Weaving the Polythematic Fabric of Story

INTRODUCTION

Employing polythemes in animated narrative adds intrigue, complexity, and greater emotional depth. Multiple themes, or polythemes, increase dimension in a story. To achieve deep, meaningful work, animators must incorporate historic, mimetic, romantic, and didactic elements. These four elemental themes layer compelling associations in the mind of the viewer and enhance otherwise conventional methods of storytelling.

> **"**
>
> **We tell stories to reveal truths, to entertain, to connect or persuade.** This has been true since the ancient Mesopotamians."

INSIGHTS

Overview

An opportunity exists to rethink the dominant theory of animated narrative and expand the core tenets of animation. Contemporary animation texts stress the presentation of simple, singular themes. Work that adheres to these lessons often demonstrates a basic viewpoint and creates homogenous, derivative animations and animators. Further, the advent of artificial intelligence threatens creatives, as straightforward storytelling can be imitated through machine learning.

By exercising the human-centric ability to identify and weave meaning within a story, animators can create narratives with meaningful, nuanced perspectives. Intentionally imbuing stories with polythemes guarantees that the psychological, social, and subtextual implications of a work will not only be more gratifying and profound, but more human. Pursuing this goal means altering the predominant way of teaching animation. Principally, this entails emphasizing that content and form are in integral relation to one another. It also connotes that the style, visual world, language, and characters all must be based on the reason and theme of the content. Using this method will distance animators
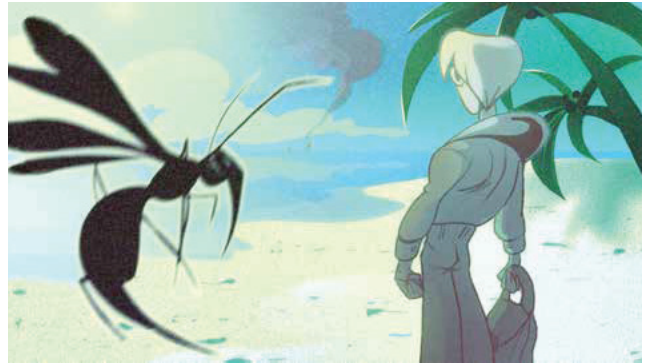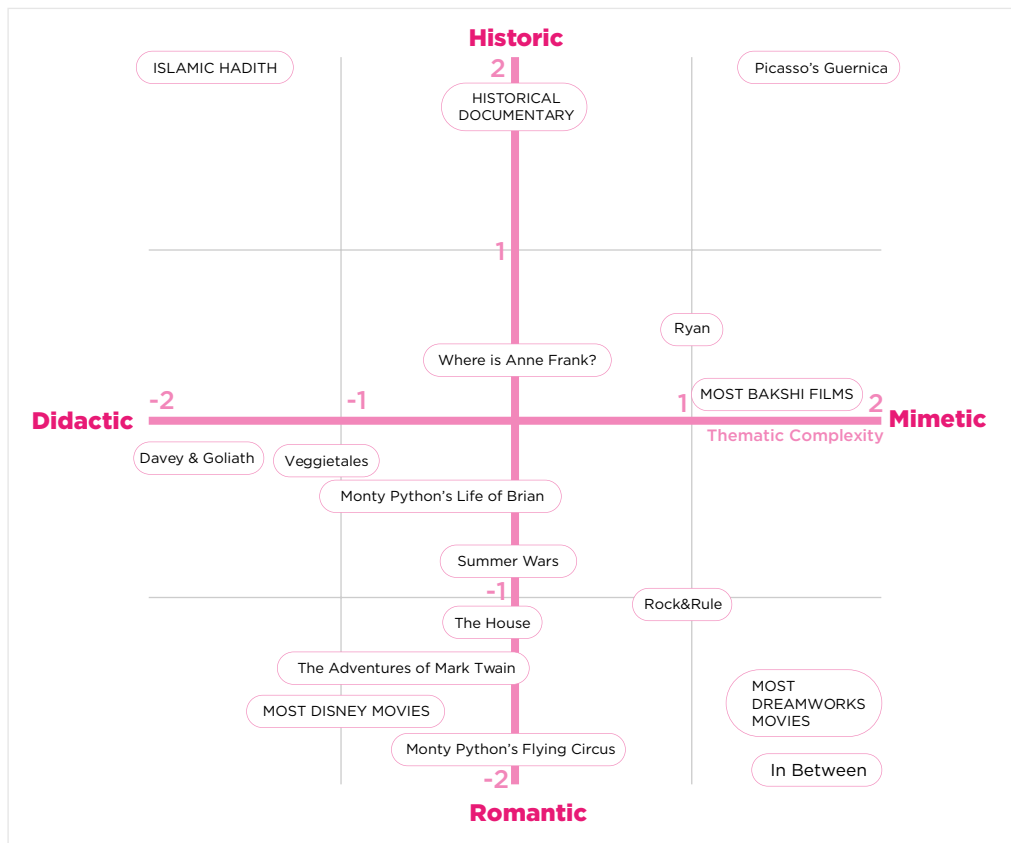

from the current existing formulae where animation narratives arrive frequently recycled and overly familiar to viewers.

> "
> The **solution is to teach the foundations of storytelling** without adhering to the existing formulae that have resulted in the frustrations we face today."

Types of Themes

Polythematic graph
Wasan Hayajneh (2022)

Historic

Historic themes seek to inform the viewer by contextualizing events and phenomena in a specific time and place. Inherently informational, the goal of historic themes is to impart facts or data and explain how events occurred.

Mimetic

Mimetic themes directly concern the presentation of emotional honesty through symbolism and metaphor. Satisfying the narrative function of connection, mimetic themes aim to distill a quality that viewers sense through intense feeling.

Romantic

Romanticism, separate from romance as a genre, primarily relates to ensuring the viewer's enjoyment. Romantic themes are commonly found in idealistic, high-concept entertainment.

Didactic

Didactic themes teach a lesson and are inherent in the narrative function of persuasion.

Successful stories that use the four narrative elements of complex, thematic entertainment — historic, mimetic, romantic, and didactic — can be gauged and assessed by the EPIC analysis. The EPIC analysis measures how a piece of media entertains, persuades, informs, and connects with the audience. This metric combines the four types of narrative themes and can be applied to evaluate the degrees of storytelling variance. Stories exhibiting the most thematic complexity contain traits of each.

Entertain Persuade Inform Connect

CONCLUSION

The predominant, performance-oriented tradition of animation lends itself to straightforward, oftentimes unimaginative and hackneyed stories. Polythematic storytelling aims to connect deeper with an audience by using a richer, more complex assemblage of narrative elements. Through the application of polythemes, animators can enhance otherwise traditional or formulaic storytelling methods. By implementing historic, mimetic, romantic, and didactic elements, contemporary animation storytelling can rise to contain multitudes and more fully reflect the subtle distinctions that comprise the human experience.

The Art of Electra Wasp: Weaving the Polythematic Fabric of Story was researched by Wasan Hayajneh (M.F.A., animation, 2023) as part of her graduate thesis.

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