Using animation discourse on the cartoon Kung Fu Panda

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Abstract. Animation discourse, with its unique conventions and techniques, is a clear example of how a medium can develop its own distinctive form of communication. One of the most prominent examples of this evolution is *Kung Fu Panda*, a 2008 animated film produced by DreamWorks Animation.

Key words: animation discourse, culture, character, humor, visual storytelling.

Introduction Animation has evolved from being a form of entertainment solely for children to a dynamic storytelling medium with the ability to convey complex themes. One of the most prominent examples of this evolution is *Kung Fu Panda*, a 2008 animated film produced by DreamWorks Animation. Directed by John Stevenson and Mark Osborne, *Kung Fu Panda* combines Eastern philosophy, martial arts, and humor to create a universally appealing story. By exploring the narrative structure, visual language, and cultural representations in *Kung Fu Panda*, we can uncover how animation discourse is applied to this cartoon and how it influences audience perceptions.

Animation as a Form of Communication

Animation is not just a visual spectacle; it is a sophisticated form of communication that employs various modes such as visuals, sound, narrative, and cultural references. In *Kung Fu Panda*, the use of animation extends beyond creating entertaining characters and settings. The film's vibrant visual style, martial arts choreography, and character design are rooted in animation's ability to merge different cultural and artistic elements seamlessly. The exaggerated movements, stylized action sequences, and anthropomorphism of animals align with animation discourse that allows for creativity in how stories are told and received.

Visual Storytelling and Cinematic Techniques

Kung Fu Panda utilizes animation discourse through its cinematic techniques, including framing, color schemes, and character design. The film employs vivid

colors that represent the thematic contrast between good and evil. The contrasting bright hues in the Valley of Peace and the darker tones in Tai Lung's lair illustrate the battle between these two forces. Additionally, the character movements, especially during action sequences, draw inspiration from martial arts films, further pushing the boundaries of what animated films can achieve. The use of slow-motion and dynamic camera angles during fight scenes mimics live-action martial arts films, blending realism with the exaggerated fluidity unique to animation.

Through the character Po, the clumsy panda who becomes the Dragon Warrior, the film plays with the concept of heroism and the "chosen one" trope. Po's journey of self-discovery is depicted through visual metaphors, such as the repeated motif of him gazing at his reflection, signifying his internal struggle with his self-worth. These narrative and visual elements enhance the storytelling in ways that live-action films may struggle to replicate due to the constraints of physical reality.

Cultural Representation and Global Appeal

One of the key aspects of animation discourse in *Kung Fu Panda* is how it represents and blends cultural motifs, especially from Chinese culture. The film is heavily influenced by Chinese martial arts (kung fu), philosophy, and traditional motifs, including references to ancient China, the concept of qi (life force), and the Yin-Yang dynamic. The film's setting, architecture, and character designs are inspired by traditional Chinese landscapes and folklore, offering a Western audience a glimpse into Eastern culture while maintaining universal themes of self-discovery, teamwork, and perseverance.

However, the use of cultural elements in *Kung Fu Panda* has been both celebrated and criticized. On one hand, the film popularizes Chinese culture on a global scale, introducing elements of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism to audiences in a digestible way. On the other hand, there is debate around cultural appropriation and whether the film accurately represents or oversimplifies Chinese culture for Western consumption. In animation discourse, such films often raise questions about authenticity and the ethics of borrowing from other cultures, especially when these stories are produced by non-Chinese filmmakers.

Anthropomorphism and Identity

The film employs anthropomorphism—giving human traits to animals—as a central narrative device. This is a common technique in animation, but in *Kung Fu Panda*, it is particularly effective in exploring identity. Each of the Furious Five, the group of kung fu masters Po looks up to, represents an animal commonly associated with kung fu styles (Tiger, Crane, Monkey, Mantis, and Viper). Their distinct personalities reflect not only their animal traits but also the essence of their fighting styles, contributing to the richness of the film's character development.

The protagonist, Po, embodies the typical "unlikely hero" archetype but through the lens of a panda, an animal associated with clumsiness and laziness in popular culture. His journey from a noodle shop worker to the Dragon Warrior serves as a metaphor for personal growth and self-acceptance. This anthropomorphic approach allows the film to tackle serious themes of self-worth and destiny in a lighthearted manner, making it accessible to audiences of all ages.

Humor and Emotional Engagement

Humor is an integral part of animation discourse, and *Kung Fu Panda* uses humor not just for entertainment but also to deepen emotional engagement. The film's comedic timing, largely driven by Po's bumbling personality, balances the more intense action sequences and philosophical undertones. The humor, often physical and slapstick in nature, is enhanced by the flexibility of animation, where characters can defy the laws of physics and exaggerate movements for comedic effect.

At the same time, the film doesn't shy away from emotional moments, particularly in Po's interactions with his mentor, Master Shifu. The combination of humor and heartfelt moments creates an emotional rollercoaster that keeps the audience engaged while also emphasizing the film's underlying messages about perseverance and self-belief.

Conclusion

Kung Fu Panda exemplifies how animation discourse can be applied to create a complex, multi-layered film that appeals to both children and adults. Through its

visual storytelling, cultural representation, and use of humor and anthropomorphism, the film transcends the limitations of traditional animation, offering a narrative that is both visually stunning and emotionally resonant. As animation continues to evolve, *Kung Fu Panda* serves as a benchmark for how the medium can be used to explore deep themes while maintaining widespread appeal. By analyzing the film through the lens of animation discourse, we gain insight into the ways in which animated films can shape cultural understanding and provide meaningful entertainment across generations.

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