a friendly bar maiden. She occasionally helps out the master by approving jobs. Mira has modeled for magazines. We meet her as a pretty, friendly, girly maiden. Throughout the story arc, Mira is crying because she can't fight to protect her friends. The first time I saw this season I was extremely upset and wondered why they wouldn't let her fight. Later we discover that the real reason Mira is not allowed to fight. At first, it seemed as though they weren't letting her fight because she appears fragile, but it turns out the real reason Mira is not allowed to fight is because she is too powerful. She is so powerful that using her magic can put everyone else in danger. In the episode Advent of Satan, Mira's power is revealed when Freed is about to kill her brother Elfman. When Freed declares that he will kill Elfman, Mira is reminded of a past death of their sibling Lasana. Mira is triggered by the memory, goes into a trance and loses control. This causes her demon form to reveal itself. This was the last power that I expected from Mira, based on her personality. In the scene you witness how much unimaginable power she has. Towards the end of the scene, Mira's demon form comes within inches of ending Freed's life. Then she remembers her sister and stops. When she stops she changes back into her original form, Freed asks why she had spared his life. "This battle is meaningless...we're both members of Fairy Tail. That means we work together, we celebrate together, and we grow together." She goes on to tell him that you can trust one person more than anyone, but that "If you just reach out, I promise there'll always be someone there for you." Mira is more than just a beautiful woman. She's been through hardships. Not to mention she's incredibly powerful. She's always kind to others and tries to resolve

conflict with words before anything. The fact that the series showed a situation where brute force won't work is a major step away from the traditional problem solving in Western film where violence is usually the answer. In Steven Universe we're introduced to Garnet, and Pearl. As I said previously, Garnet and Pearl are a part of Steven's family unit. Throughout the show we see that Garnet usually takes the lead on missions and fighting. She is also the one to make major decisions when it comes to raising Steven. Pearl is depicted as the over worried mother. She is constantly worried about Steven's safety and manners. Pearl and Garnet are also seen as the parental units for Amethyst as well. While it's fairly obvious that Garnet is shown as the leader of crystal gems, it's not as obvious for Pearl until you get to the later seasons where there are major reveals. In the beginning of the show, Pearl has taken some of the reins as far as leadership. She does uphold rules and hold Steven and Amethyst accountable. At some point she even teaches Connie how to sword fight. Most of the time we've seen Pearl as a gem that is incredibly anxious. In the episode A Single Pale Rose, we learn a major secret about Steven's mother. We discover that she is not who she has perceived herself to be. In the same episode we discover that Pearl had known this secret the entire time. A secret that not even Garnet knew. When the show reveals this about Pearl and Rose Quartz, we get a full understanding of who Pearl is and why she has been consumed with the amount of anxiety that she has. Pearl had to protect a major secret from the people closest to her because of a magic promise that held her back. Symbolizing that sometimes we struggle with the emotional capacity when protecting the ones we love, especially parents. This has also shown that leaders are not always shown on the front stage. Sometimes leaders are working behind the scenes.

Representation of Adversity

Another thing that these three shows have in common is characters overcoming adversity. I made this broad category because there is a lot of representation to cover. The characters I've chosen to cover have physical disabilities, mental illness, experienced discrimination, and have lost loved ones. With the show Fairy Tail, we're going to touch up on Erza and Mirajane's stories. Then we'll talk about Lapis Lazuli, and Garnet in Steven Universe. Then go over Toph, Teo and Zuko in Avatar. We've already talked thoroughly about Erza's background in Fairy Tail. What we haven't touched on was the fact that Erza has been an orphan since birth. It's a

rough start for her to begin with. Despite the fact that she was not only an orphan but a slave as well and still managed to become a strong independent wizard is incredibly admirable. Along with her siblings, Mirajane is also an orphan. On top of that, Mira and her siblings were exiled from their village due to Mira's deformity of her arm. Both of these characters left places that did not care for them. Erza and Mira separately found their way to Fairy Tail where they found a place of love and support. Where they found a community that they could seek refuge in. These are great examples of finding love outside of your upbringing. That you don't have to be what you were born into. Finding a better environment for yourself can make you better. Lapis Lazuli is a gem in Steven Universe that can manipulate water to her will. In the episode Mirror Gem, Steven is given a magic mirror. He later discovers that Lapis Lazuli was trapped inside the mirror. After watching the show, I feel confident to say that Lapis is a character that exhibits symptoms of depression. She is constantly exhausted, unmotivated, and does not engage with others well. There are occasional times when Lapis Lazuli is happy but her default emotions are uninterested. Sometimes she tends to hurt people no matter how hard they try to be there for her. According to an article in Metro Magazine, there was a Mental Campaign that tried to change the way mental illness was represented. The issue with the media representing mental illness is that the genre of comedy is usually used to represent mental illness. "Combining comedy with otherwise-'difficult' issues is hardly a new idea, with everything from universal fears like death and ageing, to socio-political problems like race, class and disability, dealt with by comedians across various media. But it can also be really dangerous: laughing about something could easily translate into laughing at that thing – or, worse, laughing at and further harming the victims of something severe." Lapis is a great example of what it can look like to be friends with someone with depression without it being comical. Earlier we spoke about how much Garnet contributes as a leader to the group. The adversity that Garnet experiences is fairly significant. For clarification in the show sometimes gems fuse together and create a gem fusion. In the episode Jail Break, Garnet is revealed to be a fusion of a sapphire and a ruby. It isn't until the episode The Answer, that we learn about Garnet's origin. Ruby and Sapphire accidentally fuse and the gems around them are outraged that different gems have fused together. "Unbelievable. Disgusting. This is unheard of." I think this is an excellent example of racism and discrimination.

Two different gems also known as different races. According to the paper *Restricted Visions of Multiracial Identity in Advertising*, “In the context of U.S. culture, the most socially taboo form of mixed-race identity has historically occurred when miscegenation took place between one individual racialized as black and another racialized as white.” Today mixed children are still discriminated against for being mixed. There is still racism that says that people of different races should be together and they see biracial children as a mistake. Sapphire and Ruby’s relationship is very significant to Garnet’s existence. I think that Garnet is a great role model for biracial children. Being biracial myself, I can appreciate a character like this. Avatar especially has strong examples of characters overcoming adversity. I have already mentioned the adversity that Toph Beifong has overcome. In the episode *The Northern Air Temple* we meet a paraplegic named Teo. Along with other refugees, Teo and his father have taken residence in the Northern Air Temples. Thanks to Theo’s father being a mechanist, not only is Teo able to get around he can also fly the skies quite well. Theo is even capable enough to defend the Northern Air Temple from the fire nation. While Toph and Teo are the one characters that I’ve seen with physical disabilities that I’ve seen in the show, they show more positive representations of people with disabilities than what we usually see in Western films.

Representation of Men Having Complex Emotions

As I mentioned previously, there are very rare occasions where we see male characters in films have complex emotions. It’s refreshing to male characters in these shows as human beings. I’m going to be providing examples from each of the shows. From *Fairy Tail*, I’ll be using Gray and Gildarts. In *Steven Universe* I’ll use Steven, Greg and Lars as examples. Then in *Avatar*, I’ll be using Zuko, Iroh and Aang. The show also introduces a new character named Gildarts who is one of the most powerful wizards at *Fairy Tail*. In the Episode *Natsu vs Gildarts*, Gildarts teaches Natsu that having fear is normal and that in fact you should trust fear sometimes. To understand when you cannot finish a battle. “I will not disparage you for having the courage to stand up to me. However, exceptionally few have the courage to put away an unsheathed sword. There is nothing wrong with fear. To fear is to know your own weakness.” Gildarts tells Natsu this after Natsu surrenders during their battle. There are not a lot of shows that show men that are willing

to quit honorably. Men need examples of when it's okay to be weak. Gray Fullbuster is an ice mage and he seems to have one of the most complex stories of the male characters. He is also an orphan along with many other characters in Fairy Tail. Gray is an emotionally distant young man due to the fact that he is still mourning his Master Ur, his ice bending teacher. In the episode Eternal Magic, we get a deeper understanding of Gray and his past. We see him mourn the loss of his parents. The connection he builds with Ur. The history he has with the villain. Towards the end of the episode we watch Ur sacrifice her life to save Gray. Which gives a full understanding of why Gray is as emotionally distant as he is. In Steven Universe, the male characters provide representation of everyday obstacles. In the series we see that Steven has a destiny to save the world, but in the show we get to watch as Steven solves everyday problems. Problems like how to talk to a girl, how to resolve conflict between two friends or helping a friend with stage fright. In the Fictional Families study, they asked the college students if they felt that the problems in shows were realistic. The answer was yes and no. The situations in family television shows are usually something big and dramatic like someone in the family getting cancer. They were realistic when it came to how that event would affect the family. Even though those parts are realistic they rarely show how everyday situations look like. Seeing Steven experience those everyday situations is refreshing. Earlier I explained how Greg Universe is Steven's father. Greg is definitely a complex man. He was never really cut out to be the traditional sense of a father. Greg can hardly take care of himself, but he still cares a lot about Steven. Greg did raise Steven when he was a baby but at some point Steven's powers became too much for Greg. There's a part of him that wants to stay in Steven's life but he can very easily become overwhelmed with the gem part of Steven. Not everyone is cut out to be a completely present Father and that's okay too. When you watch the show you can see that Steven has the better option living with the crystal gems. Then we have the teenager who works at the local donut shop, Lars. Lars is a rather wound up teenager. He cares a lot about being cool and popular. Lars gives off most teenage boy stereotypes. As the show progresses you get to see that Lars can be emotional and quite sensitive. Towards the end of the show you get to see Lars become the outcast hero he was meant to be. Through his metamorphosis he begins to grow past his need for validation. Typically in most western films to get to see that side of teenage boys. Young men need examples like Lars and

Steven to know that they can be more than what people expect of them. Avatar is probably the better example of the complexity of men. In the first episode we are introduced to all three of these characters. When Aang awakens from his deep sleep he releases a bright light. Prince Zuko and Uncle Iroh happen to be in range and see this light. Uncle Iroh is the brother of the fire lord and uncle to Prince Zuko. Throughout the show Uncle Iroh is the happy go lucky, tea drinking wise old man. He remains calm through all of Zuko's tempers to always offer sage advice and tea. In the first two seasons we learn little by little about Iroh and how he used to be a great general for the fire nation. We later discover that he had lost his son at the battle of Ba Sing Se. Iroh has mentioned to Zuko that ever since he lost his son Iroh has seen Zuko as one of his own. In the episode Tales of Ba Sing Se, we get to walk through a day in the life of Iroh. He walks through town meeting new people and buying items for a picnic. He helps out others that cannot help themselves. When we reach the end of his tale he goes to the top of a hill to celebrate his lost son's birthday and sings a song for him with tears in his eyes. Prince Zuko's story arc has been told to be one of the best. He starts out as the villain of the show, but as the show progresses Zuko seems to struggle with his morals as a man and his purpose. His whole purpose was to find the Avatar and capture him. The whole mission is to gain the respect of his father once more. Later through the faked death of Aang, Zuko does get to return home and have the respect of his father. He then finds himself unhappy with the result. Not knowing what he wants anymore. Later Zuko decides that life doesn't make him happy and decides to help Aang master fire bending to destroy Zuko's father.. Proving that a man can change and he does not have to be the mistakes of his past. Towards the end of the show, Aang struggles with a moral dilemma. He had accomplished the task of mastering the elements but found himself at a crossroads. Aang doesn't know if he can kill the firelord. Not because he can't do it but because he doesn't feel that it's right to take a life. Even if firelord Ozai is killing and stealing from all the nations. This is mostly because Aang is a monk and he was taught that all life is sacred.. He is able to stand by his values and finds another way. Normally a show wouldn't explore this option. The solution is usually to kill the problem. I cannot speak for men but if having a diversity of women is something that I need, I can only imagine that is what men need as well.

Conclusion

Representation does matter. “Individuals form selves or identities through various properties or substances, which include such things as physical objects, occupations, friends, activities, beliefs and values...they share substance with whatever or whomever they associate and simultaneously define themselves against or separate themselves from others with whom they choose not to identify with. Kenneth Burke uses the consubstantial to describe this association.” If we only see miniscule amount of representation in the media that is so prevalent, we are bound to think that there is something wrong with us. There are children and adults out there who are saying, “I wish I was like that.” Instead of “Oh someone like me is on tv.” We need to be heard. The television series I have provided you with are a step in the right direction. The next obstacle to overcome is getting representation like this on live action films. It seems that the only accurate representation that we can get is through the view of animation. We also only see representation like this through stories of magic and aliens. I’m not criticizing these formats but we still have a long way to go. I propose that we use these models of representation and implement them into western films. We’ve had enough of the old models of white cisgendered straight men and good looking women who don’t have any dialogue. Films need characters who are real. It is irresponsible to continue on with the inaccurate ways that we show people to be.

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