A Discussion of the Necessity of a Rating System for Animated Films from the Violent Elements of Animated Characters: A Case Study of Nezha

Qianyi Wang[1,*]

[1] *Monash University, Melbourne, Australia*
Corresponding author. Email: qwan0087@student.monash.edu

ABSTRACT

With the continuous development of the animation industry, animated movies have become a relatively influential cultural factor in the growth process of young generations. While the excellent cultural elements in animated movies positively influence the values of teenagers, some of the adult-oriented elements of these animated movies also have a negative impact on teenagers. It is worth noting that the violence exposed by animated films is gradually becoming a marketing strategy and aesthetic paradigm, which requires a kind of rating system to restrain. This study focuses on the importance and necessity of censorship and rating of animated films and characters to address the violence exposed by animated films and characters and illustrates this with the example of Nezha, one of the most popular animated characters in China. This study finds that Nezha's personality traits and behavior patterns are greatly influenced by the aesthetics of violence due to the historical and cultural context of animation, the psychological needs of the audience, the drive for commercial profits and the influence of international culture. In the context of different social periods, the humanistic inner core of Nezha's image and the expression of violence together contribute to the integrity of Nezha's portrayal, while giving an ever-changing modern depiction of the violent elements of the traditional story. Most of the audiences of animated films are relatively young, and their violent elements are highly likely to have negative behavioral, emotional or affective and cognitive effects on the audience. To further restrain the development of violence and to improve the quality of animated films, a rating system for animated films should be established, which allows to meet the viewing needs of audiences of each age group, allows animation companies to accurately target audiences when producing animated films and characters, and protects growing teenagers from the lure and harm of adult-oriented content and elements.

Keywords: Animated Film, Nezha, Rating System, Violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the development of China's animation film industry has advanced rapidly. According to the China Film Administration, the box office of Chinese domestic animated films overtook the box office of imported animated films for the first time in 2019 and continued to maintain the leading share in 2020 and 2021. In terms of box office share, the proportion of domestically produced animated films to the total annual box office of animated films has been rising year by year [1]. With the growth of the viewing population and the increase in the number of quality films, the audience group of animated films tends to be all ages [2]. As the animation industry booms, the animation is no longer

limited to the younger audience groups, but increasingly has the characteristics of all-ages, and can meet the aesthetic demand of audiences of different ages. Some animated movies consciously incorporate adult content, including violent elements, in order to cater to adult audiences with the ability to consume. Violence is considered an extremely stylized artistic technique, and violence can be used as a medium for art, forming the concept of an aesthetics of violence [3]. The element of violence in animation culture influences the audience of the animation industry in the form of media violence. Animation, as a highly assumptive cinematic art form, produces cultural penetration of the audience through images, text, and sound [4]. The element of violence in animation encompasses not only violent behavior such as bloody fight scenes or rough violent language but also the

ideological attitude of tolerance and propaganda of such violence.

In 2019, with the release and widespread popularity of the movie which is called ': Birth of the Demon Child, the story and image of Nezha is once again on the screen and is widely watched and loved by audiences. Some of the violent elements that build Nezha's image in the film have sparked heated discussions, and in the context of China's animated film industry, which has no rating system, these violent elements may have some negative impact on younger audiences. From 1979, when Nezha appeared as the main character in the animated film which name is Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King, to the present day, the image of Nezha has been constantly reconstructed, presenting corresponding cultural connotations and characteristics of the times in each period. However, the violent elements of animated film characters represented by the figure of Nezha have not been sufficiently studied in academia. To fill the research gap, this study will use Nezha as a case study to illustrate the necessity of animated film classification by exploring the violent elements of animated film characters. This study will first examine the violent elements of animated film characters, focusing on the reasons for their existence as well as analyzing Nezha's personality and behavior. The study will then analyze the audience composition of the animated film characters and explain the impact of the violent elements on the audience, and then propose possible solutions, i.e., the need for a rating system.

2. ANIMATED VIOLENT ELEMENTS

2.1. Reasons for the existence of violent elements in animation

The element of violence in the media has become a global issue that needs to be addressed urgently. As an important narrative element, it has been with the mass media from the moment of its birth [5]. There are many forms of violent content on display today, and violence-related content exists in almost every medium, including commercial films, cartoons, anime games, and television news. As mentioned by Gerbner and Gross, violence is a coercive act of blatantly using force against another person or self, or subjecting another person to harm against their will [6]. Integrating this concept into animated films, the element of violence is a visual expression of the act of violence through the use of animation expression skills, animated audio-visual language, and animated technical means. Media violence in animated films includes not only crude behavior and language but also the thoughts and attitudes of animated characters who use violent means to achieve their goals to solve problems, as well as the values they perpetuate. The cinematic presumption is a necessary means of typifying cinema, based on which the audience can still

be aware that the violence in the film is performativity, even if the film uses audiovisual language to shape the viewing experience as real as possible. In fact, under the film's assumption of the premise, the element of violence is presented as a certain degree of glossing over the violence, meaning that the viewer can realize that this violence is being performed, regardless of who the perpetrator and bearer of the violence are. Animation, as a highly assumed cinematic art, can turn various hypothetical situations into artistic reality with the help of modern digital technology [7]. Compared with real movies, the animation is not constrained by the performance of actors or the setting of scenes in its creation, and the construction of violent elements is much easier. In the context of animated films, the assumptions are stronger, and the presentation of violent elements has a stronger degree of glossing over the violence. The ontological characteristics of animation make it rationalize and aestheticize real violence in a playful, comedic, and justified way, thus making animated violence more acceptable to the audience. The aestheticized presentation of violence is a psychological rationalization in addition to the aesthetics of the visual form. The creators whitewash the production and representation of violence in an attempt to establish an art form that conforms to the mainstream social values. For example, various acts of violence by Nezha are placed under the purpose of justice, thus making Nezha's violence acceptable to the audience. This acceptance is evident when in the film Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child, Nezha's eventual battle with the Third Prince of the Dragon-King is based on the aim of saving the lives of the people. This use of violence is motivated by morality and justice, in line with the spirit of traditional Chinese culture and ethics. Such values are agreeable with what Chinese audiences have been taught. Thus the violent elements rationalised by Nezha's righteous aims are more likely to be shared and understood by Chinese audiences.

The violent elements in animated films are associated with the historical and cultural background, the psychological needs of the audience, and the drive of commercial interests. For historical reasons, early China was immersed in the ideological environment of resistance to wear, and its animation content would add some violent elements to show the resistance to war. Animated films were influenced by the cultural background of the society in which they were created, and they have continued to innovate and develop with the changing historical context [8]. At the end of the 20th century, American animation and Japanese animation had a great influence on Chinese animation, which also created violent elements in international advanced animation movies that deeply influenced the development trend of Chinese animation movies. In early Chinese animated films, the concept of authority and the relationship between rulers and subjects in a patriarchal

society was a very important impact on the creative content and characterization process of animation. The content and characters of the animated films reflect the repressive power of patriarchal authority and self-denial under such pressure, which also becomes a violent element that negatively affects the audience. In terms of audience demand, the audience's psychological need for violence drives the presentation of violent elements in an increasing number of media texts. According to Freud, human beings have the instinct of living and the instinct of dying, and the desire and behavior of violence are part of the instinct [9]. A healthy society needs not only morality and rationality, but also the repressed side of human nature needs to be released. The two world wars and the Cold War since the 20th century have made people feel the pressure in the horrible atmosphere of war and have no way to relieve it, which makes the market urgent to consume fast food with primitive desire as the carrier, and the element of violence is one of them. When releasing instinctual impulses while being morally constrained, the audience can experience a thrill of mass destruction [10]. Nowadays in an era of consumption, artworks become products of spiritual and cultural consumption in the consumer market. The commercial characteristics of animation dictate that animated films must comply with audience preferences and psychological needs. To cater to the preferences and sensory entertainment satisfaction of the general audience, animation enterprises are increasingly inclined to create animations with violent elements or place the animation in the cultural concept that is more acceptable to the audience today, indirectly becoming a violent element component of animated movies.

2.2. The Evolution of Nezha's Image

The image of Nezha is constantly being given new meaning as the times go by. Like the familiar image of the Monkey King, Nezha is essentially a creation of folk culture, a collective symbol of the aspirations and imagination of the people of different eras. Every reconstruction of the content and image of Nezha is inevitably associated with the upper-class ideology of a particular era, presenting the cultural and spiritual patterns of the corresponding era. In terms of its influence on public culture today, the main narratives and images of Nezha are the 1979 animated film Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King and Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child, which was released in 2019. Nezha is the image of a young child wearing a red belly band. Nezha wears the Universe Ring around his neck, which is a golden collar, and he is surrounded by the Red Armillary Sash, which is a seven-foot-long red damask, and a spear with a flame-like tip, named the Fire-tipped Spear. Traditionally, the portrayal of Nezha presents traditional Chinese cultural connotations, particularly the representation of the relationship between father and son. In the traditional story, Nezha is seen to be rather naughty

at birth, and his father is very strict with him. When Nezha kills the Third Prince of the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea, his father, instead of taking an objective stand to understand, educate and protect his child, acts in a panic and punishes Nezha along with the Dragon King. Nezha makes a sacrifice for his parents, but his father does not forgive him and instead continues to treat Nezha as a bad person. This relationship between father and son was unequal and was strongly influenced by the historical context of the patriarchal society of the time. From a modern perspective, Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child incorporates elements of modern kinship relationships into the representation of the father-son relationship. The figure of Nezha is transformed from a submissive to patriarchal authority to a demonic child who defies fate in the context of family harmony. While the traditional image of Nezha was meant to spread the traditional culture of filial piety, the modern Nezha is depicted in the context of family relationships based on modern kinship relationships, so more parents have taken their children to see the film. The latest portrayal of Nezha emphasizes the protection and love his parents have for him. The original cold, selfish and hypocritical father figure here becomes warm-hearted, sheltering his son in all ways for the sake of his acceptance by his neighbors and petitioning the Heavenly Court for Nezha's future and fate. His mother is also enriched and developed, and although she does not spend enough time with Nezha, her maternal love for him is undeniable. The new story and portrayal of Nezha emphasize the imagery of 'family' and modern family relationships of harmony and equality. The image of Nezha also incorporates elements of realism as a troubled teenager in today's times. For reasons of realism and artistic communication, the modern portrayal of Nezha incorporates many elements of current Chinese social phenomena, such as the lack of affection for children left behind, social prejudice, and the loneliness and rebellion of adolescents. The teenage audience can easily identify themselves with Nezha. Nezha is irritable and tends towards violence. In the traditional story, Nezha, as a child, brutally kills the Third Prince of the Dragon King and kills himself to save his father. Nezha in the modern story uses violent means to solve problems and is more irritable and impulsive than the traditional Nezha. Semantic relationships are determined by cultural contexts, but the cultural contexts are fluid. Both in content and narrative structure and characterization, Nezha's portrayal is adapting to the modern society, tending to be all-ages, incorporating more reasonable family relationships and values, while not neglecting some elements that are not suitable for children without guidance and parental accompaniment or guardianship.

3. THE COMMUNICATION IMPACT OF VIOLENT ELEMENTS IN ANIMATED CHARACTERIZATION

3.1. Negative impact on the audience

The violent elements in animation can have some negative effects on the audience, especially the younger audience. Audiences, usually act as contributors to the box office and online video viewers. Whether they are active or passive parties in the film distribution environment, everyone has a great possibility to be the target audience or potential group for that film. With the development of the times and the impact of foreign animated film works, Chinese audiences are more receptive to the behavior of adults watching animated films, and animation is no longer the exclusive product of children, gradually becoming an all-ages artwork for young and old alike. Nowadays, with the development of all-age animated movies, some deeper connotations do meet the psychological needs of multi-level audiences, but the negative effects of some all-age content on audiences need to be paid attention to. Nezha, for example, has gradually become more all-age, but its main audience is still mostly teenagers and children. According to Browne et al., adolescents and children are more susceptible to negative influences when imbued with violent elements in media [11]. In terms of behavioral analysis, younger viewers may learn the violent behaviors shown in animated movies. Albert Bandura's social learning theory suggests that children do not need to learn through reinforcement, but can acquire learning simply by observing the behavior of role models, which are stored in the brain in the form of mental representations or other symbolic representations to help them imitate the behavior [12]. The young viewers' minds are not yet mature, and their thinking activities tend to be perceptual image thinking. Due to the lack of social experience and logical thinking ability, they cannot easily distinguish the difference between the media environment and the real environment, and they can easily complete the learning process through imitation without discrimination. When some violent images are shown in animated movies, young viewers are likely to imitate and acquire them to commit violent acts. As mentioned by Anderson et al., media violence elements can increase the possibility of youth violence and delinquency [13]. The violent elements in animated movies can influence the minds of teenagers and make their emotions and feelings affected. When teenagers are under the influence of violent elements for a long time, their character will likely become more and more irritable and even develop violent tendencies. This potential for emotional and affective harm is not to be underestimated. Children and adolescents may have emotional reactions such as excitement, fear, anxiety, and dread when watching violent content in animated movies, which may be a transient reaction or a persistent long-term reaction.

The long-term reactions that children develop can have lasting effects, causing them to develop a psychological disorder afterwards in their lives.

Children and adolescents are affected cognitively when the frequency of violence in animation affects their perceptions of the real world. On the one hand, younger audiences begin to have a radical view of the real world and use violence as a way to solve problems in reality, which increases their identification with violence, and on the other hand, some issues of citizenship and rights are exposed in animation, and children implicitly begin to deny their own identity under these value orientations. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, the cognitive structure of an individual is a complex system composed of a series of mental abilities together. The individual acquires external information, transforms this information into his or her knowledge structure, and ultimately knows what to do in practice.

3.2. Feasible ways to mitigate negative impacts

As the development of animation continues to escalate, the trend of adultization of animation is becoming more and more obvious, while the negative impact of adultization of animation on younger audiences is also inevitable. It is worth exploring how to make animation form a healthy and orderly scene in the development process. Over a long period, Chinese film and television works have emphasized the function of edification and relatively neglected the function of entertainment, and the release of a film has to go through strict censorship and a large number of inappropriate scenes for children and teenagers have been cut. This is unfavorable to the needs of adults and the development of film and television. In recent years, with the renewal of social attitudes and the development of film and television needs, some films and television work to achieve the best artistic effect and emotional expression and set some violent plots, which is not good for the younger audience. For animated film works suitable for children and teenagers, the process of creation needs to pay attention to the dissolution of violent elements, including in the audio-visual language and film intention. In the creation of animation, for the inevitable violence, we can add comedy to the violence through camera transitions, sound effects, and other techniques, transforming the original serious, horrible, bloody violence into humor, banter, comedy and romance. The addition of comedic elements can, to a certain extent, serve to dissipate the violent scenarios in the animated narrative, and the violent elements become an effective visual interlude. As an example, in the American animated film Tom and Jerry, Tom suffers a lot of violence, but the comedic performance is accompanied by exaggerated body movements and funny sound effects that weaken the cruelty of the violence. In Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child, humorous and witty remarks accompany the violent acts committed by Nezha,

dissipating his grumpy, brutal image. Directors and production companies producing animated films should also pay attention to the expression of civil rights awareness in the film content so that audiences can receive the appropriate and correct perspective.

The animation film rating system refers to a system that differentiates and grades animation works according to age groups for different audiences and stipulates the corresponding broadcast range, broadcast time and viewing audience for different grades of animation film works. It is a system that changes the original control mainly through the content of animation works to provide the necessary identification information for such works and then provides such rated animation works to the audience for selection. For example, in Japan, anime content is rated, and some adult animation containing pornographic content is prohibited for consumption by minors. And some hot-blooded anime, as well as some works containing elements such as school violence and love rendering are prohibited for consumption by children under 12 years old. The U.S. has promoted a device called V-Chip, which blocks some program content according to the TV rating system to prevent children from seeing content that is inappropriate to watch. Many Chinese streaming platforms have also made a lot of efforts to screen content for children. For example, most streaming platforms have developed teen models to ensure that the content pushed by the platform is more personalized. Since many platforms do not yet have a youth model and this does not address the problem at the source, a rating system for animated films is necessary to enable them to meet the needs of different age groups as soon as they are distributed to theaters and platforms. It is only with the establishment of the animation film classification system that we can better meet the needs of audiences of all ages, and also allow Chinese animation film production enterprises to accurately position themselves in making animation films, find the right audience, provide a broader space for the creation and development of animation films, and also protect children and teenagers in their growth stage from the influence and harm of undesirable contents.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, this study argues that the violent elements of Nezha's character and behavior can negatively affect younger audiences, which requires a rating system to be in place. Not only do Nezha's violent elements need to be taken seriously, but the other adult-oriented elements that make up the characters of animated films also prompt the implementation of a rating system for animated films as a way to avoid inducing and harming the psychological, emotional or affective and the cognitive aspects of youth. It is worth considering that, influenced by factors such as historical and cultural backgrounds and commercial profits,

animated characters often need to be constructed with the help of some violent expressions, and how to reconcile the relationship between the construction of the image of the animated character itself and the expression of violence is not covered in this study. Alternatively, it may be possible to analyze the effectiveness of the rating system on audience targeting from the perspective of animation production companies.

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