



Film aesthetics as a narrative strategy for conveying complex and sensitive themes in selected children's animated films

Inviolata Naliaka Wekesa¹

Lencer Ndede²

Robert Wesonga³

¹wekesainviolata@gmail.com

^{1,2}Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, ³University of Kabianga, ^{1,2,3}Kenya

<https://doi.org/10.51867/asarev.3.1.26>

ABSTRACT

Beyond their verbal content, children's animated films manage complex and sensitive themes through visual and auditory aesthetics, yet the aesthetic dimension of theme mediation is rarely analysed as a system and seldom examined with African audiences. This study explored the role of film aesthetics as a narrative strategy for conveying complex and sensitive themes in *Kirikou* and the *Sorceress* (1998), *Shrek* (2001) and *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016). A convergent mixed methods design, qualitative-dominant, combined semiotic content analysis of the three films with a descriptive survey of 50 purposively selected respondents and interviews with 10 key informants in Webuye, Bungoma County, Kenya. Five coordinated aesthetic strategies were identified: cinematography, mise-en-scène, costume and character design, sound, music and editing, with animation technology aligning technique to thematic register. The analysis indicated cultural variation in the form of these strategies alongside convergence in their mediating functions, and its central finding is coordination at the corpus's most thematically charged sites. The strategies converge on the same content, forming a mediation system parallel to language. Field evidence assigned aesthetics a real but secondary place in conscious audience attribution, with 16% of respondents identifying visual appeal and 8% sound design as the principal accessibility feature. The study recommends the deliberate coordination of aesthetic strategies by animation artists, including African animators drawing on indigenous visual and musical traditions.

Keywords: Animated Film, Cinematography, Film Aesthetics, Mise-En-Scène, Sound Design

I. INTRODUCTION

Animation is a constructed medium in which nothing appears by accident: every colour, angle, costume, movement and sound is selected and organized as part of the process of creating an animated world. Unlike live-action cinema, in which the camera records a pre-existing physical environment, animation requires the deliberate construction of characters, spaces, movements and audiovisual relationships. Consequently, aesthetic choices can carry meaning with a high degree of intentionality (Wells, 1998). The visual and auditory dimensions of animation therefore constitute more than decorative features of entertainment; they form part of the narrative language through which characters, situations, relationships and themes are constructed and communicated.

The significance of this aesthetic dimension is particularly evident in children's animated films. Although such films are commonly associated with entertainment and child-oriented storytelling, scholarship on mainstream animation demonstrates that animated features frequently engage with sustained social content beneath their entertainment surfaces (Booker, 2010; Ward, 2002). Their narratives may address social relationships, identity, difference, cultural values and other forms of complex content while simultaneously operating within accessible and entertaining audiovisual forms. Contemporary animated features also address child and adult audiences simultaneously, with meaning communicated through stylistic choices as well as through dialogue and plot (Brown, 2021). The aesthetic organization of an animated film can therefore contribute to how potentially difficult themes are introduced, represented and made accessible to audiences.

Film aesthetics encompass interconnected visual and auditory resources. Cinematography determines the organization of shots, angles, scale and proximity, while mise-en-scène organizes the visual elements within the constructed frame. Character design and costume contribute to the appearance, identity and social signalling of characters, while sound, music and editing organize the auditory and temporal dimensions of the narrative (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013; Giannetti, 2018; Monaco, 2009). In animation, these resources are particularly significant because the visual and auditory world is constructed rather than simply recorded. Sound, for example, including score, ambience, effects, voice and silence, is fabricated and composed alongside the image (Beauchamp, 2013). Similarly, character animation uses design and movement to produce the illusion of life and encourage emotional investment in animated characters (Thomas & Johnston, 1981; Wells, 1998).



Aesthetic choices can consequently operate at several levels of meaning. A visual or auditory element may communicate immediate descriptive information while also producing culturally specific associations and broader thematic meanings. Peirce's (1985) sign typology provides a basis for understanding such elements as signs whose meanings may arise through resemblance, convention or their relationship with what they represent. Barthes' (1972) account of denotation, connotation and myth further provides a framework for examining how apparently ordinary aesthetic choices may acquire culturally and ideologically significant meanings. In the context of animation, these perspectives allow aesthetic features to be examined not simply as technical devices but as components of a signifying system through which narrative meaning is produced.

The relationship between aesthetics and meaning is also relevant to the representation of culture. Animation theory emphasizes that the medium's aesthetic self-consciousness can shape how animated worlds communicate social and cultural meanings (Herhuth, 2016), while research on animation's produced liveliness points to the cultural significance of its constructed forms (Stacey & Suchman, 2012). Production-side studies further indicate that indigenous cultural repertoires can serve as resources for thematic representation (Sugihartono et al., 2024). These perspectives are particularly relevant when animated productions from different cultural and industrial traditions are considered together, since aesthetic strategies may vary in form while performing related narrative functions.

Despite this body of scholarship, existing studies tend to examine aesthetic elements separately. Cinematography, sound, character design, costume, animation and other components are frequently treated as distinct areas of analysis, leaving less attention to how they operate in coordination at thematically significant moments. The question is therefore not only whether an individual aesthetic element communicates meaning, but also how several aesthetic elements may converge on the same narrative content. Such coordination is important because complex and sensitive themes may be communicated simultaneously through image, character appearance, staging, sound, music and editing rather than through verbal dialogue alone.

A further limitation concerns audience registration of these aesthetic meanings. Hall (1980) encoding and decoding model conceptualizes audiences as active participants in the production of meaning, allowing for variation between meanings encoded within a media text and those decoded by viewers. Research indicating emotional responses to animation (Cai, 2024) and multimedia engagement in African educational contexts (Ojwang, 2021) further points to the importance of considering audiences when examining the communicative dimensions of audiovisual media. Yet African audiences remain relatively marginal in scholarship concerning the aesthetic mediation of complex and sensitive themes in children's animation. Examining audience responses alongside textual analysis therefore provides an opportunity to consider whether the aesthetic features identified in the films are also registered by viewers as contributing to accessibility and meaning.

Against this background, the present study explored film aesthetics as a narrative strategy for conveying complex and sensitive themes in three selected children's animated films: *Kirikou and the Sorceress* (1998), *Shrek* (2001) and *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016). The corpus brings together a West African folkloric production and two Hollywood animated features, creating a basis for examining aesthetic strategies across different production traditions and animation technologies. The study focused on five coordinated aesthetic strategies: cinematography and mise-en-scène; character design and costume; sound and music; editing; and their coordination in thematically significant sequences. It further considered how audiences in Webuye, Bungoma County, Kenya, registered the contribution of these aesthetic features to the accessibility of the films' themes.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Children's animated films convey complex and sensitive themes not only through dialogue and narrative, but also through coordinated visual and auditory aesthetic choices. Although existing scholarship recognises cinematography, mise-en-scène, character design, costume, sound, music and editing as meaning-making resources, these elements are generally examined separately, with limited attention to how they operate together to mediate difficult content. Moreover, textual interpretations are rarely considered alongside audience evidence within a single study, while African audiences remain marginal in this scholarship. Consequently, there is limited understanding of film aesthetics as a coordinated narrative system for conveying complex and sensitive themes in children's animation. This study therefore examined how aesthetic strategies function individually and in coordination in *Kirikou and the Sorceress* (1998), *Shrek* (2001) and *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016), and how their contribution is registered by audiences in Webuye, Bungoma County, Kenya.

1.2 Research Objective

- i. To examine how cinematography and mise-en-scène convey complex and sensitive themes in the selected children's animated films.
- ii. To analyse how character design and costume convey complex and sensitive themes in the selected children's animated films.



- iii. To examine how sound, music and editing convey complex and sensitive themes in the selected children's animated films.
- iv. To examine how the aesthetic strategies coordinate to mediate complex and sensitive themes in the selected children's animated films.
- v. To examine how audiences in Webuye, Bungoma County, Kenya, register the contribution of film aesthetics to the accessibility of complex and sensitive themes in the selected films.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study extended semiotic theory to the aesthetic plane and operationalized it as an analytical protocol. First, Peirce's (1985) sign typology guided the coding of aesthetic parameters by the ground of their signification. Camera position, scale and proximity were coded as indexical signs, communicating through the physical relations they establish between camera, subject and viewer. A low angle does not mean power by convention but produces the experiential correlate of subordination through the embodied fact of looking up. Design elements were coded as iconic and symbolic signs, resembling or conventionalizing character meaning. Second, Barthes' (1972) orders of signification were applied as a laddering procedure to each significant aesthetic sign: denotation, what is visible or audible; connotation, the culturally specific meanings carried; myth, the ideological content naturalized and audience interpretation, treated as an empirical question rather than an assumption. Third, Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model framed the audience strand, treating viewers' registration of aesthetic meaning as active and variable, so that the survey and interview data were read as documentation of decoding rather than as proof of effects. Standard accounts of film language supplied the descriptive vocabulary of shot, staging and cut on which the coding relied (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013; Giannetti, 2018; Monaco, 2009).

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Cinematography and Mise-en-Scène

The foundational accounts of film form establish cinematography and mise-en-scène as meaning-making systems rather than technical supports. Shot scale, angle, lighting and staging organize what an audience perceives and how it evaluates what it perceives (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013; Giannetti, 2018; Monaco, 2009). Production-design research extends this argument to sets and props as narrative storytelling, showing designed objects functioning as extensions of character psychology (Aull, 2025). Within the present study, these perspectives informed the analysis of camera position, scale, proximity, lighting, staging, sets and props as aesthetic resources through which complex and sensitive themes are conveyed.

2.2.2 Character Design and Costume

The foundational account of character animation shows design and movement built to produce the illusion of life and the audience's emotional investment in drawn beings (Thomas & Johnston, 1981), while Wells (1998) identifies anthropomorphic design's fusion of animal charm and humanized psychology as a central resource of the form. Costume research further shows dress functioning as an instrument of characterization and social signalling (Ulusoy & Atalay, 2025). These studies establish character design and costume as important aesthetic resources for constructing character meaning and social identities within animated narratives.

2.2.3 Sound, Music and Editing

Sound scholarship demonstrates that in animation the entire auditory world—score, ambience, effects, voice and silence—is fabricated and composed as carefully as the image (Beauchamp, 2013). Spanakaki (2007) further shows that auditory and verbal comedy can operate as culture-bound systems. Film-form scholarship provides the descriptive vocabulary for editing and the organization of shots and cuts within cinematic narratives (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013; Giannetti, 2018; Monaco, 2009). Together, these perspectives establish sound, music and editing as aesthetic resources through which narrative meaning and thematic content can be organized and communicated.

2.2.4 Coordination of Aesthetic Strategies in Animated Narratives

Animation theory argues that the medium's aesthetic self-consciousness is itself political, shaping how animated worlds argue (Herhuth, 2016), while Stacey and Suchman (2012) emphasize animation's liveliness as a produced effect with cultural stakes. Ideological criticism of mainstream animation documents sustained social content beneath entertainment surfaces (Booker, 2010; Ward, 2002), and industry scholarship traces the stylistic strategies of contemporary Hollywood animation (Brown, 2021). Production-side studies also show indigenous cultural repertoires serving as resources for thematic representation (Sugihartono et al., 2024). These perspectives establish that aesthetic choices can participate in the construction and communication of broader thematic meanings. However, the literature



generally considers individual aesthetic elements rather than demonstrating their coordination as a system for mediating complex and sensitive themes.

2.2.5 Audience Registration of Film Aesthetics

On the reception side, research indicates that animation elicits measurable emotional responses (Cai, 2024), while multimedia engagement shapes learning in African educational contexts (Ojwang, 2021). Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model provides a theoretical account of audience interpretation as active and variable. These perspectives support examining audience registration of aesthetic meaning rather than assuming that meanings encoded by filmmakers are necessarily decoded in the same way by viewers.

III METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a convergent mixed methods design, qualitative-dominant: qualitative and quantitative strands were collected in the same phase, analysed separately and integrated at interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) on the grounds of complementarity, triangulation and completeness (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

3.2 Semiotic Content Analysis

The qualitative film strand proceeded from a study guide whose coding categories were developed deductively and refined inductively. The deductive frame combined five aesthetic categories drawn from standard film-language scholarship—cinematography, mise-en-scène, costume and character design, sound and editing (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013; Giannetti, 2018)—with the semiotic levels established in the theoretical framework. Each coded observation therefore recorded an aesthetic parameter, its sign type and its ladder of meanings. Each film was segmented into scenes and coded in three manual passes. First, parameters were logged scene by scene; second, they were grouped into candidate strategies; and third, they were checked across the full corpus for consistency. Categories were refined where the material resisted the initial analytical frame.

For example, the recurring observation set for Karaba's domain in *Kirikou and the Sorceress* logged a black-and-scarlet palette as mise-en-scène and symbolic, low framing from the protagonist's height as cinematography and indexical, rigid ornamental costume as design and iconic-symbolic, and sparse dissonant accompaniment as sound and indexical. The convergence of these codes on one narrative site provided the basis for the coordination finding reported below.

3.3 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was pursued through four measures. First, the full coding was reviewed by the second and third authors, whose queries functioned as peer debriefing. Second, cross-corpus consistency checks in the third coding pass tested each candidate strategy against all three films. Third, the study guide and coding log constituted an audit trail from raw observation to reported claim. Fourth, methodological triangulation involved reading the textual findings against two independent field sources. Scenes were identified by structural position, such as the opening sequence or the climactic scene, together with described shots and cues. This approach was used because running times differ across editions, whereas positional references remain checkable against any copy.

3.4 Sampling and Participants

The survey sampled 50 respondents in Webuye, Bungoma County, Kenya, selected purposively (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) across four age brackets: 6–13, 14–18, 19–25 and 26 and above. The age brackets were intended to span the developmental range addressed by the films. Inclusion required familiarity with the selected films and, for minors, parental consent with child assent. Prospective respondents unfamiliar with the films or without consent were excluded. The 10 key informants comprised teachers, parents and post-secondary students, selected for their capacity to speak to children's media engagement from professional, parental and near-peer positions, respectively.

3.5 Research Instruments

The researcher-designed questionnaire was organized into sections aligned with the study's objectives: respondent characteristics, theme detection in the selected films, perceived accessibility features, with closed items naming humour, character relatability, visual and aesthetic appeal, musical and sound design, emotional engagement and identification, and assessments of appropriateness and perceived value. The questionnaire used categorical and Likert-type formats. The questionnaire was administered in English and explained orally in Kiswahili or Luhya where preferred. It was reviewed by the supervising authors before administration. The semi-structured interview guide addressed the same domains in open form, inviting informants to describe observed engagement, discussion and effects in their own settings.



3.6 Data Analysis and Integration

Questionnaire responses were summarized descriptively using frequencies and percentages. No inferential statistics were computed, and all figures describe this purposive sample. Interview responses were analysed thematically. Integration followed the convergent design's side-by-side comparison procedure. After separate analysis, each principal textual claim was set against the survey distribution and the informant themes bearing on it. The Findings section reports the three strands in this explicitly paired form. Ethical clearance was obtained before data collection, and administration was anonymous.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Cinematography and Mise-en-Scène as Strategies for Conveying Complex and Sensitive Themes

The first objective examined how cinematography and mise-en-scène conveyed complex and sensitive themes in the selected films. The analysis showed that both strategies organized visual space in ways that communicated power, exclusion, belonging, vulnerability and social difference. In *Kirikou and the Sorceress*, the opening sequence establishes a planimetric symbolic style through flat ochres and frontal and profile staging resembling relief art. Karaba's domain is subsequently distinguished through a change of palette to a black ground with scarlet accents, before dialogue explicitly identifies her as a threat. Low framing also contributes to the construction of power by composing the sorceress from Kirikou's ground-level height. Power is therefore experienced through the literal visual elevation of the character. Death and violence are managed through strategic visual elision, with the camera cutting away from the moment of harm (Bridgewater et al., 2021).

In *Shrek*, cinematography similarly contributes to characterization and thematic meaning. Low angles initially give Lord Farquaad an appearance of stature, while subsequent wide shots puncture this impression. The contrast turns camera perspective into an instrument of satire concerning compensatory power. Close-ups and firelight are used at moments when Fiona's shame is disclosed, bringing the viewer into greater visual proximity with the character's sensitive experience. In *The Secret Life of Pets*, the camera is generally maintained at pet height, positioning viewers within the animals' spatial world. The most pronounced downward compositions occur during the sewer descent, visually staging movement from inclusion to exclusion as a fall through the frame. Mise-en-scène reinforces these cinematographic meanings. Each film constructs a binary moral geography. The warm ochre village in *Kirikou and the Sorceress* contrasts with Karaba's black-and-scarlet domain. In *Shrek*, Duloc's white geometric sterility contrasts with the swamp's cluttered warmth, rendering the stigmatized home retrospectively humane. In *The Secret Life of Pets*, sunlit Manhattan apartments contrast with the dark sewer world, visually dividing spaces of belonging and exclusion. Props also participate in this system. Max's guarded bone, for example, encodes anxious attachment within the scene, with the designed object functioning as an extension of character psychology (Aull, 2025).

The textual finding concerning spatial opposition is consistent with the field evidence. Social exclusion and prejudice was the most frequently detected complex theme, identified by 40% of respondents. Teachers also reported that the films generated deeper and more personally engaged classroom discussion of prejudice and capability than didactic instruction. However, because the survey did not isolate mise-en-scène or cinematography as independent variables, the relationship between these aesthetic strategies and audience responses should be understood as joint with narrative and dialogue.

4.1.2 Character Design and Costume as Strategies for Conveying Complex and Sensitive Themes

The second objective examined how character design and costume conveyed complex and sensitive themes. The findings indicate that character appearance concentrated each film's visual argument by combining physical form, costume, posture and movement to construct social identity, difference, vulnerability and contradiction. In *Kirikou and the Sorceress*, Karaba's design fuses adornment and affliction. Her gold jewelry and rigid headdress communicate authority and status, while her immobilized posture reflects the thorn buried in her body. The design therefore brings together external power and internal affliction. In *Shrek*, Lord Farquaad's costume and character design communicate excess through oversized epaulettes and the contrast between his elaborate appearance, towering castle and small physical frame. Costume and architecture are consequently recruited to visualize compensatory power. Shrek's earth-toned bulk, meanwhile, accumulates markers of social abjection that the narrative subsequently redeems (Giannetti, 2018). In *The Secret Life of Pets*, Duke's shaggy physical enormity represents mass without menace, while Snowball's white, round-eyed cuteness contrasts directly with his aggressive behaviour. This designed contradiction contributes to the film's comedy of concealed rage (Thomas & Johnston, 1981; Wells, 1998).

The field evidence provides further support for the importance of character-based mediation. Character relatability was identified by 30% of respondents as a principal feature making complex content approachable. Seventy-two percent reported strong (40%) or moderate (32%) engagement with characters and themes. The key-informant



accounts similarly indicated that animal and character mediation could create an accessible distance from difficult themes. One parent described *The Secret Life of Pets* as psychologically accessible for the youngest child because animal mediation enabled engagement at a safe distance. These findings suggest that character design does not operate independently of narrative meaning. Rather, visual characterization provides a route through which potentially sensitive issues can be encountered through fictional and anthropomorphic figures.

4.1.3 Sound, Music and Editing as Strategies for Conveying Complex and Sensitive Themes

The third objective examined how sound, music and editing conveyed complex and sensitive themes. The findings demonstrate that the auditory and temporal organization of the films contributed to the construction of threat, emotional intensity, humour, grief and transitions between social worlds. In *Kirikou and the Sorceress*, the West African score uses subtraction as a marked device. Instrumentation thins toward silence when Karaba speaks, so that threat is communicated through the withdrawal of musical warmth. Editing similarly manages violence through chase cross-cutting that alternates pursuer and pursued while cutting away before any blow lands. In *Shrek*, the film's anachronistic musical strategy is established when Smash Mouth's *All Star* accompanies the ogre's domestic routine. Music takes a different emotional function in the montage set to *Hallelujah*, a borrowed popular elegy that carries the film's lowest emotional point without dialogue. The film's characteristic smash cuts also contribute to the comic organization of its sensitive and satirical content.

In *The Secret Life of Pets*, a bright urban swing idiom is contrasted with the reverberant ostinato of the sewers. The initiation of the Flushed Pets is accompanied by chant and percussion, with sound marking the boundary between different social worlds as clearly as visual lighting does (Beauchamp, 2013). Editing also changes register during Duke's backstory, where a slower rhythm and longer takes mark the film's sustained passage of grief. The survey assigned sound and visual aesthetics a real but secondary place in conscious audience attribution. Four of the 50 respondents (8%) identified musical and sound design as the principal feature making complex content approachable, while eight respondents (16%) identified visual and aesthetic appeal. Together, these represented 24% of attributions, compared with 42% for humour and 30% for character relatability. The relatively low direct attribution to sound and visual aesthetics does not necessarily contradict the textual analysis. Rather, it indicates that aesthetic features may operate within the broader narrative experience without audiences necessarily identifying them as separate mechanisms. This interpretation is consistent with the post-secondary informants' observation that rewatching *Shrek* as adults revealed layers that had not been visible during childhood viewing.

4.1.4 Coordination of Aesthetic Strategies in the Mediation of Complex and Sensitive Themes

The fourth objective examined how the aesthetic strategies coordinated to mediate complex and sensitive themes. The most significant textual finding was that the strategies did not operate merely as separate devices. At the most thematically charged sites, multiple aesthetic elements converged on the same narrative content. In Karaba's domain in *Kirikou and the Sorceress*, four strategies converge: low camera angles communicate power; the red-and-black palette communicates moral transgression; elaborate costume communicates authority and complexity; and sparse, dissonant accompaniment registers threat. The same principle occurs at the windmill confession in *Shrek* and in Duke's backstory in *The Secret Life of Pets*, where visual, auditory and temporal choices converge around emotionally significant content.

Table 1

Aesthetic Strategies Across the Three Films

Strategy	<i>Kirikou and the Sorceress</i>	<i>Shrek</i>	<i>The Secret Life of Pets</i>
Cinematography	Relief-art staging; low framing of Karaba; elision	Farquaad angle joke; firelight close-ups	Pet-height camera; sewer fall
Mise-en-scène	Ochre village vs. black-scarlet domain	Swamp clutter vs. Duloc sterility	Sunlit apartments vs. dark sewers
Design	Karaba: adornment fused with affliction	Farquaad's compensatory excess	Snowball's cuteness against fury
Sound	Sung refrain; subtraction toward silence	Pop anachronism; borrowed elegy	Swing vs. ostinato; ritual chant
Editing	Chase cross-cuts eliding violence	Smash-cut deflation	Slowed rhythm for grief

The technological differences between the films also correspond with their thematic registers. The two-dimensional symbolic flatness of the 1998 production suits its folkloric material, while the three-dimensional verisimilitude of the 2001 and 2016 productions suits parody and urban naturalism respectively (Stacey & Suchman, 2012). The coordination finding is further supported by the field evidence, although the evidence does not establish a causal relationship. Eighty percent of respondents rated the films highly or moderately educative and entertaining, while 72% reported strong or moderate engagement with characters and themes. The textual density of aesthetic strategies



therefore coexisted with relatively low conscious attribution of aesthetics as an individual accessibility feature. The findings can be understood through Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding framework. The films encode thematic meanings through coordinated aesthetic choices, while audiences may decode those meanings without consciously identifying the specific aesthetic mechanisms through which they have been constructed. The gap between textual aesthetic density and conscious attribution is therefore itself significant.

4.1.5 Audience Registration of the Contribution of Film Aesthetics

The fifth objective examined how audiences in Webuye, Bungoma County, Kenya, registered the contribution of film aesthetics to the accessibility of complex and sensitive themes. The survey evidence indicates that aesthetics had a real but secondary place in conscious audience attribution. Eight respondents (16%) identified visual and aesthetic appeal as the principal feature making complex content approachable, while four (8%) identified musical and sound design. Humour was identified by 42% and character relatability by 30%. Thus, although aesthetic features were less frequently named directly, they formed part of a broader viewing experience in which 80% of respondents rated the films highly or moderately educative and entertaining. Social exclusion and prejudice was the most frequently detected complex theme, identified by 40% of respondents. In addition, 72% reported strong (40%) or moderate (32%) engagement with characters and themes. The key-informant evidence provided further contextualization. Teachers reported that the films generated deeper and more personally engaged classroom discussion of prejudice and capability than didactic instruction, with learners speaking through the displaced case of the fiction. One parent identified *Kirikou and the Sorceress* as the most culturally enriching, *Shrek* as the most socially influential, citing changes in how the children assessed physical appearance as a social category, and *The Secret Life of Pets* as the most psychologically accessible for the youngest child because animal mediation enabled engagement at a safe distance. Post-secondary informants reported that rewatching *Shrek* as adults revealed layers that had not been apparent during childhood viewing. Taken together, the field evidence suggests that audiences engaged with the films' themes substantially even when they did not identify individual aesthetic strategies as the principal source of accessibility. The audience evidence therefore complements rather than replaces the textual analysis.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Film aesthetics in the selected films operates as a coordinated sign system, cinematography, mise-en-scène, design, sound and editing converging on the corpus's most thematically charged sites, and it functions as a mediation system parallel to language and at those sites, often a more powerful one. The strategies vary culturally in form while converging in function and the West African production demonstrates indigenous visual and musical traditions serving as full aesthetic resources for complex theme mediation. The study recommends that animation artists coordinate aesthetic strategies deliberately rather than severally, that African animators draw on indigenous aesthetic traditions as mediation resources and that media literacy education equip young viewers to notice the aesthetic channel through which so much thematic content reaches them. Future research should test the coordination model with designs pairing textual analysis and audience evidence across sub-Saharan African animated traditions.

5.2 Recommendations

Animation artists should deliberately coordinate cinematography, mise-en-scène, character design, sound, music and editing when conveying complex and sensitive themes, rather than treating these elements separately. African animators should also draw on indigenous visual and musical traditions as resources for thematic mediation, while media literacy education should equip young viewers to recognize the aesthetic dimensions through which thematic content is communicated. Future research should further test the coordination model by combining textual analysis with audience evidence across sub-Saharan African animated traditions.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.



REFERENCES

- Aull, M. D. (2025). *An analysis of narrative storytelling through set and prop design* [Master's thesis, University of South Alabama].
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). Hill and Wang.
- Beauchamp, R. (2013). *Designing sound for animation* (2nd ed.). Focal Press.
- Booker, M. K. (2010). *Disney, Pixar, and the hidden messages of children's films*. Praeger.
- Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2013). *Film art: An introduction* (10th ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Bridgewater, E. E., Menendez, D., & Rosengren, K. S. (2021). Capturing death in animated films: Can films stimulate parent-child conversations about death? *Cognitive Development*, 59, Article 101063.
- Brown, N. (2021). *Contemporary Hollywood animation: Style, storytelling, culture and ideology since the 1990s*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Cai, Z. (2024). The emotional impact of animation on its audience. *Communications in Humanities Research*, 52, 18–26.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Giannetti, L. (2018). *Understanding movies* (14th ed.). Pearson.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972–79* (pp. 128–138). Hutchinson.
- Herhuth, E. (2016). The politics of animation and the animation of politics. *Animation*, 11(1), 4–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847715624581>
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033007014>
- Monaco, J. (2009). *How to read a film: Movies, media, and beyond* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Ojwang, C. (2021). *Prospective teacher educators' knowledge development through the creation of multimedia case studies of practice* [Doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University]. Syracuse University Surface. <https://surface.syr.edu/etd/1538>
- Peirce, C. S. (1985). Logic as semiotic: The theory of signs. In R. E. Innis (Ed.), *Semiotics: An introductory anthology* (pp. 344–360). Indiana University Press.
- Spanakaki, K. (2007). Translating humor for subtitling. *Translation Journal*, 11(2), 1–24.
- Stacey, J., & Suchman, L. (2012). Animation and automation: The liveliness and labours of bodies and machines. *Body & Society*, 18(1), 1–46.
- Sugihartono, R. A., Kasiyan, & Adi, S. P. (2024). Children's animation films: The cultural advancement perspective. *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, 29, 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.14456/jucr.2024.18>
- Thomas, F., & Johnston, O. (1981). *The illusion of life: Disney animation*. Abbeville Press.
- Ulusoy, N., & Atalay, D. G. (2025). New directions in costume design in contemporary cinema in Turkey: Conversations with costume designer Gülümser Gürtunca. *Studies in Costume & Performance*, 10(2), 239–260.
- Ward, A. (2002). *Mouse morality: The rhetoric of Disney animated film*. University of Texas Press.
- Wells, P. (1998). *Understanding animation*. Routledge.