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Disney Films: Reflections of the Other and the Self

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ABSTRACT: In the last decade of the 20th century most Disney animated features focused on the depiction of cultural otherness. Despite an apparent interest in spreading the knowledge of distant cultures, these films rely almost exclusively on conventional cultural metonymies to build the representations of the Other. More significantly, references to otherness are overwhelmed by the countless visual and verbal elements which belong to the narrating culture. If the «biased» nature of the cultural encounters which take place in these Disney films can be easily evinced from an analysis of the original screenplays, it is only by taking into account their Italian translations that it becomes fully evident. Thus, by comparing excerpts from the original and the Italian versions of the films, this paper sets out to explore the threefold cultural encounter which takes place in them, ultimately highlighting the complexity which lies in the transfer of all-specific American references rather than the generalized, universally-known visual and verbal clichés which are used to evoke the Other.

Keywords: animated films, otherness, translation, cultural metonymies, hegemonic perception.

RESUMEN: En la última década del siglo XX, la mayoría de las películas de dibujos animados de Disney se centraron en la descripción de la alteridad cultural. A pesar del aparente interés por difundir el conocimiento de culturas distantes, estas películas se apoyan exclusivamente en metonimias culturales convencionales en su construcción del Otro, mientras que las referencias a la alteridad se ven desbordadas por los innumerables elementos visuales y verbales pertenecientes a la cultura narradora. Si la naturaleza sesgada de los encuentros culturales presentes en estas películas es fácilmente reconocible tras un mero análisis de los guiones originales, tal hecho se hace totalmente evidente a través de las traducciones al italiano. Mediante la comparación de fragmentos originales y su traducción italiana, este artículo explora el encuentro cultural a tres niveles que se produce, subrayando la complejidad inherente en la transferencia de las referencias específicamente estadounidenses, en contraste con los clichés visuales y verbales universalmente conocidos y de carácter generalizante utilizados para evoca al Otro.

Palabras clave: películas de dibujos animados, alteridad, traducción, metonimia cultural, percepción hegemónica.

In the opening scenes of *Hercules,* viewers are flooded with images of classical statues and vases which immediately call to mind the ancient Greek culture portrayed in the film. In one of the next scenes Hades, king of the Underworld, refers to the newborn son of Zeus and Hera by saying, «is this kid gonna mess up my hostile takeover bid or what?»

In *Mulan*, the Chinese emperor who appears at the very beginning uses typical words of wisdom to describe the unstable fate of his reign: «a single grain of rice can tip the scale». Instants later the dragon Mushu, who is appointed by Mulan's ancestors to protect her in battle, complains about this task saying: «I'm doomed! And all 'cause miss man decides to take her little drag show on the road». He eventually accepts his duty and offers Mulan, a Chinese soldier of the XVIIth century, bacon and eggs for breakfast.

The description of these short sequences, from two of the nine Disney mainstream films released in the last decade of the 20th century (see Table 1), points to the two different sets of cultural references which appear in all of them and, more significantly, hints at the peculiar nature of the cultural representations which these audiovisual texts contain.

Table 1: Disney mainstream films produced between 1991 and 2000

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST (1991)	France (XVIIth century)
ALADDIN (1992)	Middle East
THE LION KING (1994)	South Africa
POCAHONTAS (1995)	Hispaniola
THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME (1996)	France (Middle Ages)
HERCULES (1997)	Ancient Greece
MULAN (1998)	China
TARZAN (1999)	Africa
ATLANTIS (2000)	The Lost Continent

As a matter of fact, all the major animated features released by Disney between 1991 and 2000 are similarly centred upon the depiction of cultures

which are distant in terms of space and/or time from the American culture, the narrating self whose presence always appears behind the representations of the Other.

If a first observation of this set of films might lead one into believing that Disney's decision to represent otherness in a sequence of mainstream productions is due to some interest in spreading the knowledge of remote cultures, viewing the films is enough to realize that there is nothing spontaneous in the cultural portraits which they offer to their viewers. Relying only on a few, fixed traits which belong to a long-standing repertoire drawn up *in* the West and *for* the West, these representations seem to deny any sort of dynamism and evolution to the cultures portrayed. By contrast, references to the narrating culture are the real conveyors of meaning and humour, become essential to the narration and totally outnumber the references made to the narrated Other.

Drawing examples from some of the films in Table 1, this paper aims to define the nature and role of the visual and verbal stereotypes which are employed to narrate otherness, as well as to measure their value in relation to the more numerous references to the narrating American culture. Moreover, taking into account the translations of these films for the Italian audience, the hegemonic role played by the American culture shall appear all the more clearly, clarifying the real nature and purpose of the cultural encounters which take place in these apparently «neutral» films.

1. Films and the Representation of Otherness

In historical terms, the tradition of representing otherness through a filtered gaze has its roots in Western colonialism, in the efforts which were made by the colonizers to impose their own cultural, linguistic parameters to the subjugated populations of the so-called East. Moreover, mediated representations served the purpose of the West since moulding the image of the Other according to their own needs was a means to reinforce their own identity and supremacy. The dissemination of biased representations of non-Western cultures flourished even beyond the decades of colonial expansion, strongly influencing the post-colonial redefinition of international relationships.

One of the first scholars to give a sharp, although perhaps overdetermined account of these biased cultural encounters was Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Even though primarily concerned with tracing the history of the Orientalist attitude by the West in literature, it is interesting to observe that Said does not fail to consider the importance of new technologies and the media in the spreading of this unjust tradition: «One aspect of the electronic, post-modern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the

Orient is viewed. Television, films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized moulds» (Said, 1978: 26).

More recently, the Saudi Arabian-born scholar Ziauddin Sardar (1999) has written an interesting book which, as a sort of tribute to Said's groundbreaking work, shares with it the title, *Orientalism*. The main interest of Sardar's book, whose approach is even harsher than Said's, lies in his detailed reflections upon the new, modern ways by which the Orientalist attitude manifests itself and is still spreading nowadays. By way of introduction to his work, Sardar (1999: vii) declares that «even though the project of Orientalism has way passed its "sell by date", it is colonizing new territories», such «new territories» being related to the new geographies which are shaped – and controlled – by contemporary means of mass communication like the cinema. A whole chapter of Sardar's work is devoted to Orientalism in films, where the author sets out to explore the treatment and manipulation of other cultures within filmic narrations across different genres, including cartoons, and where he makes ample reference to the American hegemonic control of the cinematic medium. Sardar (1999: 53) states that otherness is generally treated as «a pattern book from which strands can be taken» to draw up cultural representations which serve the purpose of entertaining audiences while reinforcing, by contrast, the superiority of the narrating culture. Thus, the «commodification of culture» (Bell and Garrett, 1998), a process whereby visual and verbal elements belonging to a distant world are taken and made suitable for smooth reception within more powerful socio-cultural settings, has been reinforced rather than rejected by contemporary media, with the American culture somehow inevitably leading the way in this process.

1.1. Otherness in Disney Films

Bearing in mind what has been said so far, let us now embark on the analysis of the cultural representations which are to be found in Disney mainstream productions of the last decade of the 20th century. Before exploring the visual and verbal stereotypes employed in these films, however, it may be worth making a preliminary reflection, considering the reasons for the selection of certain cultures rather than others in these representations. As a matter of fact, what might appear to be a random choice – in Disney films as well as other cinematic products – is often to be ascribed to precise cultural and ideological strategies. All the cultures which are selected to be portrayed in the nine films under scrutiny, for instance, are either traditionally considered somehow «inferior» if compared to modern Western civilizations and to the narrating American culture in particular (Sardar, 1999: 50-53), or they refer to prior stages of social and cultural development in comparison to the contemporary American standards. On the

whole, what never fails to occur is an asymmetrical relationship, whereby the distance between the narrat*ed* and narrat*ing* cultures is to be felt either on the geographical or on the temporal axis.

A first, practical example can be found in the depiction of the Medieval French culture which comes up in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. As Sardar (1999: 77) points out in his analysis of the filmic representations of otherness, «in modern times it is conventional to see the Medieval era as far removed from the world of contemporary secular and scientific thought». Therefore, the representation of a Medieval setting perfectly serves the purpose of reinforcing the supremacy of the narrating, ultramodern and «more civilized» culture.

The same can be said regarding *Hercules*: even though it is commonly considered one of the pillars in the development of modern civilizations, the ancient Greek culture portrayed in the film still belongs to a «barbaric age»,[1] where chaos reigned and eccentric Gods played with the destiny of humans. A reflection of this attitude can be found in the words which are sung by the muses who introduce the story at the very beginning of the film:

MUSES: Back when the world was new
The planet Earth was down on its luck
And everywhere gigantic brutes called Titans ran amok
It was a nasty place
There was a mess wherever you stepped
Where chaos reigned and the earthquakes
and volcanos never slept.

Another very interesting example appears in the opening sequence of *Aladdin* (1992), where the Arabic culture which is at the centre of narration is explicitly defined «barbaric» from the very first lines which make up the opening song:

PEDDLER: Oh I come from a land
From a faraway place
Where the caravan camels roam
Where they cut off your ear
If they don't like your face
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.

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1. The concept of *barbarism* comes up often in the works of scholars who, like Said (1978: 49-110) and Sardar (1999: 2-53), have extensively discussed the position taken by modern Western cultures with regard to otherness. As they have both observed, it is typical of the Western Orientalist attitude to promote images of distant cultures as backwards and barbaric. Sardar in particular points out that the level of civilization of these «barbaric communities» can only be compared to the obscure ages which Western societies went through, especially before or during the Middle Ages.

The blatantly offensive final line had to be eliminated from the home video version of the film as a consequence of the numerous protests the Disney Company received after international release. However, all the other subtle and indirect hints at the American culture's position of supremacy over the narrated Other, which is deliberately kept unspecified in historical-geographical terms, remain untouched, and insidiously shape the viewers' perception.

2. Cultural Stereotypes as Distorted Metonymies

The very nature of animated films, as well as motion pictures in general, allows the viewer comparatively limited time to identify and understand what is represented on screen. Therefore, the viewer often uncritically accepts the selection of images, words and sounds which are made to stand for concepts, actions, even whole cultures, and is brought «to acquiesce to a hegemonic form of perception» (Marks, 2000: 24). For the creators of films, the most effective way to ensure such a hegemonic perception lies in depicting other peoples and cultures through worldwide-known stereotypes, which require no effort and no time to be understood, as well as counterbalancing these stereotypes with stronger references to a more powerful and «impressive» narrating culture. Thus, seemingly justified by their being easily identified and interpreted by viewers, cultural stereotypes abound in mainstream cinema as well as, of course, in animated features.

In the case of Disney films, the portraits of the Other which are offered to the audience rely on a limited set of long-established, visual and verbal stereotypes, with no hint at other aspects of the cultures which are represented, nor to their evolution.[2]

If cultural stereotypes which are used to portray otherness in films and other media have an intrinsic metonymic value of their own, in the nine Disney films under scrutiny, the very nature of the limited set of stereotypes which are used, their being flanked by virtually no other reference to the cultures portrayed and, last but not least, their being continuously measured against elements which belong to the «overwhelming» American culture, allow for a definition not only as cultural metonymies but as *distorted* cultural metonymies. Their function is to

2. If the use of such conventional, easily identifiable elements could be partly justified by Disney films' association with children as privileged viewers, it might be worth mentioning that it was just from the end of the 1980s that Disney geared its attention towards adult viewers (Maltin, 2000; De Fornari, 1995). One of the main proofs of this new attitude was the decision to give up fairy tales as their main source of narrative material and opt for international stories and settings. Besides, the very fact of promoting the knowledge of otherness exclusively through clichéd images and expressions, especially for younger viewers, has contributed to the shaping of a rather unrealistic knowledge of other cultures since the earliest days of its interest towards – and reflections upon – the outside world.

provide an exotic, suggestive and self-contained backdrop to the narration while emphasizing, by contrast, the lively and powerful role of the narrating culture.

Such distorted metonymies operate on the visual and verbal levels alike. Animated images can be carefully constructed so that only a few selected elements, colours and traits are employed, ensuring that the acquiescent viewers are drawn towards one and the same perception. By the same token, words and expressions which are conventionally attached to cultures and have assumed, in time, an international value can be said to have somehow lost their primary meaning in order to function mainly as auditory reminders of a distant, exotic world.

In the nine Disney films of the corpus here presented, the nature and function of visual and verbal cultural metonymies is clearly manifested. A few examples will be provided in the following paragraphs, and their very essence will be perceived all the more clearly when compared with a selection of elements from the narrating culture which abound in the films. Regrettably, no permission has been granted by Disney to reproduce images from the films, therefore it will be necessary to rely solely on descriptions of relevant excerpts.

3. Cultural Metonymies for the Narrated Other and References to the Narrating Self

3.1. The Narrated Other

When observing the use of cultural metonymies in Disney films, a number of regularities can be identified. First of all, there is a remarkable concentration of such long-established, worldwide-known stereotypes – on the visual as well as verbal levels – in the opening scenes, where the portraits of the Other are outlined. The contrast with the narrating culture is, at this stage, not particularly emphasized and the Other may still seem to play a major role in the films. Secondly, cultural metonymies are very often related to specific domains such as food, which provides universally identifiable socio-cultural references and ensures easy, if strongly stereotyped identification of different nations and peoples. Finally, in the case of verbal metonymies, references to other cultures' clichéd words and expressions tend to draw from common categories such as greetings, exclamations and titles.[3]

3. Greetings and exclamations, though not necessarily connected to the stereotyping of cultures, can nonetheless be frequently used to support cultural representations as they ensure simple and immediate identification. In many cases, as it clearly emerges in the two films from the corpus where the French culture is portrayed (*Beauty and the Beast* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), these words and expressions are merely used as «auditory reminders» of the Other, deprived of their true meaning. For further reference, see Di Giovanni, Bollettieri Bosinelli, Torresi (in Cortese, 2005).

In *Aladdin*, the 1992 film where a non-specified Arabic culture is portrayed, the peddler who plays the role of narrator in the film makes his first appearance as a distant figure on a camel which moves slowly through a large desert. He has a hot sun at his back and a large turban on his head. The sequence of drawings is dominated by nuances of red, ochre and light brown and a typical Arabic music underscores the slow, sinuous movements of the characters, as well as does the camera. On the verbal level, the first words which are uttered by the peddler contain an unmistakable, conventional reference to the culture portrayed: «PEDDLER: Ah, Salaam and good evening to you worthy friends». The worldwide-known Arabic greeting is, however, immediately followed by «good evening», as if to compensate even for the faintest sense of estrangement the viewer might feel upon hearing «salaam».

The following line uttered by the peddler contains one more conventional and even somewhat derogatory reference to the other culture. While introducing his land to the «foreign» viewers, the peddler seizes the opportunity to try and sell his merchandise, conforming to the stereotyped view by which people from this part of the world are all more or less improvised merchants.

PEDDLER: Welcome to Agrabah. City of mystery,
of enchantment, and the finest merchandise this
side of the river Jordan. On sale today, come on down!

In the opening sequence of *Mulan*, the 1998 film which portrays the Chinese culture at the time of the invasions by the Huns, the visual and verbal cultural metonymies employed do not contain any derogatory reference, but they are equally highly conventional. By way of example, let us first of all refer to the words used by the emperor of China – who, incidentally, is always shown with the image of a golden dragon at his back – to address his army generals in a situation of emergency. As shown below, he exhibits a typical trait which is often associated with the Chinese culture, using words of wisdom to describe the fate of his country: «EMPEROR: A single grain of rice can tip the scale». Besides, it shall be noted that the reference to the most popular element of the Chinese culinary tradition does not appear by coincidence in the emperor's line. The shot which immediately follows features a large bowl of rice in the foreground with a pair of chopsticks lazily picking at the rice. This image is used in the film to introduce the protagonist herself, who will be very slowly revealed to the audience starting from her hand holding the chopsticks.

3.2. The Narrating Self

Alongside the cultural metonymies employed to visually and verbally define the stereotypical image of the distant Other, Disney films are replete with all kinds of references to the narrating American culture. In contrast with the limited set of cultural metonymies which, as stated earlier, are mainly employed to provide an exotic backdrop for the narration, the references to the American culture are taken from contemporary life and speech and, on the verbal level, they are conveyors of humour, puns and gags. On the whole, they utterly outnumber even the faint and artificial presence of the Other which is evoked by means of the cultural metonymies. Once again making reference to the visual as well as verbal spheres, the following examples aim at providing evidence of the overwhelming role played by the narrating culture in Disney films.

In *Mulan,* after the introductory sequence described above, a reversal of focus from the narrat*ed* to the narrat*ing* culture becomes evident as soon as the young Chinese heroine decides to become a soldier and serve her country in the war. If, at the very beginning of the film, she is introduced to the audience while eating rice, a few shots later her «Chineseness» is somehow distorted by what happens on her first day in battle. The images which show Mulan getting up in a military tent are immediately followed by a cut to a close shot of a bowl of porridge with rashers of bacon and fried eggs, which make up Mulan's breakfast. The bowl which contained rice in the opening scene has been deprived of its typical, if also highly conventional, Chinese content to be replaced by what looks more familiar to the American viewers, although totally remote from the eating habits of Chinese soldiers.

Another interesting example of what can be defined as «cultural cannibalization» (Basnett and Trivedi, 1999 *a*) appears in *Hercules* (1997). While Hades, whose main goal is to prevent Hercules from becoming a hero by destroying him, is unveiling his evil plan to finally defeat Hercules to his two assistants Pain and Panic, he is suddenly struck by the realization of their total lack of concern. In a rather hilarious sequence, Pain and Panic are portrayed as if they had just left a Disney theme park, having fallen prey to some undoubtedly modern, American-style merchandise with Hercules' logo. Pain is drinking from a huge paper cup with plastic cover and straw, while Panic is wearing some big, colourful shoes whose brand name – Air Herc – is clearly visible and recalls the famous Air Max cushioned trainers by Nike, first launched on the market in 1997, just when *Hercules* was released in the USA.

Notwithstanding the strong and clear evidence provided by the examples above, it is in the use of language that the presence of the narrating American culture in the films is perhaps made more explicit. First of all, it is worth pointing

out that all the main characters in the films, although belonging to distant and exotic worlds, speak with perfect American accents. Moreover, they are very often characterized by the use of non-standard, colloquial or regional varieties of American English.

This is the case of the dragon Mushu in *Mulan*, whose lines are filled with contemporary, informal American expressions, and marked by the use of so-called jive talk.[4] Similarly, in *Aladdin*, the most striking, informal and modern use of American English is to be found in the lines uttered by the genie of the lamp, whose main feature is the ability to change shape and linguistic register continuously, appearing in different guises and often mimicking famous American personalities. His lines are filled with colloquial expressions as well as references to the contemporary American world. For example, when he first comes out of the lamp and meets Aladdin, the genie greets him pretending to be the host of a TV show, and when Aladdin later asks for help, the genie-turned-Jack Nicholson replies «All right sparky, here's the deal. You wanna court the little lady, you gotta be a straight shooter, do ya follow me?».

The presence of these and similar lines in the film contributes to expanding the gap between the narrat*ing* and the narrat*ed* cultures – or, in Goddard's terms, the *narrator* and the *narratees* – increasingly relegating the latter to a suggestive but lifeless background. However, the roles played by the two cultures in the nine Disney films are best perceived by comparing the original versions and the Italian translations: the need to accommodate for a third culture reveals that the stillness of cultural representations is far easier to transfer than the lively presence of the American culture in the films.

4. Translation as the Site for Secondary Cultural Encounters

Even though the concept of translation can be applied to a corpus of stratified, multifarious products like animated films in a number of different ways,[5] we will here refer to the act of translating mainly in linguistic terms and, inevitably, in cultural terms. As a matter of fact, beyond the mere act of linguistic transfer, translation always implies contact between at least two cultures, with the aim to negotiate difference and – at least ideally – to make it visible.

4. The expression is mainly used in black American slang and usually employed as a synonym of trash talk.
5. «Verbal language is only one of the many codes at work within films, its role is defined by its co-occurrence with signs from other codes in shaping cultural images and, consequently, audience reception» Di Giovanni (2003: 209).

As has been pointed out with reference to the cultural representations drawn up in mainstream films distributed by Disney at the turn of the century, giving visibility to difference is not often a priority for contemporary media. Conversely, the logic of mass distribution and, less overtly, the will to shape mass perception while ensuring «easy entertainment» are the major factors at play in the creation of most audiovisual products, especially when it comes to the American film industry.

In an age of increasing awareness of media communication and power, where translation plays a major role in the international distribution and appreciation of audiovisual texts, its role in relaying cultural representations becomes ever so meaningful. This is what happens, for instance, in the Italian adaptations of the Disney films here under analysis, as their being translated into a different language from the original American version entails transferring the cultural representations drawn up in each film. In our specific case, looking at Italian translations as the sites for secondary cultural encounters will lead us to observe that mediated representations of otherness, built through distorted cultural metonymies, are rather easy to transfer into a second, Western language, due to their being drawn from a codified repertoire which is shared by the Western world, in this particular case English and Italian contexts. On the contrary, it is when they have to adapt the all-American references and expressions that Italian translators are faced with a difficult task. The secondary cultural encounter which comes up in the adaptation into Italian and involves two worlds which are seemingly closer – they both belong to the West or «Occident» in Said's terms – is much harder to resolve than the mediated, stereotyped encounter with the Other.

4.1. Adapting the Narrat*ed* Other and the Narrat*ing* Self Into Italian

After a few, broad reflections, let us now comment on some examples drawn from the translated versions of the nine Disney films from the last decade of the 20th century. Besides providing evidence for what has been stated above, the following choice of excerpts and their discussion aim at outlining a continuum between the two extremes of the cultural references which are employed in these films.

As the transfer of verbal cultural metonymies which appear in the nine Disney films generally poses no problem for the translators, due to their long-standing and transnational value, we will here only focus on one excerpt from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). It was the first Disney film to be released in the last decade of the 20th century, built around the representation of a culture which is distant in terms of time, rather than space, from the narrating American culture.

As both Said (1978) and Sardar (1999) pointed out, the «remoteness» between the narrat*ed* Other and the narrat*ing* self can take up different guises, provided that the stage of development of the two cannot be matched and the superiority of the narrator remains unquestioned. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the portrait of France appears to be hazy and marginal, but the settings and habits which are evoked as a background to the narration clearly belong to a remote age, no later than the XVIIth century. Besides laying the emphasis on time references, the «flavour of France» is unoriginally conveyed through some of the most commonly exploited cultural metonymies, in particular those connected with the popular French cuisine. The main song and dance number in *Beauty and the Beast* is, not by chance, called the «Culinary Cabaret», where delicious dishes are offered to the protagonist Belle by the butler-chandelier Lumière. Some of these specialties are mentioned in the lines below, sung by Lumière, followed by the Italian translation. As can be clearly seen, there are minimum changes in the spelling of French words which are used in the two versions and only a few, simple cases of compensation in the Italian translation:

LUMIERE: Beef ragout, cheese soufflé,
pie and pudding en flambé,
we'll prepare and serve with flair
a culinary cabaret!

LUMIERE: Che ragù, che soufflé,
torte e caramel flambé,
preparati e serviti
con un grande cabaret!

Similar instances of smooth transfer for clichéd words and references are to be found in all the Italian versions of the films.

Sometimes, elements which refer to the distant worlds evoked in the films are used to generate puns. In these cases, the «exotic» references become mere pretexts to give life to contemporary, American-style gags. This is clearly visible in the following excerpt from *The Lion King*, where the two hyenas Shenzi and Banzai are making fun of the young and naïve cub Simba. The Italian translators strived to maintain the two puns of the original version and undoubtedly managed to produce a good Italian version of the second, adapting it to the receiving culture's habits. However, the objective difficulty of adapting these plays on words has led to a partially neutralized effectiveness, accompanied by the loss of the typical American accent, as well as the use of very colloquial sentences and exclamations, which characterize the two hyenas.

ZAZU: My, my, my. Look at the sun. It's time to go.
SHENZI: What's the hurry? We'd love to have you stick around for dinner.
BANZAI: Yeeeah! We could have whatever's «lion» around!
SHENZI: Oh, wait, wait, wait. I got one. Make mine a «cub» sandwich. Whatcha think?

ZAZU: Oddio, oddio. Il sole sta calando. E' ora di andare.
SHENZI: Che fretta c'è? Saremmo molto felici di avervi per cena.
BANZAI: Già! E poi vi assicuriamo che sarà un pranzo da re!
SHENZI: Aspetta, senti questa. Potremmo mangiarci un «felino» di pasta. Che ne dici, eh?

On the whole, good solutions as the one which has been created for «cub sandwich» are rather difficult to find, although the film scripts are replete with instances of linguistic and cultural overlaps which are evoked by the narrating American culture to somehow verbally subjugate – domesticate – the Other.

In the following lines from *Hercules*, the muses who act as narrators to the story are celebrating the glory and popularity acquired by the young hero. The first line bears an example of extremely colloquial language and, most significantly, the second contains a twofold cultural reference. While somehow hinting at the democratic principles who governed the society of ancient Greece, the muses explicitly refer to the all-American custom of using opinion polls to evaluate the populariry of public figures.

The linguistic and cultural specificity of these two lines made them hard to adapt for Italian viewers, therefore the Italian version of the two lines appears to be neutralized and rephrased as follows:

MUSES: Bless my soul, Herc was on a roll, person of the week in every Greek opinion poll.

MUSE: Non ce n'è per nessuno ormai, di tutta la Grecia è il più esaltante degli eroi.

To conclude our brief overview of the increasing difficulties to resolve the secondary cultural encounters which come up in the translation of these culturally-centred Disney films, let us comment on a few excerpts which reveal the overwhelming presence and hegemonic role of the American culture. As can be seen all through the films, references to the narrating self take up a number of different guises and their specificity makes their transfer into a second language / culture almost impossible.

By way of example, let us refer once again to *Hercules*, quoting an excerpt from the opening sequence of the film. The muses who play the role of narrators

are far from being inspired by the features, language and mannerism of characters from classical Greek literature or mythology: they are black and cheerful ladies who always sing gospel-style. This very special musical genre, whose origins are deeply rooted in the American society and which is explicitly referred to by the muses in their songs, is totally made to disappear from the Italian version of the film. Even though gospel singing is undoubtedly known to Italian viewers, it would have been impossible, for instance, to keep the all-American expression «that's the gospel truth» which gives life to a constantly repeated play on words between what is being said by the muses and their singing style. Similarly, the metaphor based on «vermouth» which occurs in line four below is suppressed in the Italian translation with the overall result of a different, shorter and necessarily neutralized version.

MUSES: Zeus tamed the globe while still in his youth
Tough, honey, it may seem impossible
That's the gospel truth
On Mount Olympus life was neat
And smooth as sweet vermouth
Although honey, it may seem impossible
That's the gospel truth.

MUSE: Zeus fece tutto in tenera età
E anche se sembra impossibile
C'è anche di più
Sul monte Olimpo ritornò la pace grazie a lui
Sebbene può sembrarvi strano
Questa è la realtà.

A similar example of inevitable neutralization is to be found in the lines uttered by Philocetes, Hercules' trainer. The satyr, colloquially named «Phil» throughout the film, makes constant use of colloquialisms and drops in countless references to the narrating American culture. For instance, when taking Hercules to Thebes for the first time, Philocetes introduces the town to his trainee hero by means of the following lines:

PHILOCETES: One town, a million troubles. The one and only Thebes.
The big olive itself.
If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.

FILOCETE: Una città, un milione di guai. La sola e unica Tebe.
La grande oliva.
Sai come chiamano i tebani? Gli ebetani.

The Italian audience is deemed capable of appreciating the play on words based on the nickname given to New York City as «the big apple», which is here metaphorically turned into the «big olive». As a matter of fact, this nickname constitutes an internationally valid stereotype in itself and needs no adaptation. On the contrary, the subtler reference contained in the final line uttered by Philocetes, which clearly refers to the famous American song *New York, New York*, is not deemed appropriate for the Italian viewers and is awkwardly replaced by a rather weak and inadequate pun on the inhabitants of Thebes supposedly being half-wits («tebani-ebetani»).

Finally, the following lines are taken from *Atlantis* and pronounced by Joshua Reed, a doctor of Afro-American origin who is introducing himself to the rest of the crew taking part in the expedition to the lost continent.

JOSHUA: I got a sheepskin from Howard U and a bearskin from Iron Cloud.
One day I'm studying gross anatomy in the classroom, the next, I'm sewin'up Rough Riders on San Juan Hill.

JOSHUA: Ho avuto una mezza laurea dalla Howard University e l'altra mezza da Nuvola di Ferro.
Un giorno studiavo anatomia generale in aula, il giorno dopo ricucivo i volontari della cavalleria.

In the Italian translation there are several instances of adaptation and neutralization. First of all, the pun based on the word «sheepskin» – which in American English can refer both to the skin of the sheep and to a diploma – is lost. Moreover, the reference to the Afro-American Howard University of Washington is certainly not perceived by the Italian viewers and, finally, in the last sentence of the Italian version no mention is made to Rough Riders and San Juan Hill.

5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it should be first of all pointed out that, even though the examples shown seem to imply that the Italian versions of these films are poor and inadequate adaptations of the original scripts, this is certainly not the case. The Italian translators have put considerable effort in trying to recreate the flavour and meaning of the references and expressions used in the films, trying to adapt them to the needs of the receiving culture. However, the extremely large amount of all-American references which appear in the films unavoidably leads to producing neutralized, simpler versions in different languages / cultures. It is not the seemingly distant Other, narrated through long-standing and distorted

cultural metonymies, which evokes a sense of distance for the culture receiving its representation through translation. It is the hegemonic role of the narrating self which gives rise to an indirect, more difficult-to-resolve cultural encounter.

One final example of different, more overtly cannibalizing translation appears in the following lines from *Pocahontas*. When the female and male protagonists meet for the first time, the young Native-American called Pocahontas and the «civilized» man from the West called John Smith speak different languages and cannot understand each other. Only when Pocahontas yields to English can she be understood by John Smith, who smiles smugly as the young girl utters the final line:

JOHN: Don't run off.
It's all right, I'm not gonna hurt you.
[offers her a hand] Here, let me help you out of there.

POCAHONTAS: *Me-da-que, natoorath.*

JOHN: You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you?

JOHN: Who are you?

POCAHONTAS: [hesitating] Pocahontas.

JOHN: What? What did you say?

POCAHONTAS: My name is Pocahontas.

The implications which arise from the sequence above somehow bring this paper to its natural conclusion: speaking English, hence being willing to give up one's own language and culture, is the key to being understood, considered, cared for. As it happened in colonial times, when the British conquered new territories and imposed their language and social order, English still appears to be a powerful tool in the management of cultural difference through contemporary media.

As for a possible interest in spreading the knowledge of otherness through these films, the short presentation of the two sets of references to the narrated Other and the narrating self which has been here provided clearly reveals that distant cultures are not the *subject* of narration, but rather *objects* which are used to ensure the success of these all-American audiovisual products.

Even if the use of cultural metonymies to represent distant worlds could be partly justified by the age group these films are primarily associated with – i.e. children – otherness in Disney mainstream movies is mainly used as a narrative

pretext to support, by contrast, the cultural and economic supremacy of a post-colonial superpower whose influence worldwide is strongly promoted by the media.

The aim of this paper, however, is not to stigmatize such an attitude, but only to shed light on what can be obtained through the production and worldwide distribution of seemingly neutral cinematic products. On the whole, the effect produced by carefully constructed narrations of distant cultures, by the juxtaposition of images and expressions which deny cultural dynamism, is what Jack Zipes (1994: 94) calls the «domestication of imagination», a process which, perhaps not surprisingly, extends its influence also through translation.

The term «domestication» brings us back to one of the main tenets of this work: the close connection between translation, cultural representation and the power relations which are reflected in every form of cross-cultural communication. The readers, as well as the author of this paper, can only be left to wonder whether it will ever be possible to establish the limits when domestication may become worthwhile and positive.

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