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REPRESENTATION OF ARCHITECTURAL STYLES IN THE CARTOON MOVIE ‘MY LIFE AS A TEENAGE ROBOT’

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Abstract:

Cartoon movies have a wide range of fans at different ages, including the adults. However, it is undeniable that cartoons play an important role for the children aged over five in shaping their social values, as well as their relations to the material world. The animation of *My Life as a Teenage Robot (MLAATR)* is an American animated television series produced by Frederator Studios for Nickelodeon Channel. This paper aims at discussing the potential impacts of cartoon movie ‘*My Life as a Teenage Robot (MLAATR)*’ in raising awareness on architecture and design culture among children and teenagers. The study has established on two major tasks; the first is a comprehensive analysis of the architectural character represented in the movie and the second is the discussion of the results of a workshop arranged for a group of children.

Keywords: cartoon movies, children, architectural style, design culture, pre-design education.

Educational Broadcasting:

Animated cartoons are favorite form of communication among young people, since there is a great opportunity to stimulate their imagination with animated characters which can seem and act in any way without being dependent on the rules of the celestial world. The strong image language of the animations is reinforced with rapid movements which do not leave any need for verbal expression.

Use of cartoons or animations in innovative teaching methods for various aims is an ongoing effort for years. However, “historically, educational television has not hold the broad viewer base that entertainment television has, since educational television has to focus on a more specific age group for its content to the unintended exclusion of other age groups. Therefore, stations showcase entertaining programs to the extent that true educational television can only be found on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), which is funded by grants and individuals, that is, not commercials. Even the ‘Children’s Television Act’ of 1990, enacted to force broadcast stations to create more educational programming, saw little fruit.” (Patrick McCue, 2005)

On the contrary to commercial broadcasting policies, non-commercial organizations do achieve the use of animated cartoons for educational purposes.¹ Organizations related with built environment also integrate such activities in their training programs. UNESCO World Heritage Centre invited Gruppo Alconi (Italy), a communication group specializing in animated cartoons,

to host the 4th International World Heritage Education Workshop on ‘Mobilizing Young People for World Heritage’ in Treviso/Venice (Italy) in 12 -15 November 2002.²

The program included plenary sessions, working groups and preparation for the presentation made by the young people at the Venice Congress session on. There were twenty-one participants from twelve countries: Cuba, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Norway, Philippines, Russian Federation, Slovakia, South Africa and Spain, as well as observers from Denmark and the United Kingdom. The organizers included members of Alcuni and representatives of UNESCO Headquarters and the UNESCO National Office to Jordan in Amman. The project was based on a competition of animated cartoon design on the topic of world heritage among young people.

Due to the lack of educational television shows for children, public broadcasting services in many countries tried to increase the amount of educational programming among broadcast networks. The educational aims of the existing shows are directed at global concerns such as nature in danger, sustainability, discrimination, caring elderly, etc....,

The Story and Content of *MLAATR*:

My Life as a Teenage Robot (MLAATR) is an American animated television series produced by Frederator Studios for Nickelodeon Channel. *MLAATR* is distinguished, because it is the only popular show on air which stimulates young people to get involved with design culture at different scales. This show was originally based on a previous cartoon character created by the same director, Rob Renzetti. This show used to be entitled *My Neighbor is a Teenage Robot*, which was featured on the *Oh Yeah! Cartoons*. In this short series, the robot Jenny used to look more Japanese, and the episode had an Asian appearance as well.

The series of *MLAATR* narrate adventures of a robot girl named Jenny Wakeman who is also known as XJ-9 Wakeman. She is 15-16 years old and living with her creator Dr. Nora Wakeman in the city of Tremorton in the presumed year of 2072. Dr. Wakeman is a typical mad scientist, devoted herself for developing technology for the safety of world. The timeless philosophical question of mind and emotion, body and soul, form and content is frequently faced in the characters of *MLAATR* in different forms.

The paradoxical relationship between Jenny and Dr. Wakeman is felt when Nora repeatedly calls her the robot “XJ9”, whereas Jenny always describes her as “mom” or “mother”. Despite of being a robot, Jenny is always enthusiastic with “human” conditions. She is in demand of emotions and instincts since her robot power does not fully satisfy her. On the other hand Nora has a stable and decided personality which rarely shows her feelings. From this point of view, Nora seems as conveying more robotic features than Jenny, whereas Jenny seems as a humanoid than her mother.

Jenny was designed to save the world, but like every human-made machine, there are several handicaps in her design. She can easily be “unreasonable” because of her “free will and emotions”. Jenny’s desire for acceptance in society has also discerned by the robot society whose queen Vexus is also the leader of a society called “liberation from humanity”.

There are serious conflicts in the communication between Jenny and her mother in this television show. Nora always follows Jenny in order to warn her about potential enemies of the world, since Jenny has a computer screen on her chest that provides contact with her mother. Jenny finds many tricks to get rid of her when she becomes exhausted. On the other hand, Jenny and Nora always find a compromise at the end of the episode.

Sign-ificance of Art Deco in MLATR

Although *My Life as a Teenage Robot* has many fans all around the world, it never became as popular as other Nicktoon series. However *MLAATR* bloggers from different age groups aim at raising popularity of the series through making a deeper understanding of its distinctive character³. The animation has a strong stylistic character which was appreciated from the first day it was on air. The background creator Seonna Hong⁴ received Emmy for Individual Achievement in Background Styling in 2004. The *MLAATR* bloggers consistently open up discussions related with Art Deco which is predominantly appear in this animation. The postings in the blogs include news for recently appeared publication and broadcasting on Art Deco. Pictures of authentic Art Deco pieces also appear in the blog postings. Although there is no comprehensive information or profundity in the content in the sent messages or comments as far as understood from the blogs, the animation achieves to start a fire, and opens up design awareness and stimulates curiosity in design history among the spectators.

Art Deco, became a source of inspiration for the design culture of the 20th century as well as it was inspired from diverse historical sources such as Egyptian abstraction, archaic forms of American Indian culture, Cubism and Bauhaus. The style appertained to many spheres: architecture, fashion and textiles, sculpture, art, graphic design, photography, music, jewellery, industry, appliances and interior design. The radical forms exhibited in 1925 Paris Exhibition⁵ were embraced with the spirit of the age since they were promising an optimistic, elegant future more closely than the tortuous forms of Art Nouveau. The sweeping plant-like curves of Art Nouveau had given way to the streamlined aerodynamic curves of aircraft and cars, reflecting industrial engines of the early twentieth century afterwards.

As being a European based movement, Art Deco was rapidly adopted in the United States following the Great Depression not because of its simple and practical forms, but also because of its symbolism of the wealth period and American dream. It became an ideal set for many Hollywood films which include interiors of luxury ball rooms as well as simple mass production objects.

On the contrary, there are other types of representations of Art-Deco in media which is generally referred as Dark Art Deco, such as in the *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* or *King Kong*. The period that Art Deco became popular (1920-1940) were also memorized with many ups and downs in the socio-economic life, such as Great Depression and prewar political atmosphere in Europe which hope and social trauma intersected one another. Since the collective memory conveyed all of these feelings related with Art Deco period to the present, the creators in the media used the style in various contexts. Although *MLAATR* series also include some instances which reveal certain themes of fear such as destroyer, robotic creatures, the milieu is pleasurable and amusing, in general

Unity in the form language is also spectacular and can be witnessed at every scene of *MLAATR*. The built environment represented in this cartoon signifies a holistic design activity which does not allow any probability for irregularity, individuality, random and ad-hoc. The scenes of the *MLAATR* symbolize an exaggeratedly designed world in an idealistic and utopian tone. In contrast to the plurality of the real life, the world of Jenny reproduces modernist ideology in the sense of progress and instrumental rationality which can be planned and controlled. Fundamentally, Art Deco was a style of opulence and optimism, in which inherited a sense of advancement of human progress. In this sense, the use of Art Deco in *MLAATR* refurbishes the ultimate expression of "modernism" as an artistic movement and an ideal.

Since Art Deco unfolds with various sources, it is generally accepted as "a style without ideology" which compromises with all of the other early modern movements on the basis of aesthetics, but it presumes no specific conceptual approach. (Klein D 1991)

Stylistic Analysis of *MLAATR*:

Art Deco design can be identified according to some criteria according to Kerry (1986): Geometric and linear formality, optical simplicity, and distortion or transformation of reality. Simplicity becomes the key-concept; objects are minimized with simple shapes and lines. Distortion was used to interpret the real world in Art Deco design. It created illusions of size, speed, power, amazement, rhythm and dynamism which all make the graphic language of Art Deco appropriate for caricaturistic visualization. (Figure 1 and 2)

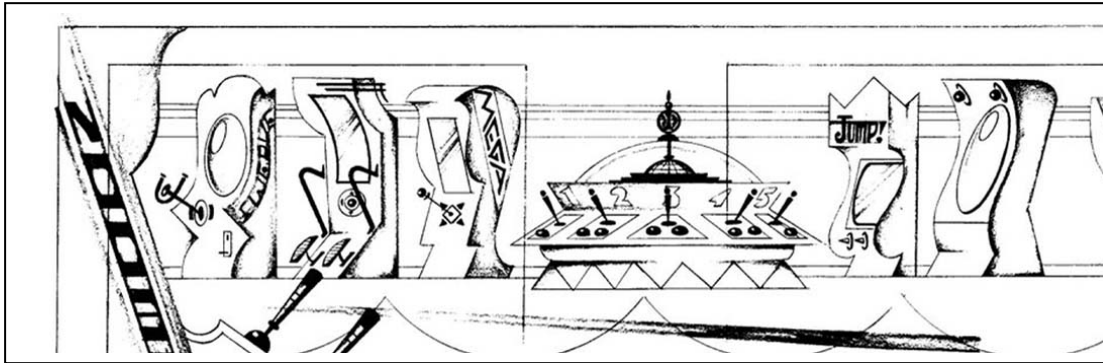


Figure 1 Original drawings from story board; simple lines and shapes with speed effect.



Figure 2 Drawings from original story board, distortion in perspective

MLAATR series offer a distinctive design culture to the spectators with its strong art-deco settings including the architectural elements, interiors, industrial design objects, as well as its graphical expression and representation of landscape

The *MLAATR* series display different tones of Art Deco style. The architectural objects, illustrated in this animation exhibits a bold marriage of *Moderne Deco Style* and earlier periods with voluptuous interiors, curvilinear forms. As it is common, *Moderne Deco Style* was widespread in United States, especially in Miami and flourished during 1935-1941, at which point new building in the US was interrupted by World War II. It was used for commercial and

residential buildings which are generally modest in scale and more commercial than those of the earlier era.

As typical to *Moderne Deco Style*, the streamlined look in the city of Tremorton is represented with horizontal chrome strips similar to cars and trains, as well as domestic fittings and furniture of the era. The streamline effect is given with the 90-degree curve of wind-tunnel inspired design. The corners are cylinders that swiftly transition to planar walls. Circular windows are often combined with the streamlining to give a nautical look (Figures 3-5). Drawing from the era's love of mechanical invention, deco borrowed heavily from the iconography of advanced technology of its day, most notably: steamships. On the other hand, large glass panels generally indicate the architect's ambivalence toward nature. The use of glass bricks invites sunlight while filtering it through repetitive and subdued design.



Figure 3 Jenny's school



Figure 4 Toys store in the city

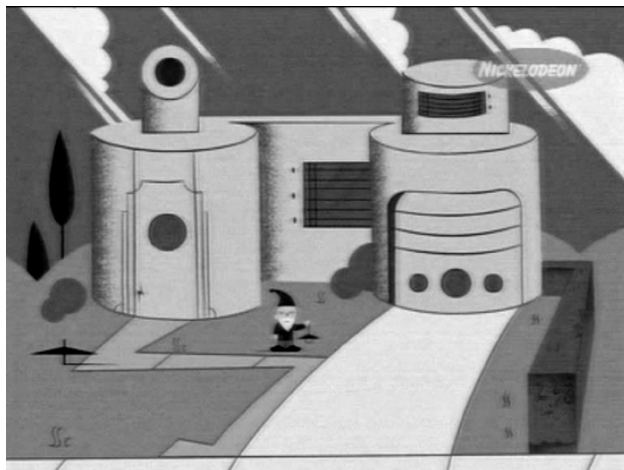


Figure 5 Houses from Tremerton

Objects appeared in the animation perfectly reflect streamlined effect. Industrial design products in the scenes of *MLAATR* display heavy influences from jazz age that was inspired bright and contemporary decorative motifs and pure forms of international modernism. The prevailing mode of the era, symbolized with modern aerodynamic designs are mirrored in design objects at different scales starting from car design, to small sized domestic fittings and equipment, such as furniture, radios, clocks, fridges and tableware. Automobiles similar to Chrysler Airflow design- originally dated 1933, come into view in some scenes which reflect power, fame and luxury.⁶

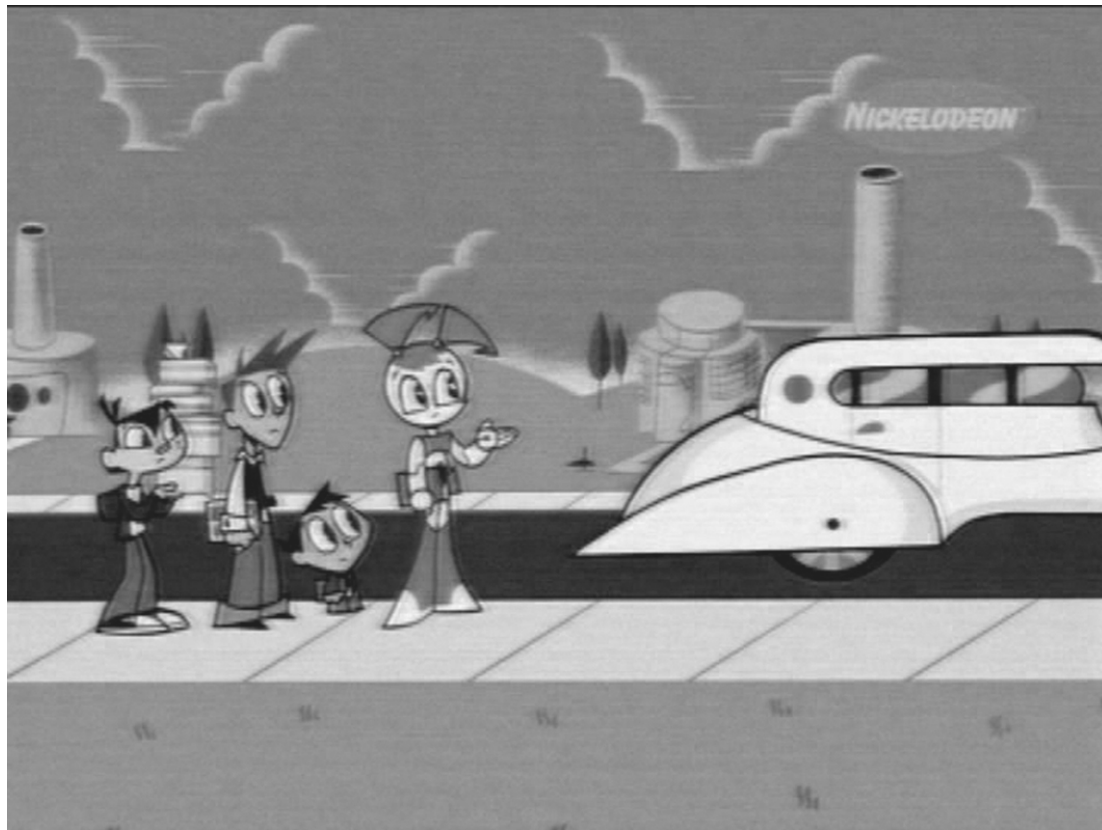


Figure 6 A car from the animation- strong influences from Chrysler airflow design can be seen.

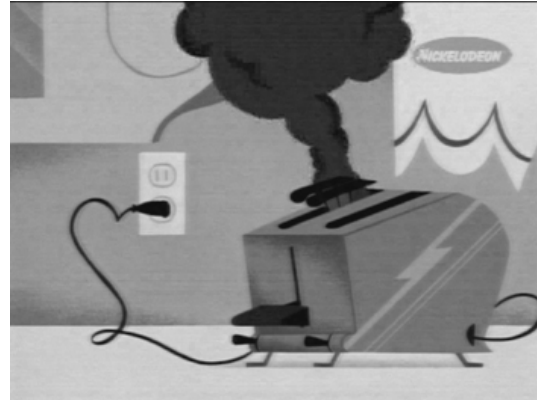
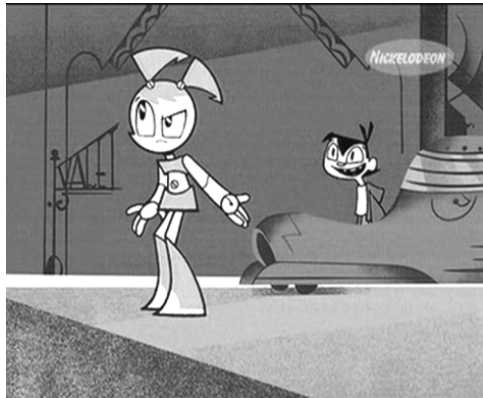


Figure 7 on the left- an aerodynamics designed car; on the right- a toaster with streamline design

The use of typical Art Deco typography and graphic layouts is also spectacular in *MLAATR* series. Fonts like Parisian, Copasetic, and Chi-Town are widely used in order to reinforce unity in the form language. Although animation cartoons prefer to create characters whose appearance never change, *MLAATR* characters have color schemes that change depending on their environment, which gives depth to the world they inhabit.

Workshop with Elementary School Children:

It can be understood that *MLAATR* has achieved to stimulate young spectators about design and design history with its stylistic approach from the postings on the web. *My Life as a Teenage Robot* is not one of the well-known cartoon movies in Turkey since it is aired without Turkish subtitles on a cable channel. In order to observe possible effects of the show on spectators in Turkey, a group of pupils in a state elementary school in Izmir has been selected to organize a workshop⁷. The selected age group was 10. 41 students attending to the fourth class were invited to watch an episode of the movie in the classroom. Following this show, they were asked to design a door for the Jenny's home.

On the first day of the workshop, 41 students from Room 4A in *Ankara İlkogretim Okulu*, watched the episode entitled 'Toying with Jenny' together with their class teacher Kamuran Yavuz and the author as moderator. All of the kids have shown great enthusiasm to this occasion since they were informed a day before. 1/3 of the classroom stated that they had watched this cartoon animation before, while the rest did not recognize the characters and story. At the beginning of the presentation the voice was down due to prevent any questions that might come from the students related with the story. However, the students demanded to watch the episode with the original sound although they did not have enough language skills in order to understand the dialogues. Since their apologies have been accepted, the show was restarted by turning the voice up. They were asked to pay their attention to certain shapes, lines and colors, pointed by the

author during the show, which did not interrupt their amusement, at all. Although the show was in English, they enjoyed the story by catching humor and showing response.

Following the episode, the style of Art-Deco was very briefly introduced by means of a powerpoint presentation. This presentation was a collection of images, selected from the movie and real art deco objects or spaces. The common points in style were discussed in terms of line, shape, texture and color selection. The first session of the workshop was completed in 45 minutes.

On the second day of the workshop, the class was asked to form groups, made of two, in order to design a door for Jenny's home. Therefore, the students were re-seated in the class with the partners they picked. Since the door they were asked to design was going to be made of two wings, each group was invited to work on a pair of panels. The class teacher joined into this session in order to help to moderate the activity.

The moderator followed up by giving each group a photocopy of real art deco object which they extended to make into their own design. The given images were not in typical streamline style, instead they were reflecting different tendencies in Art Deco, such as cubist, naturalist, or Egyptian styles. The reason was preventing the students to reproduce the forms that they saw in the movie, and making them to think about the stylistic relations between the movie and the images they got.

The groups examined the image at the first stage. They produced some sketches on the photocopy paper in pencil which helps them to understand the form relations in the picture. During this stage, the moderator answered their questions and assisted them to read the formal relations in the picture. At the second stage, they started to design the decoration of the door panels which were made into 8/25 cm colored cartoons. The door panels did not have to be identical.

During this phase, the students tended to be independent from the image they were given, since they were thinking that the activity of design must be independent and purely "original". Within the limited time, the moderator tried to remove this prejudice and encouraged them to design in relation with the photocopied image. Since the second day's session was limited with 90 minutes, most of the students could not complete. The finalization was made at home, individually. The design was collected on the following day by the class teacher.

Conclusion:

Animated movies have a great impact on the education of children. Design sensitive animations may raise the awareness of children on raising awareness of design. The three major results of this workshop can be itemized as follows:

- The students learned something specific about design history, the characteristics of Art Deco style.
- A group of young people-or in other words, the users or customers for architecture in the future, started to think about the relations between style, era, fashion, art, architecture and production.
- They explored the meaning of design by involving into a real design activity and appreciated its value when they paid time and effort to do.

Notes

¹ As an example, Amnesty International organized some education activities among young people in order to raise awareness of discrimination. Amnesty International ACT 31/05/98

² World Heritage Papers 8, Mobilizing Young People for World Heritage, 2002.

³ <http://teenageroblog.blogspot.com/2006/08/mlaatr-kiddies.html>, <http://mlaatr-pairings.deviantart.com/>, <http://fan.ai-megami.com/mlaatr/>

⁴ Seonna Hong is a Los-Angeles based artist and animator. Her work has been published in the *Artistic Utopia Calendar*, the *Beatsville Sci-fi Western* and *The Truth Show* books.

⁵ The footsteps of the style were first heard as an avantgarde movement in Paris exhibition of 1925-*Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*.

⁶ Recently there has been a revival of interest in real Art Deco items among collectors, especially because despite their studied attempt to look machined and mass-produced many Art Deco items were actually hand-made in limited quantities by master artists

⁷ Special thanks to Kamuran Yavuz, class teacher of Room 4A in Ankara İlk Öğretim Okulu and all 41 students who involved into this workshop.

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