

Visual Contradictions Between Cuteness and Sadism: An Analysis of Character Design in Cartoon-Style Adult Animated Film Series

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze how character design in the animated Series *Happy Tree Friends* particularly in the episode “Eyes Cold Lemonade”, constructs a contradictory aesthetic true the contrast between cute visuals and sadistic violence. The study employs Jacques Rancière’s theoretical framework, focusing on the concept of the distribution of the sensible and dissensus. Data were collected through visual observation of selected scene and analyzed based on character design elements such as body shape, facial expression, and color. The results show that simple shapes, pastel colors, and innocent expression create expectation of a safe and playful visual world, which are then disrupted by extreme violence. This contradiction produces a perceptual tension that intensifies the viewer’s experience. The study concludes that character design functions not only as a visual elements, but also as an aesthetic strategy. These findings highlight the potential of contradictory aesthetic in animation to construct complex visual experience.

Keywords: *contradictory aesthetics, character design, Happy Tree Friends, animation*

INTRODUCTION

Animation has developed into a medium that is not only aimed at children but also widely consumed by adult audiences. One example is *Happy Tree Friends*, an animated series known for its cute character design combined with extreme and sadistic violence. Happy Tree Friend is an animated series created by Mondo Mini Shows in the genre of bloody dark comedy, Intended for adult audience (Widendra, D. 2014; Setiadi, 2024). The main characters are forest animal depicted with anthropomorphism; Cuddles, Giggles, Petunia, and Toothy are some of the main characters among the total of 22 characters appearing in Happy Tree Friends (Happy Tree Friends Wiki | Fandom, n.d.). The Happy Tree Friends series features of cast of small mammals character designed to be funny and cute, characterized by large eyes, bright pastel colors, and soft body shapes (Nittono, 2016). The characters are designed using simple shapes, bright pastel colors, and innocent facial expressions which are commonly associated with children’s cartoons (Wells, 1998). However, these visual elements are constructed with scenes of explicit violence creating a unique visual experience. This contrast can be understood as a form of contradictory aesthetic, where visual appearance and narrative content do not align (Rancière, 2004).

Previous studies have examined character design and visual elements in animation from different perspectives. Research on *Inside Out* by Cahyanto and Afghanistan Shows that shape, color, and expression are used

to represent emotions and strengthen narrative meaning. Other studies also explain that simple and cute visual styles are often used to create a friendly and non-threatening impression (Wells, 1998; Prakosa 2010). In terms of color, Heller (2009) and Itten (1970) explain that pastel colors are commonly associated with calm and pleasant emotions. However, most of these studies focus on how visual elements can contradict or oppose the narrative itself.

This shows a research gap where the relationships between cute visual style and violence content has not been deeply analyzed as a contradictory aesthetic experience. In reality, animated content that combines these two elements has become increasingly popular on digital platforms. According to several media studies, adult animation with dark humor and violent content continues to grow in audience interests especially in online platforms. This indicates that there is a shift in how audiences interpret visual style and meaning. Therefore, it is important to understand how this contradiction works and how it affects the viewer's perception.

Many animations feature characters with simple body shapes, rounded proportions, and innocent facial expressions, which are often associated with friendly and non-threatening characters. Character design with these visual characteristics are generally used in animations related to the world of children, because they create a cheerful and enjoyable visual impression (Wells, 1998; Hidayatullah, 2017). Research on color in visual media also indicates that the use of specific colors can establish a visual atmosphere while reinforcing the meaning intended in a visual work (Sanyoto, 2009; Nugroho, 2015). Color is also a key element in the creation of animated characters. Visual elements such as color, shape, and composition play a crucial role in establishing a visual identity and reinforcing the message intended to be conveyed in visual media (Hidayatullah, 2019).

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how character design in *Happy Tree Friends*, especially the episode "Eyes Cold Lemonade" create a contradictory aesthetic through body shapes, facial expression, and colors. This study uses Jacques Rancière's theory, focusing on the concepts of the distribution of the sensible and dissensus. The method used is qualitative visual elements interact with the depiction of violence. This study is expected to provide a better understanding of how character design can function as an aesthetic strategy in animation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jacques Rancière's Theory of Contradictory Aesthetics

Elements in visual works often give rise to specific aesthetic and meanings. Aesthetic experience in art can arise from the encounter of elements that are not always conceptually harmonious (Rancière, 2004). This creates tension in the viewer's interpretation of the visual. Aesthetics in the visual realm are not merely understood as visual beauty alone, but also as a system that shapes how something is seen, felt, and interpreted by the viewer. Rancière explains two main concepts relevant to understanding the phenomenon of contradictory aesthetic: The Distribution of the Sensible and Dissensus.

Distribution of the Sensible

The Distribution of the Sensible Is a perceptual system that determines how things are perceived, seen, and understood within a social context. Through this system, certain expectations are formed regarding the form of official and the meaning it conveys. For example: Bright animation and cute character design are typically categorized as lighthearted and enjoyable entertainment. However certain visual forms indirectly shape the audience's expectations regarding the type of experience they will encounter.

In animation, this system appears through visual codes such as character design, color, and style. For example, cute characters with soft shapes and pastel colors are generally associated with a safe and friendly animation.

Dissensus

Dissensus is a discrepancy or mismatch between what is seen and what is implied. Dissensus occurs when a visual image presents a form that does not align with the meaning or event being depicted. In such situations, viewers experience a cognitive dissonance because their preconceived visual expectations do not align with the narrative reality portrayed in work.

In the context of animation the dissensus can appear when a visual style suggests something light and harmless, but the narrative shows something violence or disturbing. This creates tension in how the audience interprets the image. In this sense, contradictory aesthetics can be understood as a condition where visual elements and narrative meaning do not align, producing a unique perceptual conflict.

Character Design

Character design in animation is one of the visual elements that plays a crucial role in shaping the audience perception of an animated work. Animated characters are generally designed through the simplification of body shapes, the use of distinctive proportions, and facial expressions that are easily recognizable to the audience (Wells, 1998). This approach to simplification gives animated characters a very strong visual appeal and makes them memorable. Simple body shapes, rounded proportion, and innocent facial expressions are often associated with characters that are friendly and non-threatening, so they are widely used in animation related to the world of children (Wells, 1998; Prakosa, 2010).

Color

Color also plays a very important role in shaping the audience's visual experience of animated works. Color is not merely a decorative element but also carries psychological meaning that influences the audience's emotion and visual interpretation (Heller, 2009). For example, pastel colors are often associated with a soft, cheerful, and innocent impression, so they are commonly used in visuals targeting the world of children or creating a pleasant atmosphere (Heller, 2009). The relationship between color and emotion allows for the use of specific color to build a visual atmosphere and influence how the audience perceives visual representation (Itten, 1970). Color is a vital element in shaping the visual atmosphere and reinforcing the meaning intended to be conveyed in the visual work (Sanyoto, 2009).

Violence, Dark Comedy, and Aesthetics in Animation

Despite this expectation many animated works combined cute visuals with violence content. violence in animation is often presented as an exaggerated and unrealistic way, allowing it to be perceived differently compared to realistic media (Wells, 1998; Prakosa, 2010). This exaggeration can create distance between the audience and the violence, making it appear humorous rather than disturbing.

Previews research

Research has investigated the connection between character design elements, such as visual form and color use, and their role in animation. For example, Syamsah Naqsyah Afghanistan's study on character design in the film *Inside Out 2* examined how shape, color, gesture, and facial expressions portray character emotions. While this study confirmed that color and visual form reinforce the characters' psychological narratives, its approach was purely descriptive and did not explore the concept of aesthetic contradiction—for instance, the pairing of soft visuals with aggressive themes. Similarly, AR. Nur Cahyanto's research on character design in *Inside Out* highlighted the link between body shape, facial expressions, and visual symbolism in emotional representation. Although this work

addressed shape and color as design components, its focus was on the visual coherence with the emotional concept, neglecting the potential for conflicting visual interpretations.

These study aims to analyze how character design in *Happy Tree Friends*, specifically the episode “Eyes Cold Lemonade”, and mainly focus on how visual elements support narrative coherence. They do not fully address situations where visual elements contradict the narrative content. Presents a contradictory aesthetic through the juxtaposition of cute character visuals with sadistic violence. This study focuses on analyzing visual elements of character designs such as body shape, facial expression, scene, and the use of pastel colors which are the visual hallmarks of the series. The study is expected to provide insight into how character design elements in animation can create a paradoxical aesthetic experience through the juxtaposition of sweet visual with narratives of violence in animation.

Conceptual Framework and Operational Definition

Based on the terrorists above the study integrates the concept of *distribution of the sensible*, *disensus*, character design, and color into a single framework. character design, and color create initial visual expectation (distribution of the sensible), while violent events disrupt these expectations and produce dissensus. This interaction forms what is to in the study as contradictory aesthetic. In this research contradictory aesthetics is defined as a visual condition in which cute and harmless design elements, such as simple shape, pastel colors, and innocent expression, are combined with scenes of explicit violence, resulting in a tension between visual appearance and narrative meaning. This definition is used as the main basis for analyzing how visual elements in *Happy Tree Friends* create a unique experience.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs Jaques Rancière’s theory of contradictory aesthetics to analyze the contradictory visual element featured in the episode “Eyes Cold Lemonade” of the animated series *Happy Tree Friends*. Aesthetic experience in works of art often arise from the juxtaposition of elements that are conceptually at odds with one another, thereby creating tension in the way viewers interpret visual representations (Rancière, 2004). The research data was collected through visual observation by documenting screenshots of several scenes from the episode “Eyes Cold Lemonade” that depict The interaction between character design and the representation of violence in the animation. Visual documentation is a technique frequently used in visual media research to identify and analyze the visual elements that are the focus of the study (Rose, 2016). The selected scenes were then analyzed based on visual elements of character design, such as the character’s body shapes, facial expressions, and the use of color appearing in those scenes.

DISCUSSION



Figure 1. Petunia



Figure 2. Toothy

The character Petunia and Toothy are the primary focus of the data to be analyzed in constructing a visual representation of violence, particularly in the episode “Eyes Cold Lemonade”. The analysis will focus on scenes that depict changes in body shape, from the initial design to the physical alterations resulting from violent events in the story. The character design aspect examined include body shape, color, facial expression, and physical transformation caused by visual violence.

Contradictory Aesthetic Analysis

Table 1. Analysis Data 1

Visual Data		
		
Figure 3. Master shot		
Visual Description	Visual Contradiction	Time
Two characters with cute designs, bright pastel colors, standing in the daytime selling lemon drinks.	This scene is the opening before a few of extreme violence occurs	0.23

Distribution of the Sensible

Bright cartoon visuals are usually associated with a relaxed, safe, and children's entertainment. This scene shapes the audience's perception of a safe and pleasant world. The use of pastel colors and rounded character designs helps the audience perceive what they see as normal and reinforces the impression that it is harmless.

Dissensus & Interpretation

In this scene the concept of dissensus has not yet emerged, but it serves as a crucial foundation for the narrative and contradictions that will unfold in this episode. Visually, this shot is composed to create a sense of stability in line with standard animation conventions. However, this "normal" state serves as the setup for the disruption that will occur in the following scenes, so that when the contradiction arise, the impact is all the more powerful.

Table 2. Analysis Data 2

Visual Data		
 Figure 4. Profile Shot Toothy		
Visual Description	Visual Contradiction	Time
Toothy's face was ripped open after a sales sign fell and hit her in the face.	Cute visuals collide with brutal physical injuries	0.51

Distribution of the Sensible

The character design remains consistent, maintaining a cute and harmless vibe, so the initial visual expectations are still met. Characters with cute designs usually do not experience graphic violence.

Dissensus & Interpretation

Dissensus arise when this visual expectation emerges and then clash with explicit scene of violence. The audience is presented with two starkly contrasting elements, the cute visual style of the characters and extremely graphic depiction of injury. This incongruity creates a disruption in the process of interpretation. While violence in cartoons is typically portrayed as mild, this scene feels particularly jarring because the visual style remains unchanged despite the violence taking place.

Table. 3 Analysis Data 3

Visual Data		
 Figure 5. Double Profile Shot		
Visual Description	Visual Contradiction	Time
Petunia reflexively sprayed lemon juice onto Toothy's injured face.	Lemon juice aggravates an already open wound.	0.54

Distribution of the Sensible

Interactions between characters and animated cartoons are generally associated with light-hearted or comedic actions and situations. This give audience's a sense of comfort when watching the animation

Dissensus & Interpretation

This scene visualizes pain in a way that remains playful. There is a contradiction between the humorous nature of the interaction and its painful impact. In this intense, spitting out a dream that's already in one's mouth at a scene partner is usually funny, but because of what happened earlier the scene takes on the darkly humorous tone. This aligns with the concept of dark comedy where unsettling situations are presented within a humorous framework. The aesthetic implication is the emergence of a dual emotional response from the audience, feeling both amused, and uncomfortable at the same time.

Table 4. Analysis Data 4

Visual Data		
 Figure 6. Profile Shot Petunia		
Visual Description	Visual Contradiction	Time
Petunia was hit by the sales sign too, but in a worse condition, namely her head was crushed and one of her eyeballs was removed.	The character's body experiences extreme destruction	1.23

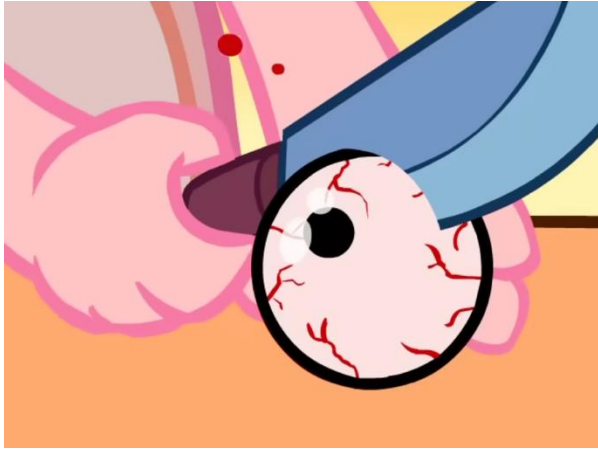
Distribution of the Sensible

Visually, the characters retain a cute and non-threatening design style. However, characters with this kind of visual style typically do not face extreme violence in their scenes.

Dissensus & Interpretation

The dissensus grows stronger as scenes of violence become increasingly extreme and frequent, while the visual style remains completely unchanged. This contradiction depends on the conflict in the audience's perception. This situation forces the audience to persist two conflicting meanings simultaneously. It also demonstrates how visual design not only supports the narrative, but can also contradict the story's content.

Table. 5 Analysis Data 5

Visual Data		
 Figure 7. Insert Shot		
Visual Description	Visual Contradiction	Time
Toothy, who can't see, thinks that Petunia's loose eye is a lemon, so she cuts the eye as if she were cutting a lemon and making a drink from Petunia's eye.	The character's eyes are treated as a drink ingredient.	1.30

Distribution of the Sensible

The process of making food or drink is typically seen as normal and safe. Visuals of food or drink preparation should generally appeal to the audience's appetite.

Dissensus & Interpretation

Depicting body parts as substitutes for food creates a powerful contradiction. The familiarity of everyday activities is disrupted by the presence of the violent elements depicted. The dissensus here is not only visual, but also conceptual, as there is no clear boundary between body parts and food.

Table 6. Analysis Data 6

Visual Data		
		
Figure 8. Insert Shot		
Visual Description	Visual Contradiction	Time
Toohy squeezed what she thought was a lemon from Petunia's eyes	Body organs (eyes) are treated as like a fruit (lemons)	1.47

Distribution of the Sensible

The process of making a tree usually doesn't involve any sense of danger or discomfort at all.

Dissensus & Interpretation

The transformation of body parts into food objects reinforces contradictions that have already been established. The dissensus presented between visual expectations and narrative actions continues to recur. This repetition demonstrates that the dissensus does not occur by chance, but is systematically constructed and created within the visual structure of this animation.

Table 7. Analysis Data 7

Visual Data		
		
Figure 9. Insert Shot		
Visual Description	Visual Contradiction	Time
Toothy adds cut out eyes as a drink garnish	Body organs are used as decorative elements	2.14

Distribution of the Sensible

Drink garnishes are typically used to enhance the visual appeal of the beverage and stimulate the audience's appetite.

Dissensus & Interpretation

The use of body parts as decorative elements presents the most extreme form of contradiction. Decorative visuals, which should be designed to be appealing, instead become jarring when used as decorative elements beverages. This creates an experience that should not coexist: attraction and revulsion. This tension opens up a new way of seeing as audiences can no longer rely on stable visual meanings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study demonstrates that the character design in the animated Series *Happy Tree Friends* particularly in the episode "Eyes Cold Lemonade" create a contradictory aesthetic experience through the dissonance between visual and violence narrative. Simple body shapes, innocent expression, and pastel colors create expectation of comfort and safety (*Distribution of the Sensible*). Which, over time, are contently juxtaposed with scenes of extreme violence, resulting in a sense of *Dissensus*. The main findings of this study confirm that the contradictions present in this animation do not occur randomly, but are systematically and purposefully constructed through the relationship between visual design and narrative events. Character design served not only as a visual element that supports the

animations aesthetic, but also as an aesthetic strategy capable of creating semantic tension and enhancing the audience's visual experience.

The scientific contribution of the study lies in the development of a conceptual framework of contradictory aesthetics in the context of animation, by integrating Jacques Rancière theory into character design analysis. Theoretically, this research expands our understanding of how visual elements not only create harmony but can also generate conflict of meaning. In practice, this research can serve as a reference for animators and creators in exploring visual approaches to create more complex and engaging experiences.

Based on the research findings, recommendations for future research. First, the scope of this research can be expanded by incorporating other approaches, such as semiotics or audience perception analysis, to understand how audiences interpret this forms of visual contradiction. Second, future research gold conducts corporations with similar animation, such as those in the dark humor genre. Third, scope episode episode other animated series.

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