

A Study of Anthropomorphic Characters in Indian Mythological Animated Feature Films Released During 2010

Atul Sinha*

Abstract

This paper investigates anthropomorphism in animation: its use, and various aspects of this phenomenon that makes it an integral part of animation since the very beginning of this art form. Human physiology of anthropomorphizing objects and shapes is an innate urge, as humans found themselves at the centre of things. Looking for a human face in the moon¹ and creating shapes from clouds are some of the basic examples of portraying this phenomenon. This tendency to see the world as ourselves is "anthropomorphism". This paper will further take a closer look on its types, forms, and evaluate the reasons behind the necessity of its inclusion as an inherent part of Animation. Mostly Indian mythological gods, goddess and monsters are zoomorphosized (Attribution of animal characteristics on humans), but in this paper we will be concentrating on the anthropomorphized characters in mythological theme based animated features released during year 2010. Following are the list of animated features based on Indian mythologies released during 2010 chosen for this study:

1. My Friend Ganesha 3 (Released on 26th March 2010)
2. Lava Kusa (Released on 8th October 2010)
3. Ramayana the Epic (Released on 15th October 2010)

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Anthropomorphic, Animism, Cognitive, Animation

Introduction

India has produced animation periodically for almost 90 years but due to the popular live action film culture and massive feature film industry has often been neglected. Compared to its western counterpart animation industry in India is still in its infancy. The 3 feature animated films purposively selected for this study are all based on mythological themes and use anthropomorphic characters. Though comparing the collections these films have made in relation to the cost incurred it will be difficult to come to a conclusion- that what makes it work.

To us as educators and practitioners in this field (Communication) it is important to know why anthropomorphic characters are in use so excessively in Animation; this will enable us to use it effectively. This study will focus on animated films and shorts for the same. There have been a surge of anthropomorphic objects and animals in animation, since the very beginning of this art form. Though there has been a lack of documentation of this phenomenon in relation to animation, this study will further add on to the understanding of

*Assistant Professor, AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, INDIA

All India 2010 (Figures in INR Crore)²

Name of the Film	No. of Cinemas	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Total	Cost	Dist. Share	Verdict
My Friend Ganesha 3	50	0.11	0.01	-	0.12	<u>n/a</u>	<u>0.06</u>	Disaster
Lava – Kusa	125	0.13	0.01	-	0.14	<u>25.00</u>	<u>0.07</u>	Disaster
Ramayana - The Epic	250	0.78	0.09	0.01	0.87	<u>20.00</u>	<u>0.43</u>	Disaster

anthropomorphism. Thus, a better insight on to this subject matter will further enable animators, animation film makers and also the audience a better knowledge of the same.

It is important to answer such questions: as to why anthropomorphism is used so extensively in animated films, what all anthropomorphic forms are omnipresent in animated films and through this understanding how can one further strengthen this art form by its use.

This study will be covering the current database available on anthropomorphism in general and in particular its uses in the field of animation will be discussed. Categorizing anthropomorphism into different head based on its use in animation field. This study will be useful for both practitioners and academicians in the field of communication and animation. This paper will offer an insight into the use of this phenomenon in Indian animated feature films based on mythological themes.

Research Methodology

Review of literature will help us to acquire knowledge of what all data is available and what needs to be done further, this study implements thematic textual analysis of purposively selected three Animated Feature Films based on mythological themes. The time range is January 1st to December 31st 2010. Time range where anthropomorphic characters have been depicted in the films have been identified and studied upon.

Anthropomorphism

The word Anthropomorphism comes from two Greek words, *άνθρωπος* (anthrōpos), meaning "human", and *μορφή* (morphē), meaning "shape" or "form".

Use of Anthropomorphism in Animation is prevalent since the very beginning, as early as the first ever character based animated short "Gertie the Dinosaur" (1914), though anthropomorphism has been a part of discussion since decades in relation with sociology, science and religion, not much has been published about its attribution in relation to animation.

To define anthropomorphism, it can be stated that it's not limited to our views to animals alone, but is deeply instilled in our thoughts and actions.³

Why anthropomorphize?

Anthropomorphism is linked to the human thinking in type of a cognitive default that subconsciously project ourselves on toys,

machines, objects and animals. Often objects are designed imitating human forms: thus projecting human attributes. Reasons, behind this can be to make the product more proverbial. Psychologically speaking, anthropomorphism often starts with animism⁴. This results into a self-extension onto the objects and animals with which one is emotionally involved with. Anthropomorphic form of communication has probably been in existence, since the very beginning. Based to Nietzsche's idea of the "falsification"⁵ of the world in terms of his study of sensation, to summarize that the world we are familiar with through sensation and perception is a unique world of qualities that is "true" for us. Which we can interpret as a humanized world of experience: stating that our sensory world is purely anthropomorphic.

Defining Animation

The word 'animation' is derived from the Latin verb, *animare*, which means 'to give life to'. It does this by creating a world of illusion. Animation can be defined as "art of time"; what happens between the frames is always magical. It's not the art/design on a single frame; it's the whole package that holds its consistency. This inflates those rather still and lifeless pieces of art with life and joy of movement.

There's a famous Greek myth, concerning Pygmalion once king of Cyprus, who made an image in ivory of a maiden. He fell in love with the image he had made and asked Venus to give it life. She did and the king married the maiden. In a way, it could be said that Pygmalion was the first animator: especially if animation means to give life, to bring your own fiction into an elusive reality. That's what differentiates animation from a feature (live action footage); animation portrays something which never happened in real time; whereas a live action feature is merely a record of what actually occurred in real time.

Maureen Furniss, author of *Art in motion: animation aesthetics*, states that in this present rapid phase of development with the many changes going on in this field, many definitions have become established by various organizations related to the animation field. Different fields, denominations and mediums/ techniques adopt different definitions of animation. However, the main dominating feature of animation will always be motion, action or movement.

Animation is of immense importance in the field of motion pictures because of its poetic abstract nature and because of its very origin that is based on fantasy. Thus what can't be achieved in motion pictures can be created through animation.

Kinds of Anthropomorphic Forms in Animation

In animation various objects, animals, geometric shapes, are anthropomorphized in a different instances based on the story requirement. This initial distinction of the kind of anthropomorphic form based on design Buchanan's four order of design, were reconceived and altered by Carl DiSalvo, Francine Gemperle and Jodi Forlizzi and were presented in their paper 'Imitation the Human Form: Four Kinds of Anthropomorphic Form'⁶ this act as the grounding for my own reflection of anthropomorphic forms in animation. Broadly categorizing anthropomorphic forms in animation into -three types.

Gestural anthropomorphic form

Often in abstract experimental animation, forms and shapes are used exemplifying a humanistic physical movement. A certain movement, gesture, pose reflects human behaviorism. A good example will be Laura Kissel and Karl Heider (1944) animated film, where basic geometrical shapes (rectangle, lines, triangle and circle) have been used to convey humanistic gestural traits.

Rather than just been basic geometrical shapes moving on a two dimensional plane, these objects seems to poses unique personality and reflects a mutual social interaction.

Structural anthropomorphic form

Incorporations of humanistic limbs or physical attributes to a non-living object or shape. We can also refer Structural anthropomorphic forms attributing/reflecting human anatomical values. For example, the anthropomorphic candle stand used in the 1991 Disney animated film 'Beauty and the Beast' which conveys emotional realism.

Behavioral anthropomorphic form

One of the most common anthropomorphic forms omnipresent in films is the anthropomorphic animal characters. Other than possessing humanistic anatomical structure, these characters also reflects behavioral traits similar to their human counterparts (standing upright, walking on two legs, talking, etc). One of the best examples of this form is an animation in which a hippo performs the solo 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight' with a dog.

Anthropomorphism in Animation

Anthropomorphism is associated with storytelling and has ancient roots. Different cultures hold a long-standing fable tradition with anthropomorphized animals as characters. Though the use of anthropomorphic characters in animation dates back to the creation the very first character based animated short film "Gertie the Dinosaur" by Winsor McCay back in 1914. But the real impetus which caused the extensive inclusion of anthropomorphic forms and animals in animation films started with Disney. Its latter extension can be seen at the Disneyland theme parks, where audio-animatrons have been used to create dancing and singing animals.⁷

Thomas and Johnston (2 of the Disney's Nine Old Men who were the core animators at beginning of Disney) emphasized that they could have pushed their character designs, but it was quintessential to retain human characteristics in them, so that the audience could identify with them.⁸

Anthropomorphism and Animation

My personal experience as a student, while learning animation was that we started animating human forms, before beginning, observing and animation animals, which makes it a natural process of applying our modified perception of movement of animals based on us, as it's easy to animate human characters as they are more accessible and one can always observe ourselves for a particular action or movement.

Based on our fables and stories from centuries onwards, we as humans have created several prototypes or pre-assumptions about animals: majestic elephant, beautiful swan, etc.

Anthropomorphism and Indian Mythology

Hanuman released in Indian theatres in 2005 and it got the Indian animated feature industry spinning. Audience loved the film and, subsequent to its record success, many Indian animation studios have tried to achieve a similar result. There is a strong misconception that Indian audience will accept readily anything to do with gods, which has been proven wrong with the failure of these 3 films that will be analysed in this paper. Though it's high time to realize that animated features are not all about visual effects, and fancy characters, it's about good script and convincing body movement.

Since the success of Hanuman (2005) most of the animated films are based on stories from mythology.

My Friend Ganesha 3

The third sequel of My Friend Ganesha directed by Rajiv Ruia uses a combination of live action and animated characters. Though compared to the previous 2 parts, this one has less animated sequences.

In this film only two anthropomorphic characters has been used one at 42:00 a talking turtle and the other, an anthropomorphic mouse named 'Mushakraj' who is shown as a side-kick of Ganesha and accompanies him wherever he goes. This occurrence follows a similar style which is predominant in many Disney classic films, such as 1940 animated feature 'Pinocchio' which features Jiminy Cricket along with Pinocchio and recently in 2010 animated feature by Disney 'Tangled' an anthropomorphic chameleon 'Pascal' is shown along with the main character 'Reunzel'.

Lava Kusa

A film based on the epic legend 'Ramayana' depicting the adventure of twins: Lava & Kusa. In this film various talking anthropomorphic characters have been shown - rabbits, vulture, squirrels, turtles, monkeys, horse and tiger. Use of anthropomorphic characters adds to the mystic effect of the Valmiki's Forrest (where the twins resides and learns the teachings of Guru Valmiki). These anthropomorphic characters work, as we empathize with them by recognizing even the most distorted traits as human, by reflecting similar traits in ourselves.⁹ These traits further enhance empathy and engagement level of the audience.

Ramayana the Epic

Based on the epic Ramayana, the film has a lot of action

sequences to add to story's appeal. Though the presentation of this film, has given more screen-time and prominence to Ravana, which could be one of the downfall of this feature. Even when analyzing the character development Ravana's character has been done with great craftsmanship, compared to Rama and Sita.

Anthropomorphic bear has been shown at 00:51:50 and 00:57:00; a giant multi-headed snake has been shown at 00:53:57 and an anthropomorphic monkey is shown at 00:59:40 who metamorphosis's into Hanuman. Thus the use of anthropomorphic characters in this feature is minimalistic compared to the other 2 features that have been studied.

Why does it work?

Though, anthropomorphism with its status in-conjunction to animation is a fundamentally flawed way to describe animals, as it is a more egocentric portrayal of us as humans, but to build a connection between the characters with audience it works inexplicably. This can be further emphasised by laying down a fact, that we are a lonely species and haven't reached that state/level where we can understand physiology behind the thinking process of animals.

By critically examining and bifurcating traits: for example: ethnicity, colour, social background, etc, which can either alienates us with a particular human character or helps us to connect with him/her. But, with the benefit of using anthropomorphic animal characters is that this urge of individuating¹⁰ fine details we feel about humans will not interfere with the process of storytelling and moral won't get jumbled. The prototypes of these characters which already exists in our literature, builds us a foundation of this storytelling process.

Ultimate goal of an animator should be to capitalize on how to maximize the connection between the audience and animated characters.

Research Question

The research seeks to analyze the incorporation of anthropomorphic characters in animation, further studying this implementation of anthropomorphism in animated feature films based on mythological themes. Looking at this phenomenon through different viewpoints: social, cultural, physiological: offering a different outlook and perspective into this animalistic practice called 'Anthropomorphism'.

Findings

This study has given an insight into the working of this phenomenon through various perspectives: social, cultural, and physiological and in particular to animation. This further validates that anthropomorphism has become an inherent part of our cultural framework and the way we look at things. This study validates that how essential it is to portray human traits for the development of a convincing animation character.

Conclusion and Future Work

From the ongoing research on anthropomorphism and use in animation, this study has identified different traits of

anthropomorphism in general and in the field of animation. We have broadly separated anthropomorphic forms in animation into 3 distinct categories based on its different traits. It should be emphasized here that anthropomorphism plays a very crucial importance in animation, referring to it as an important area of inquiry for research. Further impetus should be laid upon zoomorphism in contest with animation. Anthropomorphism in gaming to enhance interactivity is also a field which needs to be addressed.

Glossary

Anthropomorphism: attribution of human virtues to nonhumans.

Animism: belief in the existence of spirits separable from bodies.

Animation: An imaginary world, which an animator creates, is based on a set criteria of visual systems based on time, distance, value, shape, form, sound, and words in some sort of narrative or non-narrative format.

Animated Film: short or long duration films created by hand rendered images or computer generated images.

Cognitive: relating to, being, or involving conscious intellectual activity (as thinking, reasoning, or remembering).

References

1. *All India 2010 box-office report*. Retrieved on May 15, 2011. From <http://www.boxofficeindia.com/showProd.php?itemCat=366&catName=MjAxMA==>
2. *Anthropomorphism* Wikipedia. Retrived on March 04. From <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropomorphism>
3. Atkinson, N. (2006). *The Use of Anthropomorphism in the Animation of Animals*. Retrieved on 2/04/2011 From: http://ncca.bournemouth.ac.uk/gallery/files/innovations/2006/Atkinson_Nicola_6/NAtkinsonInnovations.pdf
4. Bukatman, S. (October, 1991). *There's Always Tomorrowland: Disney and the Hypercinematic Experience* Vol. 57, pp. 55-78
5. David, H. (1889). *The Natural History of Religion*. London: A. and H. Bradlaugh Bonner. P.7.
6. DiSalvo, C. Gemperle, F. & Forlizzi, J. (2003). *Imitating the Human Form: Four Kinds of Anthropomorphic Form*. Carnegie Mellon University, 5000 Forbes Ave. Pittsburgh, PA USA 15213.
7. George, J. S. (Apr., 1980). *Nietzsche and Anthropomorphism*. *Crítica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía*, Vol. 12, No. 34 pp. 54-71
8. Laurel, B. Shneiderman, B. & Brennan S. (1992). *In Defense of Anthropomorphism. ACM SIGCHI'92 as part of a panel entitled "Anthropomorphism: From Eliza to Terminator 2."*
9. Mitchell, Robert W.; Thompson, Nicholas S.; Miles, H. Lyn. (1997). *Anthropomorphism, anecdotes, and animals*. USA, New York, State University of New York Press.
10. Mellon, C. *Psychology: Perceiving Humanlikeness*. Retrieved on May 4, 2011. From, <http://anthropomorphism.org/psychology2.html>
11. Thomas, F AND Johnston, O, (1981): *The Illusion of Life*. Italy: Walt Disney Productions