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FROM LITERATURE TO ANIMATION: DEFAMILIARIZATION

TECHNIQUE IN *TOM and JERRY*

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ABSTRACT Defamiliarization is the artistic technique of making the audience perceive familiar objects in an unfamiliar way in order to enhance perception of the familiar. The term was first used in 1917 by Victor Shklovsky, one of the leading figures of the literary criticism movement known as Russian formalism. Victor Shklovsky's Defamiliarization technique has been employed in various art forms, including animation, which primarily targets younger viewers. In this sense, William Hanna and Joseph Barbera's creation Tom & Jerry is widely regarded as one of the greatest animated series of the 20th century. This iconic series is evidence of the popularity of animation and its ability to draw a large viewership for decades. With its innovative approach to visual storytelling, timeless humour, adorable characters, and - above all - its artistic use of defamiliarization technique, Tom & Jerry has left an indelible mark on the animation industry, entertaining viewers worldwide of all ages and solidifying its status as a true masterpiece. Based on the visual analysis method, this paper adapts Shklovsky's technique of 'defamiliarization' from literature to animation, explaining its various aspects and considering its practical implications. The results obtained show that defamiliarization manifests itself multifariously in Tom & Jerry and that it can affect the perceptions of younger viewers who may misinterpret the defamiliarized visuals due to their cognitive immaturity.

Keywords : *Tom and Jerry, Shklovsky, Defamiliarization, Entertainment, Artistic Effects*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tom & Jerry is an iconic animated series that originally appeared on television screens in 1940 (Jones, 2015) and has since grown to be a beloved

classic. Produced by the legendary duo William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, Tom & Jerry centers on the never-ending rivalry between Jerry, the cunning mouse, and Tom, the domestic cat. This

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rivalry, which is often marked by extreme acts of violence, results in dramatic situations in their house (Wells, 1998, p.102). The series uniqueness, however, stems from the opposing dualities of Tom and Jerry : friend and enemy, big and small, naughty and smart. The absence of dialogue, clever jokes, and splastik comedy are other elements that make the animation so distinctive. Splastik comedy, according to Bromley (2019), involves more actions than dialogues, and “physical comedy” is a term used to describe this type of humour. A successful slapstick performance in visual entertainment requires impeccable timing, expressive facial gestures, and fair amount of physical agility. In fact, the visual gags and comedic timing in every Tom & Jerry episode make of the show a beloved favorite for both children and adults alike.

The animation’s adept use of the defamiliarization technique contributes to its uniqueness as well. This intriguing artistic technique takes the familiar

setting of a house, a cat, and a mouse and defamiliarizes them in a way that challenges viewers’ preconceived notions. In Tom & Jerry world, the ordinary becomes extraordinary, as Tom, the alleged predator, is continually outsmarted by the small Jerry. The animators astutely use defamiliarization technique to turn everyday objects and situations into sources of comedic tension. They take the familiar and turn it strange for artistic effects, whether it is frying pans wielded as makeshift weapons or a piano serve as an instrument of mischief. The use of defamiliarization technique not only adds humour to the show but also redefines the boundaries of animated comedy, holding viewers in eager anticipation of how the ordinary will be reimagined and subverted in each new episode. Thus, by adopting the visual analysis method, this article seeks to analyze this masterwork through the lens of defamiliarization, offering a critical examination of its influence on the viewers’ perceptions.

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2. An Overview of the Defamiliarization Technique

The term defamiliarization, also referred to as 'ostranenie', was coined by Victor Shklovsky in 1917, marking an early contribution to Russian formalism. In his article 'Art as technique or Art as device' Shklovsky introduced this term to explain how art fundamentally aims to make the familiar as something unfamiliar. Defamiliarization swiftly emerged as a central notion in the sphere of formalist literary analysis. Its essence lies in the distinctive use of language in artistic works, in contrast to its everyday usage, with the objective of presenting familiar objects, situations, or concepts in an unconventional manner. In doing so, it rekindles in the audience a fresh and vivid experience of life's feelings. Shklovsky identifies defamiliarization as an artistic technique with the potential, as illustrated by his famous expression, to make "the stone stony." (Shklovsky, 2004, p.15). It is used to disrupt conventional perceptions and encourage the readers to look at the world with new

eyes differently from how they are accustomed to seeing it. In his essay "Art as Technique," Victor Shklovsky conveys this idea emphatically, stating that:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty of length and perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (Shklovsky, 2004, p. 16).

By making the familiar seem strange, defamiliarization invites readers to interact more actively with the text or artwork, which promotes critical thinking and deeper thought. It acts as a catalyst for fostering intellectual and emotional growth, enabling individuals to get above the limitations of their daily routines and habits and to understand the complexities of human existence. In literature, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a reference that demonstrates the significance of defamiliarization technique. In this literary work, the farm

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is symbolically depicted and transformed; and Anthropomorphism is used to defamiliarize the Russian Revolution of 1917, its aftermath, and the subsequent Stalinist era as well. The use of animals as characters defamiliarizes the political figures of the Russian revolution. Animals assume human roles and responsibilities, managing the farm, enforcing regulations, and engaging in trade with humans. This process defamiliarizes the roles of animals and humans in society, providing a critique of the Russian revolution and totalitarianism. It also forces readers to re-evaluate these historical events and view human foibles and corruption through a new and more critical perspective.

Expanding on this idea, Bertolt Brecht, the German poet and playwright, shares a common perspective with Viktor Shklovsky. Both of them hold the belief that defamiliarization can broadly be applied to all forms of arts. The key distinction lies in Shklovsky's focus on poetry as the foundational point of entry,

whereas Brecht places his emphasis on drama as the central theoretical framework. Bertolt Brecht coined the term 'Verfremdungseffekt' (Jameson, 1998, p.39) in German, which is translated into English as 'alienation effect' or 'the distancing effect.' This term refers to the procedure of artificially alienating the familiar and maintaining a certain level of detachment from it. In his 1936 article "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," Brecht coined the term and defined it as the approach of performing in a way that:

The audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious (Brecht, 1964, p. 91).

Brecht's theatrical technique aims at breaking the illusion of reality in the theatre by engaging the audience intellectually rather than emotionally. One significant aspect of this technique involves the removal of the 'fourth wall'

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(Michael, 2022, p. 14), which is an imaginary barrier that separates the actors from the audience. (Biovin, 2018) While the audience is able to see through this "wall," the actors are expected to perform as though they cannot. By removing the fourth wall, Brechtian theatre disrupts the typical passive spectatorship and encourages the audience to engage in critical thinking, questioning, and reflection on the characters and their actions as noted by Bell Elizabeth (2008, p. 205). This fosters a more detached, analytical viewpoint that enables the audience to examine the social and political concerns being discussed on stage with a critical eye. It is precisely this distance from reality in Tom & Jerry that creates specific effects, leading viewers to perceive the familiar things, which they may otherwise take for granted in daily life, in a new way.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The visual analysis method has become a vital tool for scholars trying to examine the dynamic landscape of today's quickly expanding visual media,

which affects every aspect of people's daily lives. A wide range of visual media, including paintings, sculptures, photos, films, advertisements, and even animation, may be studied and analysed using this research method. Its primary objective is to increase people's comprehension of the visual arts and to bring attention to the techniques, imagery, and ideas that are embedded within these visual expressions. The present study is conducted by adopting the visual analysis method to develop a framework for visually exploring the manifestations of defamiliarization technique and its effects on the viewers' perceptions in Tom & Jerry (animated series). The first step in the visual analysis process involves a critical observation in order to document the visible elements in Tom & Jerry, such as shapes, colors, objects, patterns, and more. This initial observation serves as a crucial step in gathering the data needed for further investigation. Following a thorough observation of the visual work, the paper proceeds to describe it in detail

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before moving on to the analytical stage.

This is the point where the material is analysed with particular focus on the target viewers and the potential effects of the visual work.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The aspects of

Defamiliarization in *Tom and Jerry* (animated series)

4.1.1 Violence Depictions



Fig.1 Violence Depictions in Tom and Jerry

Because of the portrayal of aggressive actions, several episodes of Tom & Jerry are perceived as unpleasant and distressing to younger viewers. (Potter, 1999, p.49). Such episodes

feature instances where characters try to harm or even kill each other. They depict physical confrontations like hitting, kicking, and other aggressive behaviors.

Morrison (1993) directly pointed a finger at Tom & Jerry for depicting violence. He strongly argued that without the depiction of the violent elements, there would be nothing left to entertain the viewers. (pp. 124-129). Nevertheless, these violent scenes are usually presented to the viewers in unfamiliar and funny ways.

The purpose of this technique is to offer viewers a fresh and alternative perspective on violence, a significant societal concern, so that they may understand it better. As an illustration, in his ongoing attempts to kill and/or eat Jerry, Tom makes use of a wide range of tools and resources. Tom uses traps, axes, knives, forks, and even explosives. In contrast, Jerry kicks Tom into a refrigerator, squeezes his tail into household appliances like waffle irons and mangles, strikes him with a mace or

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mallet, throws him onto a piano stool, and breaks his bones. (Whitworth, 2006, p. 9).

Feilitzer and Carlson (2000) asserted that, in certain cases, animated series projecting more intense violence had better plotlines. For a thorough analysis of the depiction of violence in animation, the two researchers divided the animation into four categories. The first category pertains to the tools or weapons used in the violent scenes, the second deals with the production aspects of these occurrences, the third focuses on the presence or lack of humor, and the final one delves into the characters' instant responses and intentions to violence. (p.249). When it comes to *Tom & Jerry*, if someone were to undergo the physical violence portrayed in the show, s/he would undoubtedly get a range of injuries, such as bruises, cuts, broken bones, and internal harm. The common consequences associated with these brutal acts, in the worst circumstances, can lead to life threatening injuries,

psychological trauma, disabilities, and even fatalities.

It is crucial to note, however, that the portrayal of physical violence in the animated series *Tom & Jerry* occurs without the depiction of bloodshed or any lasting harm, and the overall consequence remains very delicate and nonthreatening (Klein& Shiffman, 2008, p. 185). More than that, these acts of physical violence become attractive and humorous due to the usage of various elements, such as music, well-paced actions, intriguing plotlines, exotic settings, visual effects, and loveable characters. In fact, by defamiliarizing violence in *Tom & Jerry*, viewers, particularly children, might find these actions funny and harmless, which negatively influence their perceptions of violence.

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4.1.2. House Places and Items



Fig.2 Tom and Jerry use Household Items to fight each other

Defamiliarization, which takes familiar objects and exaggerates, distorts, or repurposes them to produce fun and enjoyment, is utilized as a crucial comic tactic in the animated series *Tom & Jerry*. For example, the kitchen, which is designed primarily for cooking, metamorphoses into a frequent arena for the characters' conflicts. The culinary tools are ingeniously transformed into weaponry and protective shields in this unusual battleground, adding a humorous dimension to the characters' disputes. The main characters, Tom and Jerry, produce slapstick humour by deftly altering commonplace objects like

brooms, frying pans, dishes, the refrigerator door, hammers, and furniture, to mention but a few. Frying pans become devices for hilarious clangs and dings when they clash with with heads, hammers take on a playful life of their own, and furniture morphs into props for amusing chances and mishaps. Interestingly, inanimate objects, such as mops and broom also come to life in the animation and strangely interact with the protagonists. For instance, brooms serve as both chase instruments and makeshift broomsticks, sending characters soaring through the air in splotik fashion. The refrigerator door acts a a portal to alternate worlds in some episodes, and television become source of distraction or surreal escapes. Concerning staircases, they function as a stage for Tom and Jerry's chases and as setting for tumbles and races.

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4.1.3. Size Alteration



Fig.3. Physical Appearance Changes

In addition to defamiliarizing House places and Items, the animation often changes the characters' sizes and shapes through the use of mechanisms, such as magic potions, scientific experiments, or fantastical scenarios. The characters adopt unusual sizes or shapes, transforming their recognizable bodies into comically exaggerated versions. For instance, Tom, the cat, and Jerry, the mouse, turn into different shapes, such as puppets, robots, or even abstract shapes. Also, they often experience size fluctuations in which they can grow to enormous sizes or shrink down to small size. Jerry could

expand or shrink to fit into tight spaces or escape from Tom's grasp, while Tom might stretch his body to an incredible length to reach Jerry hiding in a mouse hole.

These body changes cause a dynamic shift in the two characters' power and tactics. The hurdles and ridiculous circumstances that both Tom and Jerry encounter as they adjust to their new sizes creates visual surprises, provide the amusement, and challenge the familiar appearance of the characters. Tom's attempts to catch Jerry become comically hyperbolic when he is giant-sized, while Jerry's diminutive status enables him to outwit his greater foe in amusing and imaginative ways.

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4.1.4. Laws of Physics



Fig.4 Violating the Laws of Physics in *Tom and Jerry*

In the process of chasing each other or escaping danger, Tom and Jerry display an astonishing ability to defy the laws of gravity. An illustrative example of this is when they rush over the edge of the cliff and are suspended in mid-air until they realize there is nothing beneath them, which causes them to fall to the ground. Remarkably, they may astonishingly escape massive explosions with little to no harm, returning to the action in the following scene. This clearly disregard the principles of physics,

especially those pertaining to force and energy.

In some episodes, characters violate the laws of momentum and terminal velocity by falling from great heights and landing uninjured. Significantly, when it comes to the constraints of time and space, characters have the ability to quickly vanish and reappear in entirely different places. The characters in the animation are transported into diverse historical eras or time periods where they encounter strange traditions, clothing, and technology. Generally, these episodes provide a humorous and unfamiliar interpretation of the laws of physics.

4.1.5. Religion



Fig.5 Distorted Visuals of Religion

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These visuals are extracted from an episode named *Heavenly Puss*, in which Tom is once again attempting to catch Jerry. In the course of this chase, Tom gets killed by a piano and he ascends to the gates of Heaven. There, Tom is informed by the gatekeeper that his entry into paradise is denied due to a lifetime spent chasing Jerry. The gatekeeper told Tom that he can gain entry to paradise only if Jerry sends him a letter of apology. Tom makes numerous attempts to secure Jerry's signature on the paper, yet this also proves unsuccessful. He even tries to forge the signature, but that fails as well. Just when Tom is on the brink of losing his temper and being consigned to Hell, he finally manages to get Jerry to sign the letter. However, it is too late, and Tom falls into Hell, where his escape efforts

meet with failure. He abruptly awakens from this ordeal and, realizing that all that happened was merely a dream, he kisses and hugs Jerry.

This episode introduces a mistaken understanding of various theological concepts, such as God, the Afterlife, Paradise, Hell, and the Reckoning. For example, in this episode, God has been framed as a 'gatekeeper' who appears unsympathetic, emotionally detached, and solely focused on facts or performance, which contradicts the tenets of many religious doctrines. Muslims, for instance, are taught to worship God as if they can see Him, recognizing that He see them even if they do not see Him. God is beyond form. God is believed to be the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing, and the All-Knowing. Such defamiliarized portrayals of God and other theological concepts can potentially have serious effects on the emotions, thoughts, and behaviours of the viewers.

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4.1.6. Race



Fig.6. Mammy Shoes' Physical Appearance

Race is another issue that can be viewed through the defamiliarization lens in *Tom & Jerry*. In the animated series, Mammy Two Shoes, also referred to as Aunt Delilah, embodies the stereotypical image of a black maid tasked with overseeing the opulent house where Tom and Jerry reside. The animation defamiliarizes Mammy, the human character, by showing only the lower part of her body; however, the face which communicates the totality of her being and personality is deliberately

hidden, which unfairly indicates that she is identityless. Mammy Two Shoes is a symbol for how racism distinguishes itself from other forms of discrimination due to its deep-seated origins in notions of superiority and dislike of individuals considered inferior. The racial representation of Mummy Two Shoes is based on many variables, including her race, national background, look, and colour.

Additionally, she is represented as a markedly overweight character. Her voice is grating, and she gives a raucous cry of "Tomaaaaas." She often wallops Tom with abroom when she discovers his wrong doings. This portrayal aims to reinforce the stereotype that those perceived as 'Other', particularly from non-Western backgrounds, are

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associated with being black, backward, aggressive, and inhumane. Furthermore, the animation shows a troubling racial imagery when characters' bodies turn completely black following an explosion. This indirectly conveys a message that black people are the true terrorists who pose a threat to global peace and stability whenever an opportunity arises.

4.1.7. Language and Communication

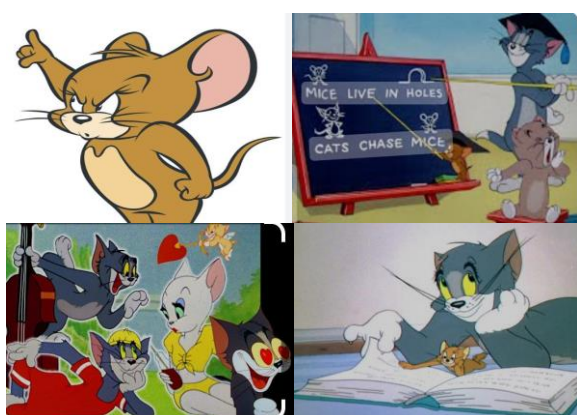


Fig.7 Tom and Jerry communicate in human-like manners

Concerning language and communication, one can obviously witness the creative use of

defamiliarization in the ways the characters in *Tom & Jerry* communicate. Their way of communication is specific to their species but is depicted in amplified, often human-like manners. To illustrate, Tom and Jerry characters convey emotions like surprise, anger, love, or fear through facial expressions, eye movements, or physical gestures. They rarely engage in verbal communication, and when they do, it is often limited to the occasional yelp or shout. The protagonists also use signs, written messages, or drawings to express their intentions, emotions, and thoughts. This blend of animal behaviour with human-like expressions serves to defamiliarize the natural behaviours of cats and mice and their way of communication, which transcends language barriers. The physical comedy and universal themes of rivalry, friendship, and mischief make *Tom & Jerry* enjoyable and accessible to viewers around the world, regardless of their native language.

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5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The defamiliarization technique is not only used in literature discipline but also in other art forms, including animation, which is predominately aimed at children and teenagers. Regarding Tom & Jerry animated series, defamiliarization is used funnily and comically to generate some moments of comedy, prompting viewers to get free from their usual reactions to art and perceive things in a fresh and intensified ways. In fact, through the creative use of defamiliarization, the animators of Tom & Jerry not only demonstrate their intelligence and artistic insight, but also their ability to think outside the box. However, it seems that the animators might not have fully considered the repercussions of such technique. For example, younger viewers like to copy what they see on television. When violent behaviors are exhibited by their heroes, they may imitate such actions, which can definitely have a severe impact on their learning of social behaviour and development of psychology (Simmons, et

al., 1999). This occurs because younger viewers are provided with inaccurate and misguided information about the real consequences of violence. In Tom & Jerry, characters usually escape explosions, falls, and other violent incidents without suffering any bodily harm. Tom jumps from the top of the tree, landing in a well or a fire, resulting in only temporary physical harm before quickly recovering to his normal state.

In addition to these defamiliarized violent and scary visual depictions, Tom & Jerry also contains episodes that exhibit a more troubling kind of cruelty, particularly in the context of (mis) representation of religion and race. The animation typically delves into religious themes and settings. In doing so, it engages in irreverent misrepresentation and satire of religious doctrines. The sensitivity surrounding matters of religion should be recognized and religion should not be used as a subject of mockery, as it is neither meant to be laughable nor entertaining. (Lindsey & Heeren, 1992, p.63). However, the

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opposite is demonstrated, and reference can always be made in this context to the episode entitled Heavely Puss. Furthermore, the animated series Tom & Jerry maintains the traditional worldview that frames the world in clear-cut dichotomies such as white/black, master/slave, powerful/powerless, civilized/ uncivilized. This perspective aligns with a Eurocentric worldview, which has historically dominated global narratives and perpetuated stereotypes and hierarchies. It is rooted in the notion of the West's purported uniqueness, which is constructed by :

Europe's contact and self-comparison with Other, non-Western societies (The Rest), very different in their histories, ecologies, patterns of development and cultures from the European model. The difference of these other societies from the West was the standard against which the West's achievement was measured. (Hall, 1996, p.187)

The defamiliarization of race in the animated series raises significant concerns because of its prominent

visibility. This process may induce younger viewers who may not have much contact with black people to internalize and accept such (mis)representation as truth. As such, Tom & Jerry continues to instill in viewers the idea that the whites occupy a superior societal position in an era where national borders are disappearing and racial, class, and identity classifications are becoming more complex because "today, none is purely one thing," (Said, 1993, p.336.)

6. CONCLUSION

Tom & Jerry has always been welcomed and loved by viewers of all ages. Its ability to transcend generational boundaries and remain a beloved classic is a testament of the way that artistic creativity and inventiveness, along with the use of defamiliarization technique, combine to produce an ageless masterpiece. The use of defamiliarization technique in Tom & Jerry certainly makes the animation more attractive and humorous, but it also brings up questions about the attitudes, beliefs, and actions that are implied in the show and how

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they can affect viewers, especially younger viewers. The latter often seek to make sense of the world through their interactions with entertaining programs like Tom & Jerry. While doing so, they may unintentionally take in and adopt the morals and behaviours of their favourite characters. This negative influence may cause waves of anti-social behaviours, a decline in moral values, and aggressiveness among younger viewers.

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