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Animation or Cartoons: An American Dilemma

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Abstract:

This project attempts to elucidate the connection between animation and preconceptions about appropriate age demographics in the United States. It endeavors to demonstrate that animation has primarily remained a children's medium because of contingent contextual factors, rather than elements inherent to the medium, and that its evolution over time is proof of its merits as a medium. Through an exploration of the Golden Age of animation between the late 1930s and the late 1950s, as well as an exploration of animation between 1988 and the present, it uses various examples within film, television, and theatrical shorts to show limitations placed on the medium. These limitations were created by a long, inerrant continuity created a small number of contextual factors near the beginning of animation as a storytelling medium, causing it to be marketed towards children and to be seen as something only for children. Both the preconceptions and the consequences of those contextual factors remain to this day, but American animation's history has provided evidence that they are not inescapable.

Faith Statement

Scholars are fickle. By their very nature, they are a disagreeable, argumentative, and contentious bunch. When adding 'Christian'—an ideology that has been the crux of some of the greatest wars and fieriest disputes of our age—into the mix, there are bound to be to have some difficulties. So, I can only define 'scholar' and 'Christian' according to what I have access to and the commitments I currently hold. I'll lay out what that means to me, and hopefully it will be satisfactory.

Honestly, I can't really say that I come from a very unusual background. I was born into a relatively well-off family of devout Christians who raised me in a supportive but rigorous environment and sent me to schools which did much the same. This background—shared more or less by many other American students—did help me form some of my faith commitments, and undoubtedly shapes me to this day. However, unlike most people in our country, I wasn't raised Protestant, or even Catholic, and my Eastern Orthodox background has led me to grow in a number of ways I'm certain I would not have had I been born into a different faith tradition. Fundamentally, Orthodoxy, even when translated into a Western context, has many assumptions and holds many commitments that are simply not in line with the Western Christian historical and theological discourse. The most important of these, the ones that have affected me the most deeply, have to do with the ideas of rationalism, mystery, and the way one is saved and connects with God. There are a lot of problems in the Western theological discourse that I simply don't see as relevant; there are a lot of ideas that just seem alien and unnecessary. In particular, the extremely Western need to categorize, qualify, and quantify everything is just not as present in Eastern thought. That is not to say that the Eastern Church doesn't engage with its ideas in a rigorous or well-thought out, manner, but to say that there are simply some things that don't need to be dissected and pared down to their smallest components. This applies to a whole range of things, from the idea of a literal seven day creation to notions about the afterlife, but for me, it's the way that disposition interacts with salvation and our relationship to God that are most compelling. God is absolutely and completely sovereign, and though he is accessible to us in the way He has revealed, we can never pretend to understand him. And because of

that, as humans, we can never truly know exactly what is going to happen, what God wants, or what is right. On some level, that's terrifying. Humans crave certainty. I crave certainty. But God is here for us, regardless. We can't be perfect, the world is messy, and we are deeply flawed, but God is there for is anyway. And in that, we can only follow His commandments and our own consciences to the best of our ability. The idea of mystery in the Orthodox doesn't fill in the gaps in theology as much as it permeates and defines every aspect of our lives, reminding us simultaneously of how small and how infinite we are and pointing the way towards Kant's 'sublime'. It's an idea that stems from the right brain, from a place of paradoxes and an intuitive sense of something more. That can be a very powerful thing to base one's own theology and life around.

For me, it points towards a way out of all the judgmental and unloving scenes Christians have painted themselves into over the last two centuries or so. Our job is to love and try to make the best of what we are presented with here, and it is up to God to make any final decisions, if there are those to be made. This isn't to absolve us of responsibility—we have all been invested with the image of God, and are each infinitely dignified in His eyes, and that leaves us with essential responsibilities towards each other. That's all my own opinion, of course, and there are likely many people who don't share it, but it's the theological stream I'm on. My Orthodox background, combined with a lot of ecumenical thinking both from my own church and from those outside of it, have given me a broad idea of what Christianity can be and what it can mean. I've had my views shaped not only by my childhood church but by thoroughly Protestant schooling, a Catholic extended family, and a range of new friends at university with their own diversity of views. For me, this diversity within Christianity is absolutely essential, and it is the only way to continue to grow, change, and learn as we move forward. Although it's almost impossible to define Christianity, for me, all that's a start. We have to believe in a loving God, we have to believe in a sovereign God, and in that, we have to accept mystery and our responsibility towards others as infinitely worthwhile.

Now, how does that have anything to do with being a scholar? If scholars are just people who sit inside all day and argue about the esoteric, not much. However, I think a little bit of redefining is in order. A scholar can be so much more than an academic, so much more than someone using their brans for their own purposes. We are not scholarly simply because we want to know things, though that's part of it. A scholar, for me, is someone who uses their learning, uses their understanding of a discipline and a way of thought, to create and share. Does that mean ever scholar has to publish a seminal work on understanding a subject that marks the lives of millions for centuries to come? No. Creation comes in many forms, and sharing can mean many things. To an extent, it's arbitrary. However, in the Western academic context we inhabit, I think there are some easy limits that we can use. To be scholarly is to be rigorous, to use our minds and learning to understand things as best we can and to share that knowledge via the creation of new material, even if that new material is only the synthesis in a slightly new way of old material. There may be nothing new under the sun, but as scholars we can try to make sense of what is here and communicate that to those around us. For me, this entails looking back at history, trying my best to understand the events and narratives that have led us to our current position, and then translating that into the modern day and to those around me. And as a Christian, it is my responsibility to do this as faithfully as possible while also keeping in mind the harm that misrepresentation of history can cause and the difficulties inherent in translating things through time, space, and culture. My project is about animation and its place as a children's medium, and I will resist that misrepresentation to the best of my ability. History and stories are inextricably connected, and my scholarship is defined against my ability to discover truth and beauty in both.

Christian scholarship is about integrity, and change, and creating, and sharing. It's about trying, and about humans, and about God. I hope I can reflect that as I move forward.

Animation or Cartoons: An American Dilemma

By Andrew W Meyer

The history of animation in the United States differs from the history of animation in the rest of the world. The first sign of this difference is the fact that most Americans would not even use the term animation. They would instead use the word "cartoons"—a word suggesting that this is a storytelling medium for children. And that, in fact, is exactly how American producers developed the medium. The American entertainment industry developed other storytelling media like novels, live-action film, and television for audiences of all ages, but not animation. Cartoons were for kids.

It did not have to be this way. Animation, like any other medium, has the potential to tell a diverse variety of stories for audiences across the age spectrum. Yet because of the circumstances of its birth and the preferences of those who first cultivated it, American animation has continued to focus on younger audiences, often at the expense of adult viewers.

This study will show how the birth and subsequent development of American animation kept the medium focused on younger viewers. The primary argument of this study is that this was not a necessary development. The focus on children was due to choices of human agents and the cultural context in which they worked, not to factors inherent in the medium itself. Animation has just as much potential as any other storytelling medium to speak to audiences of all ages.

Part I of this study is a chronological outline of the growth and evolution of animation, followed by a discussion of the early development of American animation and its relationship to other storytelling mediums. Part II will discuss animation in the major American studios during the 'golden age' of the 1940s and 1950s, with a focus on Walt Disney. Part III will demonstrate how the patterns set in the early years continued forward and produced a demographic stagnation in the medium, even in the midst of efforts to take animation in new directions. Overall, the evolution of the medium and its demographic realities will be demonstrated by examining the conservatism and ambition seen many of the best-known and most influential pieces of animated media made in the last century. Finally, the conclusion will discuss the possibilities for American animation to break out of this stagnation and become a more mature art form, capable of telling all kinds of stories for all kinds of audiences.

Part I:
Humble Beginnings

Animation, as a concept, has been around for quite some time. Although there is some debate as to whether these early attempts actually constitute animation, and thus where the formal beginnings for the practice truly lie, the general consensus is that modern animation began in the mid-19th century in Europe. However, the desire to convey motion in art has existed for almost as long as humans have been creating visual representation, with several undated Paleolithic cave paintings showing animals with multiple limbs in an attempt to depict motion.[1] Although obviously this was an extremely primitive and rudimentary way to depict it, this early example shows that humans have always been drawn to the idea of making the images they created more lifelike, to take something stationary and tell a story with it using motion.

The idea of animation continued to develop over the millennia, growing ever closer to what we recognize today. The earliest recorded example of a major step in animation is about 5,200 years ago, in modern Iran, located in 'The Burnt City'. A piece of pottery depicts an ibex, in five sequential frames, attempting to leap and eat the branches of a tree, then falling back to the ground.[2] Although obviously lacking the superimposition that allows traditional animation to imitate motion, it is easy to imagine the intent of the piece. Animation of this type continued to be created for the centuries following this early attempt, seldom changing in form or function but always in the service of showing motion and enlivening the inert. There are also records that indicate that some ancient civilizations, such as the Chinese, may have had devices that "give the impression of movement" to various living figures, but these are unconfirmed and may have been referring to something else entirely.[3] One thing is obvious, however: Depicting movement in art is something humans around the world have been keen to do for a very long time.

This leads us to our working definition of animation. To keep things simple, we'll define it thus: The 'animating' of human-created images in order to create the semblance of movement and life with the purpose of creating some sort of narrative. Of course, 'animation' can exist without a much of a narrative, but this paper is also focused on the development of animation as a narrative medium, rather than just as a vehicle for depicting motion or a novelty. Thus our definition of 'mature' animation will be restricted to those pieces that include some form of storytelling, however crude. Although this paper will be focusing primarily on the well-known 'traditional' hand-drawn animation created between the forties and the sixties, it will also explore more non-traditional forms including off-screen primitive animation attempts, as well as more contemporary CGI animation. This paper is not designed to be primarily an art critique or

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[1] Thomas, Bob. *Disney's Art of Animation*. Los Angeles/New York City: Golden Press, 1958, 8.

[2] Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies, "CHTHO's Cultural Blunder and Documentary Production on World's Oldest Animation", March 04, 2008. http://www.cais-soas.com/News/2008/March2008/04-03.htm

[3] Rojas, Carlos. *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 5

to make judgments about the quality of various types of animation as opposed to others, but is instead intended to be an academic analysis of the medium from a cultural and historical perspective.

But before we dig into the meat of animation's history and development, a quick look at some alternatives and progenitors is necessary. There is an immediate connection to theatre—both in means of display and enjoyment, as well as in style and narrative—that is telling. Animation, like live-action film, owes a great debt to the theatre for a wide variety of reasons, especially in its early incarnations, but the points of divergence of equal importance. Its divergence from visual art, its most immediate precursor, and from film (and later, graphic novels and comics), is striking and fascinating. From its audience, to its themes, to its style, animation would grow to become fundamentally separate from its parents as well as its siblings, and these differences lie primarily in numerous contextual anomalies, flukes, and continuities, or their abortion. Each of these mediums deserves their own treatise, and this paper could be devoted entirely to comparing one of them with animation, but this paper will limit itself to their basic trajectories, and how they compare to animation and its trajectory, specifically with maturity of content and intended audience. Although we could obviously go further, and compare animation to literature or poetry or some other medium, we will limit ourselves to visual mediums for two reasons: One, because there is greater continuity and similarity within the spectrum of visual mediums than outside it, and two, because this is not intended to be a dissertation. To that end, we will focus on visual art and live action film.

Of these related mediums, the oldest, and most foundational, is visual art. As we already discussed, the first inklings of animation only came when static, visual art was manipulated to create motion and the semblance of life. Traditional animation in the style of Disney and Looney Tunes is really nothing more than individual pieces of visual art superimposed over each other at high speeds, while even digital animation often relies heavily on the use of storyboards and concept art. As such, the importance of traditional visual art as an ancestor for animation's development cannot be overstated.

Tracing the entire history of visual art is not in the purview of this thesis. But there are several things that are worthy of note. Of these, one thing that is absolutely essential to understand is the sheer size, complexity, and breadth that is visual art. Art has been used in different civilizations for centuries, and although there are always similarities, there are myriad differences as well. That is the one thing that all art shares: Diversity, complexity, unpredictability. Even in the Western canon alone, within only a few centuries, the diversity is staggering: From the satirical political cartoons of William Hogarth to the strangely enchanting *Mona Lisa* to Edvard Munch's disturbing, absurdist *The Scream*, visual art can communicate an almost unlimited variety of ideas and emotions to the viewer, and has been used to do so for millennia. It is abundantly clear just how great the spread of ideas and intentions can be within the medium. Under our broad definition of 'visual art'—non-photographic stills made with a measure of

artistic purpose—we can say without any question that the possibilities, and the realities, are nearly limitless.

What is the significance of this? Mainly, it is to draw a comparison to what we know of animation today. To the modern audience, animation is known primarily for creating children's entertainment, with the notable exception being adult comedy, often of a satirical, ridiculous, and lowbrow variety. And yet, animation fundamentally arose out of visual art, which is a fundamental, diverse, and universal medium which very few adults would scoff at. In fact, art, along with literature and music, is part of the unquestioned trinity of acceptable scholarly artistic pursuits. Very few would think to question the importance of art, or its ability to speak to numerous audiences about numerous subjects.

This begs an obvious question. Why, then, is animation—which is essentially moving, living art—marketed almost exclusively for younger audiences? Why the lack of maturity, the lack of diversity? Is it because of something within animation itself, limiting it to certain types of stories? Or is it because, as this paper has proposed, of something else?

A glimpse of insight comes from a type of still art already mentioned. The political cartoon has been around for centuries, with its zenith in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and North America.[4] Typically humorous, with exaggerated art and style and a strong sense of irony and satire, these short pieces of two dimensional art are typically used to point out hypocrisy, corruption, and other social ills. As time went on, the word cartoon began to grow and expand in meaning, until today, the public often unthinkingly refers to animation, regardless of intent or style, as 'cartoons'. It seems innocuous enough. However, the use of this word as opposed to others is instructive: It implies a particular type of content, a particular composition for its audience, and a particular way in which it should be viewed. Cartoons were rarely seen as 'art' in the proper sense, possessing a singular purpose in their creation, a particular audience, and a particular style. To apply this to an entire medium, one that this paper will argue has the potential for a great diversity of themes, audiences, and stories is a disservice. A continued exploration of the development of animation through the early 20th century will illuminate this. For, over time, animation (at least in the United States) would come to resemble editorial cartoons in many ways: Possessing a singular purpose in their creation, a particular audience, and a particular artistic style.

Before moving on to animation, there is one more essential comparison. In the modern world, live action film is king. Bringing in massive amounts of money at theaters, from DVD's and Blu-rays, from online sales, from advertisements on television, live action film and television wields a massive amount of cultural power. Despite getting its start around the same time as animation in the late 19th century and working in what is functionally the same way (with individual photographed stills recorded/superimposed

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[4] Sterling, Christopher. *Encyclopedia of Journalism*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009, 253–261

and changed rapidly to mimic movement), their method of portrayal has been immensely powerful and ubiquitous in the way that animation simply hasn't been.

Not only is live action film powerful and ubiquitous, but it enjoys the kind of diversity of content and audience that a mature medium typically possesses, despite its youth. Even limiting the field to narrative film and television, virtually everyone can find something that is to their taste within live action film. Not only is every genre represented—science-fiction, drama, comedy, and so on—but the audience, and the age and maturity of that audience, ranges from the youngest to the eldest. Television, too, can range from tense, complex, ideologically murky works such as *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* to comparatively simple, feel-good comedies such as *Friends*. Although the medium is full of lackluster efforts and failed ideas, there is always something new to try on the next shelf.

And why is this? Why has live action film become so much more ubiquitous and successful, despite developing from similar roots around the same time?[5] The most obvious reason is also the biggest difference between the two: The fact that one is representational art, and the other is a realistic, recorded series of 'actual' images. This photographic element is certainly important, and does point to why live action film has attracted so much popularity, as a combination of initial novelty, desire for realism, and intuitive connection to the characters through their 'reality' could certainly have played a role. Our perception that the curtain has been pulled back, that this is not a representation of people but is rather truly them, was likely part of the initial appeal, although of course there are still many layers of carefully constructed presentation between the viewer and reality of the film's creation.

This representational element does not seem to fully account for the divergence, however. As with many things, these developments come down to history, happenstance, and context. Each medium went down the path it did for numerous reasons, and the paper hopes to illuminate animation's journey. Even if film's greater popularity did push animation to the sidelines, why did animation move in the direction it did? Why are most television shows marketed to the ages 6-15 animated?[6] And why has that remained the same for more than half a century? One reason, certainly, is the flexibility that animation has in its portrayals—the ability to create bizarre creatures, weird situations, funny looking people, and amusing artistic aesthetics easily lends it easily to minds of the young and impressionable. However, this paper argues that the answers to these questions lie primarily in context, not in content. As a comparison to the animation being created elsewhere in the world—in France, where animation and film got their start, or in Japan, where animation is the king, rather than live-action film—shows, it quickly becomes obvious that the types of stylistic portrayal seen in animation can fit a wide range of content and age

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[5] Bordwell, Thompson, David and Kristin. *Film History: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill Company Inc, 2003, 13

[6] "Children's Television". Wikipedia.com. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children%27s_television_series, section 3

ranges. The progression of the medium in the early twentieth century, where it truly got its start in the United States, shows this very clearly.

The 19th Century: Technologies and Experimentation

The first meaningful step that began the march into the modern era of animation came with the invention of the phenakistoscope, a spinning disc-like device that could mimic movement, in the mid-19th century by a Belgian physicist.[7] This was followed by the invention of the zoetrope (1834), a spinning cylinder with slits for viewing, the praxinoscope (1877), an updated zoetrope with an inner circle of mirrors rather than small slits for easier viewing, and the proliferation of the flip book.[8] Although most of these inventions are little known today, they all played their part in popularizing the idea of animation and in pushing the technology closer to what it is today. They did this by continually improving the depiction of movement and by pushing the development of other, longer lasting animation techniques by others in the future. They made significant conceptual and historical strides towards the types of animation we're presently familiar with, and they showed how essential technology was and would be in continuing to advance the medium towards its potential.

Though there were other further developments, such as Edison's kinetograph, it was the 'cinématographe', first introduced by the Lumiere brothers in 1895, which combined a camera, a printer, and projector into one that really precipitated the technological progression of the medium and allowed both animated and live-action films to be made without great difficulty.[9] From the middle of the 19th century on, animation would continue to advance technologically, and, alongside it, the idea of using animation to do more than depict motion began to catch on and develop itself more fully. The potential to use animation as a medium for entertainment deeper than novelty was slowly realized, and animation progressed extremely rapidly.

The first true inkling of what animation could be capable of came in 1892 when the French educator and inventor of the praxinoscope, Charles-Émile Reynaud, projected his own personal animated project, *Pauvre Pierrot*, at a museum in Paris.[10] *Pauvre Pierrot* is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is significant as, quite simply, the first example of modern animation watchable in a cinematic

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[7] *Ghent Scientists: Joseph Plateau*. Museum for the History of Sciences, Ghent, http://www.sciencemuseum.ugent.be/engl-plat5.html

[8] "Emile Renaud", Les Indépendants du Premier Siècle, http://www.lips.org/bio_Reynaud_GB.html. Rojas. *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, 5. Webster, Chris. *Animation: The Mechanics of Motion*. Waltham: Focal Press, 2005, 10

[9] McLaughlin, Dan. "A Rather Incomplete but Still Fascinating History of Animation, Film Tv." (2001) http://www.arnokroner.com/education/design/cg/foundation/fun_facts.pdf

[10] "Emile Renaud."

format. However, what does that mean? What advances and differences make it so significant? Technical innovations and the formatting used are the most obvious. *Pauvre Pierrot* not only employed an animation style that made it appear as though the images were superimposed over one another, but put its hand-done paintings into a long form artistic format which consisted of a large quantity of frames, rather than several frames repeating themselves in an endless loop.[11] This set a precedent that has been followed for over a century since. Additionally, *Pauvre Pierrot* is the first piece of animation to utilize film perforations to better transport and steady the film in use, a practice that is still common.[12] However, it is the way in which it was displayed, and the attempt to create a coherent narrative (despite the lack of sound, which was made up for by live music), that is of most interest for our purposes. Chronicling the tale of 'Pauvre Pierrot' (Poor Pierrot), the short tells the story of a love affair, unwanted advances, and a man who ultimately is gotten the better of by the caprices of human affection.[13] Although the material and execution are somewhat crude, the subject matter is ultimately of a fairly mature nature despite its lighthearted presentation. This, in and of itself, is worthy of note. Although hardly a narrative or artistic masterpiece, *Pauvre Pierrot* is undoubtedly aimed towards an older audience, being hardly the type of material suitable for children. Few children's stories tell explicit tales of alcohol abuse and marital indiscretions. And, although the characters are far from fleshed out and the story is short and simple, it is nonetheless a complete narrative, including a clear beginning, middle, and end. Additionally, it was shown, with great fanfare, as part of his 'Théâtre Optique' at the Musée Grevin, marking another trend that would continue onward, and one that paid its dues to traditional theatre: That of putting on animation, as well as live action film, as a type of show that people could share in together.[14] Paying for the experience, rather than just the product, as well as the community element, has remained fairly strong despite remarkable advances in technology, and is just one of the many continuities that can be traced from before the genesis of narrative animation to the present.

The Early 20th Century: The United States and its Experiments

Although the origin of animation lies in France, and France would continue to have its own path of development throughout the coming century, it is in the United States that the focus of our story lies. Throughout the 20th century, animation would go from a little known curiosity in the United States to a

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[11] "Essential Films: *Pauvre Pierrot*." Essential Films. http://www.essential-films.co.uk/article/essential-films-chapter-iv-pauvre-pierrot-poor-pierrot.html
[12] Herbert, Stephen. "Charles- Émile Reynaud." Who's Who in Victorian Cinema, http://www.victorian-cinema.net/reynaud
[13] Ibid
[14] Ibid

medium known by everyone. A combination of increasing technological improvement and the ideas and vision of a few far-sighted individuals, the development of American animation could fill several books. This paper will limit itself to highlighting a few important developments in the early 20th century before diving into the primary discussion of the medium and its history in the 'Golden Age' of animation and onward.

The story begins with J Stuart Blackton, the 'Father or American Animation'. Although originally born in Sheffield, England, Blackton emigrated with his family to the United States at an early age, and spent most of his working life within the United States. Working as an illustrator and reporter in New York, Blackton was eventually exposed to Thomas Edison, his Vitascope (an early film projector), and the idea of animation, and soon began working on creating animation professionally along with his partner, Albert Smith.[15] He was immediately successful, with numerous small films and pieces doing well commercially and generating critical interest. However, it wasn't until *The Enchanted Drawing*, the first animated film to be produced on standard picture film, and *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces*, that he began to truly make serious contributions to the business of animation.[16] This new way of creating animated films, which used transparent film strips in a more standardized fashion and reduced costs while increasing quality, became much more prominent in the 1900-1919 era, allowing animation and film to proliferate both within the United States and elsewhere.[17] J Staurt Blackton would continue to create important works and to move the industry forward, creating stop-motion animation, numerous popular animated pieces, and the first American film version of *Romeo and Juliet* (live action).[18] Increasingly well known, financially successful through a combination of his film work, his work with the vitagraph business (adapted from the Vitascope), and other ventures, and able to create more or less whatever he liked, Blackton was able to experiment with a number of practices and greatly popularized the idea of animation. In this way, Blackton made a significant contribution to the development of animation in a purely linear, productive, developmental sense.

However, it is his cultural and historical impact that we are primarily concerned with here. What kind of films to Blackton make? What messages and ideas did they convey, and what effect might that have had upon following works? Although there was some diversity in the content or his material, most of Blackton's animation work was of a fairly simplistic, childish nature, with the films being short, often humorous silent pieces. *The Enchanted Drawing* has little story beyond the title, and *Humorous Phases of*

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[15] Gifford, Denis. "James Stuart Blackton." Who's Who of Victorian Cinema, http://www.victorian-cinema.net/blackton.php

[16] Blackton, J Stuart. "The Enchanted Drawing." The Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/item/00694004

[17] Bowser, Eileen. *The Transformation of Cinema 1907–1915*. New York City: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990, 74–75.

[18] Blackton, J Stuart, and Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*, 1908. World Public Library, http://www.worldlibrary.org/articles/romeo_and_juliet_(1908_film)

Funny Faces is fairly self-explanatory. Blackton seems less interested in the idea of animation as an art form or a storytelling device than as an industry or medium for proof-of-concept creations. In his unpublished autobiography, he makes no mention of animation experiments, despite them being the center of his fame and importance today. Toward the end of his life, he is purported to have come to see his experiments in animation as rather juvenile and not worthy of consideration as an art form— something that cannot be forgotten when delving into the nature of animation's historical audience and content.[19] The fact that the founder of American animation eventually viewed his own pioneering work as juvenile, as something not valuable as either an art form or a storytelling medium, truly begins the story of animation being considered as something for kids.

Blackton didn't create 'juvenile' works simply because he loved children or because he felt like it. Being the first of his kind in America was part of it. But technology and the limitations of the medium played their role as well. Animation, including the stop-motion animation often used by Blackton, can be incredibly time consuming and labor intensive, requiring the creation of numerous frames for every minute of screen time. Additionally, the film and projectors of the time were simply not equipped for long and incredibly complex or artistic work, with neither the quality of the picture nor the potential length of the piece being conducive to storytelling or art. Lastly, artists and producers of animated films soon realized that a more abstract, exaggerated style similar to humorous cartoons was considerably easier to produce in a shorter amount of time than detailed, artistic work.[20] With their reference point being this kind of work, rather than different and more mature examples of stylized art, a particular lexicon for creating animation was formed. As the 20th century marched on and traditional, hand-drawn animation became more popular, the difficulty in creating animation and historical audience and authorial intent led the medium primarily being used in its traditional manner. But even when technology was more able to handle complexity and realism, the example set by Blackton and those like him would continue to carry its weight.

Blackton set quite an example. This can be seen in the cases of the Warner Brothers and Walt Disney, both of which remain well known today. Once again, the direction in which the American animation industry progressed was influenced by choices of a few individuals, with Walt Disney in particular having a huge effect on animation's development. Although there are certainly other factors in the development of animation as a children's medium in the United States, the connection between the role of these two companies and their choices over the years, as well as the context in which they made

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[19] "J Stuart Blackton." Wikipedia.com, unpublished autobiography. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._Stuart_Blackton
[20] Bendazzi, Giannalberto. *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994

those choices, had a powerful effect in shaping the direction of animation's future. We will explore the this in part two of this paper.

Part II: A Golden Age

The Warner Brothers and Walt Disney have been consistently formative presences in the American entertainment industry. Today, Walt Disney is one of the largest and best known entertainment companies in the world, with fingers in almost every pie imaginable, from blockbuster science fiction to art films to princess movies. And Warner Brothers is right behind them, producing everything from the Harry Potter films and the Dark Knight series to quirky cartoons such as *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe*. This wide range of content is designed to appeal to all possible demographics, representing a powerful push to create an ecosystem in which the company can provide content for all demographics. This wide-reaching strategy strongly incorporates animation, with animation representing a significant segment of the youth-focused content for both companies.

This all came from the beginnings of the true animation revolution in the United States. Often known as the "Golden Age of Animation", the 1940's and 1950's (and to a lesser extent, the 1930's) gave birth to many of the most iconic characters of a generation: Bugs Bunny, Donald Duck, Snow White, Cinderella, and many more.[21] The films and cartoons made during that era, more than most live action films, endured in the hearts and minds of Americans, remaining popular enough to be released and updated year after year. And the continued power and profitability of the aforementioned corporations is owed in large part to their precipitous rise during this period.

Walt Disney and an Unlikely Rise

Talking about the history of American animation without paying homage to Walt Disney impossible. Walt Disney had a profound effect on the development of the medium in the United States, and it is doubtful that American animation will escape his influence anytime soon. His ideas, his choices, his ideals, and the technical developments made by him and his teams made animation into what it is today.

Walt Disney came from humble beginnings. Though the details of his early life are not important for our purposes, suffice it to say that he had both a great interest in art and a strong entrepreneurial spirit, both of which would serve him well during this chaotic and potential-filled period of American history.[22]

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[21] Gabler, Neal. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of American Imagination*. New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 51-89
[22] Ibid, 52

It wasn't until he finally made his move to Hollywood in 1923 that things started to truly move towards success for him.

   After many attempts to use art to make his living in various ways, from cartoons to illustration, Disney had finally hit upon what he'd been searching for with animation. By this time in his early-twenties, Disney made his own company, settling on cel animation (in which assets are reused; e.g., if one character is speaking to another, the other remains still and is only drawn for that one frame while the one talking is drawn in multiple) as the most promising method for his efforts.[23] This led to the creation of "Laugh-O-Grams", framed as modernized fairy tales, which proved to be quite popular in the Kansas City area and mark the true beginning of Disney's long foray into animation.[24] This choice is instructive. Fairy tales have long been primarily aimed towards children, aiming to teach moral lessons, entertain, and shape the children's perceptions from a young age. Ultimately, this was no different, with Disney's continued adaptation of fairy tales playing into the same age-old customs. And the nature of that adaptation would contribute to a focus on children's animation that would be maintained for nearly a hundred years.

   Once he arrived in Hollywood, things began to happen quickly. Now with a better idea of where he was headed (Laugh-O-Grams were particularly popular with children), Walt Disney was able to quickly set himself up as a successful creator of animated entertainment. Within the space of his first few months there, Walt and his brother Roy had started a cartoon studio and had gotten both Iwerks and Virginia Davis, the star of one of his previous Laugh-O-Grams, to move to Hollywood to begin work. By 1925, Walt had married ink artist Lillian Bound and created the *Alice Comedies*, short children's cartoons mixed with live-action featuring Virginia Davis and other child actors, which became quite popular before they ended in 1927.[25] However, *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*, produced by Charles Mintz and distributed by Universal Pictures, was Disney's first true mainstream success, propelling him and his studio into the wide world of Hollywood productions.[26] However, that same wide world quickly showed its true colors: Despite Oswald's immense popularity, when Disney tried to negotiate for greater compensation, Mintz demanded he accept lower compensation, lest Mintz (who owned the copyright to Oswald and held the contracts for most of Disney's animators) start his own company to distribute the project.[27] Disney refused, and soon found himself on his own again, with nearly everybody but Iwerks (who refused go over to Mintz) and his wife having left him.[28] At this point, it would seem likely that

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[23] Gabler, *American Imagination*, 56
[24] Ibid, 57
[25] Ibid, 80
[26] "Secret Talks." Walt Disney Family Museum. Archived from original on April 29, 2015
[27] Gabler, *American Imagination*, 109
[28] Ibid, 109

Walt Disney's journey towards lasting popularity had ended, just as it had truly begun—but Walt was not finished yet. And his next project would end up being far more lasting in its popularity and impact than Oswald had ever been.

According to various apocryphal tales, it was on the ride back from New York, where Disney had been so thoroughly betrayed and left bereft, that he landed upon the idea for one of the most lasting icons of American popular culture to ever exist: Mickey Mouse.[29] In reality, many hours were spent by Iwerks, Walt, Roy, and Lillian trying to come up with a character to match Oswald, but ultimately it was Mickey who stood out, inspired by Walt's oft-professed love for Aesop's Fables and by the notion that a mouse would make a "cute character to animate."[30] The influence of Aesop's Fables and related fairy tales on Disney's work is once again both apparent and telling, and would persist through the decades. The product of much careful calculation and brainstorming by the four most closely tied to the project's success, Mickey reflected that hard work admirably, and it was not long before his popularity began to rise. Though their first outing, *Plane Crazy,* was by all accounts rather uninspired, it provided the foundation to create works that were less so—following up on the success of the *Jazz Singer*, the first full length motion picture with sound, Walt began the painful process of making his cartoons into works that could be heard as well as seen.[31] Despite many difficulties getting the animation to sync with sound, an area in which no one had any expertise, *Steamboat Willie*—by many considered the true beginning of the era of modern animation—was eventually released. And it was able to do exactly what Disney had hoped: To bring his studio of uncertain future back from the brink and send it hurtling towards fame and fortune. "The Jazz Singer of animation" had arrived, and it would usher in a new era.[32] And that was not the end of it. Although *Steamboat Willie* did many remarkable things, it remained in black and white, like all animated features before it. Disney would change the nature of animation once again with the release of *Flowers and Trees* in 1932, the first feature to use the full three-strip Technicolor process, creating a much more vibrant and visually arresting color palette.[33] Though Disney had a contract with Technicolor until 1935 preventing other companies from using this process, the release and subsequent success of this color film soon led to the many others like it, creating an industry standard in less than a decade. *Flowers and Trees* would also go on to receive and Academy Award that year, no mean achievement for a short piece about trees falling in love.[34] However, despite any shortcomings we may see in hindsight, both

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[29] Gabler, *American Imagination*, 111-112
[30] Ibid, 113
[31] Ibid, 117
[32] Ibid, 119
[33]Dirks, Tim. "Animated Films Part 1." Film Site. http://www.filmsite.org/animatedfilms.html
[34] Ibid

Steamboat Willie and *Flowers and Trees* served to usher in a new, and ultimately very fruitful, era for animation.

That new era acted in much the same way a snowball rolling down a snow-covered slope does: For a long time, it only seemed to gain momentum and mass, with no end in sight. Soon after the release of *Steamboat Willie*, Disney and his newly minted studio were able to begin producing the beginnings of a truly massive corpus of work. Mickey Mouse was, and remains, perhaps Disney's most enduring character, and it soon eclipsed Felix the Cat and Oswald the Lucky Rabbit as the best known cartoon character worldwide.[35] This came in part due to the realization by Disney and his fellows that the success of cartoons was inextricably tied to the strength of the stories being told, through the uncommon success of the *Three Little Pigs*.[36] This was a huge realization, and it would have a significant impact on the development of the medium: Whereas previously, story was seen as little more than bare threads connecting the art and characters together, as part of the legacy of political cartoons and visual art, from the 1930s on, the narrative was seen as just as integral to the success of any production as the animation itself. This led Disney to the practical innovation of creating a story department separate from the animation department in which writers and story-boarders would create, design, and hone stories that would captivate audiences.[37] This idea, obvious to us now, rapidly caught on within the industry, and soon this kind of division of labor and focus on story became the norm within American animation. On the more traditionally artistic side, *Three Little Pigs* led to an important realization on the part of artists and animators and in the form of the importance of movement to the establishment of personality in animated characters. Chuck Jones, who is today known as one of the giants of traditional animation, "realized something was happening there that hadn't happened before…it wasn't how the character looked but how he moved that determined his personality." Given animation's fundamental origins in the concept of literal 'moving pictures', this realization helped put the medium on the road to visual maturation by more closely syncing it with its basic nature and strengths. Instead of relying primarily on the simple visual artistic representation of the character for personality, as one would with a still picture, audiences were given living, moving people with unique, often exaggerated tics and methods of movement to distinguish and enliven them. However, despite this huge jump forward, it would be a long time before any kind of mature storytelling would come out of the medium. Fundamentally, the stories were still for kids.

The innovations and cultural trajectories begun with *Three Little Pigs* only continued as Disney's company began to use its newfound popularity and financial success to create ever more complex and

[35] Solomon, Charles. "The Golden Age of Mickey Mouse." Disney. Archived from the original on July 10, 2008.
[36] Krasniewicz, Louise. *Walt Disney: A Biography*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010, 60–64
[37] Gabler, *American Imagination*, 181-189

intricate works. However, nothing compared to what was one of the most ambitious creative endeavors of the era, oft referred to by contemporaries as "Disney's Folly": 1937's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first ever full-length animated feature film.[38]

Snow White: Disney's Folly and the Awakening of American Animation

Snow White is significant enough that it merits both a historical examination of the outside context and an in depth primary analysis of the content. For *Snow White* is and was important in numerous and diverse ways, from its effect on the animation industry, to its effect on animation as an art form, to its effect on animation as a cultural phenomenon, and a cursory examination would fail to capture the reality of just how important the film truly was.

Snow White came out of a specific context, with regards to Disney himself and the general world and culture around it. Though success with the *Silly Symphonies* and the Mickey Mouse cartoons had allowed Walt Disney to enter the stage of national American media, and had finally allowed him and his studio to become relatively financially stable, animation still wasn't treated with real seriousness by the film industry. Walt Disney aimed to change that, to make his mark on history despite any difficulty, and he did so by making the ambitious decision to make the first full length animated feature film ever made.[39] He did this despite the protestations of his wife, Lillian, his brother and business partner, Roy, and the skepticism of the entire film industry.[40] And, though he had to mortgage his house to finance the incredibly expensive film (at $1, 488, 422.74 it was an absurd amount of money for the time), it was ultimately a spectacular success, making over eight million dollars, briefly holding the record for best-selling sound film of all time, and remaining within the top ten performers in the North American box office (adjusted for inflation) to this day.[41] *Snow White* remains the most influential production in the history of animation to this day. Its example showed American studios that animation was most successful when made for children and their families. Its success was so great, in fact, that most animation studios failed to even attempt more adult focused work. *Snow White*, combined with Disney's continued use of the template it created, set the medium down a path that it has never left.

The reality behind *Snow White*'s content is essential to our understanding here. The fairy tale content is no accident. It bespeaks Disney's long history with children's entertainment, and it reflects his interest in children's storytelling. The *Snow White* tale Disney based his adaptation on was always

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[38] Note: First animated film with traditional hand-drawn animation and a coherent narrative
[39] Smith, Dave. *Disney A to Z*. Glendale: Disney Editions, 2006, 33
[40] Thomas, Bob. *Disney's Art of Animation: From Mickey Mouse to Beauty and the Beast*. New York City: Hyperion, 1992, 66
[41] Barrier, Michael J. *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 229. "Genre and International Box Office." Film Victoria / Government of Australia,10. Archived from the original on June 16, 2012

something for children, as are all fairy tales in this day and age, and that continuity has remained.[42] *Snow White*, and most Disney films after it, are intended to be a reimagining of that kind of children's literature. Because of its importance as the first of its kind, it created a blueprint on which both the animated film industry, and most animated work in general, would be at least partially based. By aiming the first animated film ever created squarely at younger audiences, Walt Disney created a trend in animated media that has persisted long after his death. Who knows what might have happened had the film been less successful, or geared towards a different demographic—perhaps the landscape of animation would be wildly different, or perhaps not. Regardless, because of *Snow White*, animation has filled the role of dispenser of both entertainment and ideology for children in the 20th and 21st centuries, and it continues to do so.

There are numerous examples of the way in which the film was aimed towards children, though a few of the more obvious and lastingly important will suffice. Firstly, there is the story structure itself. The movie hits a runtime of about eighty-three minutes, which in and of itself is telling. In our day and age, the average film—even simple children's fare in the tradition of *Snow White*—tends to hit at least about ninety minutes, with the trend typically only going up with time.[43] Though the short length of the film was partially a function of the time period, it was still shorter than the average: In the 1930s, the average film length for top films was around ninety-five minutes, and in the 1940s, the average film length was closer to one-hundred and five.[44] The story is incredibly thin, with only around four major plot movements: Snow White's escape/exile/failed execution, her discovery of the home of the dwarfs and subsequent *fait accompli* occupation, the Queen's discovery of Snow White's temporary happiness and attempt to take it from her, and then resolution in the form of the Queen conveniently falling off a cliff and Snow White's kiss from a prince whose name and character is never given. Throughout these major movements, we are given establishing character moments in the form of constant sight gags and convenient, short-cut naming (Grumpy, Happy, Snow White, etc). Each character is established as a single, simple character attribute, or set thereof—the Queen is vain, jealous, and cruel, Snow White is pure and kind, Happy is happy, Sneezy sneezes a lot. They then continue to play into that attribute statically for the remainder of the film, with the possible exception of Grumpy. From an immediate narrative standpoint, things are never complicated.

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[42] Stone, Kay. "Märchen to Fairy Tale: An Unmagical Transformation." *Western Folklore*. Western States Folklore Society (1981), 40 (3): 232–244. Bredsdorff, Elias. *Hans Christian Andersen: The Story of his Life and Work 1805–75*. London: Phaidon Press, 1975

[43] Scriretta, Peter. Slashfilm.com. "By the Numbers: The Length of Feature Films." http://www.slashfilm.com/by-the-numbers-the-length-of-feature-films/

[44] Ibid

The rest of the film is spent playing out those character stereotypes and engaging in narrative fluff. This filler content cannot be entirely circumscribed in a quick summary, but there are enough examples to effectively demonstrate its nature. Many of the singing portions could be classified as such, particularly those towards the middle of the film—"Whistle While You Work" and "The Dwarf's Yodel Song (The Silly Song)" are especially poignant examples. "Whistle While You Work" does little else besides fill time and provide fun scenes of animals rollicking about in lighthearted and bumbling fashion. Essentially, it functions as a vehicle to ensure the audience is well aware of Snow's housekeeping prowess and proclivities, while also keeping younger audiences entertained in the process. Though it performs some character establishment, it serves primarily as connective tissue for the narrative.

The "Silly Song", however, is an example of something that is entirely filler content, doing absolutely nothing for the story or the characters but filling time between Snow's quick assimilation into the lives of the dwarfs and her ultimate third-act temptation and near death experience. The only thing that it debatably does from a meta or character standpoint is create camaraderie between Snow and the dwarfs, but even that is not really explicit in the scene, and no measurable changes of attitude can be discerned from either party. The scene is spent simply frolicking about, with each character playing perfectly into its own stereotype: Grumpy doesn't want to participate, Dopey appears drugged and half-incapacitated and performs various pieces of physical comedy, Snow sits, occasionally sings, and mostly titters, and so on. All in all, nothing really seems to happen.

However, the scene does have its place. For one, it does fill time and allow us to move to the next act of the plot. Additionally, it creates the kind of silly humor that children are often drawn to, and it allows for a few moments of uninvolved playtime before continuing with the story. It cements the film as something solidly aimed at the hearts of children, and in doing so, helped solidify the already coalescing elements of what would become the American animation industry.

However, *Snow White* is characterized by more than a sparse and undeveloped plot structure, archetypical characters, and a simplistic narrative. It also demonstrates, through its presentation of these elements as well as through the ideas it espouses, that it is a product of its time, and that it was created with a particular audience in mind. Coming off his work with the Laugh-o-Grams and various other lighthearted cartoon work, Walt Disney carried his sensibilities for what made a successful cartoon with him. The type of humor the film employs is probably the best example of this. Unlike many modern cartoons, which endeavor to appeal to older audiences by creating multiple layers of humor, *Snow White* is very simple, using physical humor and visual ridiculousness to entertain without engaging the mind of the viewer. In the 'Whistle While You Work' segment, the bits with the turtle—being too slow to keep up with everyone, unable to be helpful, constantly getting knocked around—exemplify this. During the 'Silly Song', we see the dwarfs constantly bumping into each other, dancing around, watching each other's

Adam's apples intently, throwing drumsticks around, among other things, all while singing. In fact, this lighthearted music makes it very clear what it is: The words "Ho hum, the tune is dumb, the words don't mean a thing" are specifically included in the song.[45] The film makes clear that it is not intended to be a serious work of art in the narrative sense, even if it was a major leap forward from a technical standpoint.

Dopey is another major example of the type of humor that is typically seen in the film. The name itself gives a clue to what lies behind the surface, of course, with "Dopey" alternately interpretable as "addled by drugs" or mentally deficient. Having a character being primarily identifiable by either of these traits is deeply problematic, and is emblematic of the expectations and allowances of a very different time. His actions in the film only serve to reinforce the stereotypes heaped upon him by his name: He spends most of his screen time meandering about, knocking things over, causing mayhem (usually without noticing or responding to it), and making ill-informed and shortsighted choices. The examples of this are numerous, ranging from when he's first introduced in the mine and nearly harms himself throwing a bag, to his introduction to Snow where he causes himself and the dwarfs to hurt themselves with his various antics, to his self-parodic dancing in the *Silly Song*, and so on. The important thing to note is that his lack of faculties is consistently played for laughs, and that he is intentionally presented as the butt of many of the film's jokes. Regardless of any moral dimension, this kind of presentation shows just the type of lowest-common denominator humor that the film frequently employs. Whether this kind of humor *can* appeal to adult viewers is mostly a moot point: It appeals primarily to those who can understand little else, and it makes no effort to meet adults where they are intellectually. Although there is nothing wrong with enjoying silly humor every once in a while, this *kind* of silly humor is simply not the primary kind of humor that most adults enjoy, in any era, and it isn't presented with the notion of attracting adult viewers in mind.

Snow White also caters to its audience in more subtle ways. The first of these is the visual presentation itself. Each of these are designed and created with intention in mind, in order to help shape the audience's view of what's happening. This kind of visual storytelling is part of what made *Snow White* so unique and special. Though in previous animated works, the visuals had certainly been created to fit the type of story being told, that story was rarely of any depth or length, and thus matching it to the visuals was less important than simply creating an art style that was engaging and appealing to viewers. Although the creators of *Snow White* certainly attempted to do that, they also attempted to improve the storytelling experience by creating visual cues for their viewers, to help better communicate character, theme, and narrative. This is most easily seen in the character designs. This kind of framing is incredibly important to the development of any medium, and the way in which it is done is a good marker for the

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[45] Disney, Walt. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Directed by Walt Disney. New York City: RKO Radio Pictures, 1937

intended audience and general complexity of the work. Whether it is matched or not, intentionality in visual framing is essential to making animation effective as a storytelling medium. And *Snow White* is the first major example of this.

Consequently, there is an extremely noticeable contrast between "evil" characters and "good" characters in *Snow White*. The queen, the huntsman, Snow, the prince, and the dwarfs are all framed in different ways, and each is designed to fit the way the audience is supposed to see them. The queen, the primary antagonist, has sharp and bony features, downturned lips, hooded eyes, and sharp and slanting brows, and wears long, dark, dramatically flowing clothing with a high, sheer collar. Everything about her image is cultivated to make her appear dark, scheming, vain, evil, et cetera, to the viewer. By using her appearance—dark red, downturned lips to represent beauty and vanity, hooded eyes to indicate scheming, dark robes for hiding things, and so on—to affect the perception of the viewer, the film is able to easily code her as a villain without having to rely on her actions to point the way. This method has been used in visual art, theater, and even to a certain extent literature, to influence the audience's perceptions, and it's both an effective and powerful way of doing so. And, following *Snow White*, it would become in the industry standard in animation as well, with character design always being of utmost importance. The other characters in *Snow White* are framed similarly, with each fitting the role they are intended to play. Snow herself is supposed to be the epitome of innocent maiden beauty, and she is drawn as such, with a small rounded button nose, compact but full lips (red as roses, of course), rounded eyes, thin penciled brows, a simple, rounded hairstyle, and clothes reminiscent of newly budding flower. The prince, though of little importance throughout most of the film, has similarly soft, rounded features. The dwarfs are also presented as soft and rounded in their own way, and each has a design intended to match their name and stereotype. Happy is especially rotund, with a round, rosy nose, plump, dimpled cheeks, fluffy white brows and beard, wide eyes, and a round, contented figure. His face rests in a smile, and in general, he seems to exude positivity and contentment through simple existence. This is, of course, borne out in his actions and in his general demeanor throughout the film. In comparison, we have Grumpy. At the face of it, they couldn't be more different, with one consistently a wet blanket, the other a ray of sunshine, one immediately warming to Snow, one reticent and truculent towards her. This is reflected in the designs as well, with a larger, lumpier, redder nose, a downturned mouth, and plunging eyebrows. However, in a broader sense, Grumpy shares many qualities with Happy and the other dwarfs: He tends to be rounded, his features tend to be large, and the lines tend to be soft. All of these contribute to the sense that, despite his unpleasant attitude, Grumpy is still very much part of the "good guys", unlike the sharp and unyielding queen with her sharp features and attack eyebrows. The other dwarfs each have their own unique features, but all reflect this ultimate divide. Dopey's face, in fact, is almost totally elastic and rounded, with large, doughy features and expressions. This reflects not only his factional and moral

alignment, but also his presentation as the mentally incompetent comic relief. Ultimately, each character not only has its own micro-narrative presented in individual form, but it conforms to an overarching aesthetic suited to the overall moral and factional narratives in the film. Most importantly, it communicates to the viewer the way in which the characters are supposed to be seen. It allows children with little notion of the details involved to understand the basic motivations and alignments of various characters, and to emote towards them in the appropriate ways. This is an indispensable tool. It also demonstrates the degree to which the film was directed towards children. It allows for a subliminal communication between the viewer and the film, conveying information and intended sentiment without needless exposition. This type of storytelling, already common in film at the time of *Snow White's* release, would become increasingly sophisticated and common as animation developed. Unlike film, however, the exaggerated and artistic style of animation allows for a more direct transmission of ideas and symbols, making stylistic choices incredibly important when setting the tone of the work.

 Snow White is a very early attempt at an animated film. It suffers from pacing problems, uncomfortable stereotyping, narrative simplicity, flat characters, and a rudimentary art style. However, there is no denying its import, as without it, we might never be where we are today. It pioneered or notably improved many ideas that would come to define animation as a medium, and, in particular, it started the trend of true long-form animated storytelling. It also started a continuity of children's storytelling that would shape the century.

 The road American animation takes grows only more complicated from 1937 onward, as we approach what is known by some today as "The Golden Age of Animation." Now limited by the Hays Code, which prohibited any kind of explicitly adult content in film, creators within the medium were increasingly forced to make their films palatable to all audiences.[46] Created partially because of concern about the effect of medium on children, the code limited the kind of content that could be distributed for both live-action and animation. For animation in particular, it only helped to convince content creators that the most profitable and sustainable content would be that focused on younger audiences. By limiting the scope of animation, it ensured that animation would continue to develop down a more family-friendly path, as well as ensured that no serious efforts would be made to break from that path.

 More films, cartoons, and the beginnings of modern animated television shows begin cropping up all over the place, and it becomes difficult to track them all in any detail. Thus, we will focus primarily on only those works which made significant strides in artistic, narrative, or thematic directions. We will examine these varied choices and their impact in our analysis of the medium's development over the

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[46] Smith, Sarah. *Children, Cinema and Censorship: From Dracula to the Dead End Kids*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005, 38

remainder of the 20th century, starting with the continued work of Disney and the work of the Warner Brothers.

Today, the company that a struggling artist and entrepreneur from a family of little means created controls a vast media empire, including everything from Marvel Comics to *Star Wars*, with their productions oft seen as marking the cornerstone of children's entertainment. The phenomenon of "Disney Movies", which seemed to have marked the early years of nearly every American child, cannot be underestimated. Media helps us frame the way we think, act, and choose, and children, growing brains that they are, are especially malleable. Classic retold fairy tales like the Beauty and the Beast or Cinderella, or new stories about anthropomorphic animals like the Lion King or anthropomorphic toys like Toy Story create narratives for children to conform and adapt to, ideals to emulate, and people to admire, all without really seeming, on the surface, to be marked by any kind of ideology or agenda at all. These films serve a complicated function, in both perpetuating existing narratives throughout culture and helping to engender or refine those not already entrenched. Disney—a particular kind of man, in a particular time, with particular needs and desires—necessarily led to the creation of a particular kind of company, which in turns reflects those values into the stories it creates.

How does this affect the perception of animation as a children's medium? For, although this work has argued that animation is a children's medium primarily because of environmental and contextual factors in the United States at the time of its conception and onwards, it has also acknowledged that important figures like Walt Disney did not simply decide to aim their work at children on a whim. How can these two contradictory realities be reconciled?

The seeds for that reconciliation have already been planted, in the above detailing of the history and continued development of animation as a medium. First, as already stated, the exaggerated and stylized method necessary for longer, narrative based animated projects due to time and budgetary constraints did seem particularly suited for children. Stylization is one of the few elements inherent in animation that could be seen as lending it towards children, with the exaggerated art being suited to physical humor and colorful characters. This is belied by the fact that stylization can also produce different effects if used differently, from eerie and creepy to romantic and emotional.

More importantly, proudly capitalist America had not yet seen any real capitalization on the part of film on the market of children, and Walt Disney and others like him were uniquely positioned to take advantage of that fact. Animation would soon fill that gap.

Additionally, in the United States, as seen with the early theatrical cartoon and the work of J. Stuart Blackton, animation was also always considered something for the working and middle classes, and thus not something for serious artistic consideration. The connection of early American animation to vaudeville and other 'lowbrow' forms of entertainment also played a part in consigning animation to

negative preconceptions.[47] Animation needed to evolve past these roots, but that is not quickly or easily done.

But overall, these are individual, contextual reasons. Though important, they fail to capture the most important reality of any storytelling medium: The reality that, with time and the progression of technology, art, and storytelling, comes evolution.

The two primary legacies of works that best exemplify that impetus to change and grow, and to conform to and shape the culture from which they come, are Walt Disney's long line of fairy tale retellings, and the Warner Brothers' explosively popular *Looney Tunes*. Each took a different primary route, with the Warner Brothers focusing primarily on more comedic, short-form animation, and Disney focusing on longer form animated films, typically based around Western fairy tales. Each helped shape the form of American animation, with *Looney Tunes* helping to pioneer the thirty minute television episode format that is so common today, and Disney's fairy tales refining and defining what it meant to be an animated film. Each company would also help create a culture around animation, one that would greatly contribute to the maintenance of a near century-long status quo. From 1928 to the present, both companies have consistently stuck to their formulas, refining and improving rather than growing or radically changing. As this project outlines each film, show, or short, it will become increasingly clear just how much animation's trajectory has been affected by both the inertia of decades of success and the conscious choice to 'stick with what works.'

A Golden Age

Though many consider 1928 (the advent of sound cartoons) to be the beginning of the Golden Age, this is not strictly true.[48] Until the release of *Snow White*, animation was not really seen as a true storytelling medium, and was used primarily in humorous theatrical shorts. However, following *Snow White*'s release, and especially into the 1940s and 1950s, animated storytelling became much more popular and common. The next moves in that direction from each studio came in 1940, with Disney's release of *Pinocchio*, and with the Warner Bros' release of the very first Bug Bunny cartoon, *A Wild Hare*. Each of these films helped advance the medium from a technical standpoint, but more importantly, they moved the medium along the structural and stylistic paths that we're familiar with today.

Having succeeded so spectacularly with *Snow White*, Disney began the process of honing their formula into something that would remain successful going forward. *Pinocchio* cemented this trend, once

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[47] Hubley, John, and Schwartz, Zachary. "Animation Learns a New Language." Hollywood Quarterly, Vol 1, No. 4 (1946). 360-363.
[48] Gabler, *American Imagination*, 109

again taking an older fairy tale and adapting it for young American audiences, crafting it to appeal to young children as well as to transmit some of the moral messages that fairy tales are known for. Though not stunningly successful, due a lack of market from World War II, the film nonetheless was a technical achievement and a step forward in the studio's construction of their formula. It is also often identified as one of the most "Disney" of Disney's films, with a strong adherence to middle-class values and a very clear moral through-line that *Snow White* largely lacks. While *Snow White* may be, under the surface, very much a tale cautioning against vanity emphasizing the proper role of women innocent and submissive, it is framed as a subliminal message, rather than an obvious parable. Pinocchio, however, is a tale that intends to teach children "middle-class virtues of deferred gratification, self-denial, thrift, and perseverance, naturalized as the experience of the most average American."[49] A parable of the perils and pleasures of the life of the twentieth century American, *Pinocchio* reflects both Walt Disney's own upbringing and life story, as well as the values a middle-class parent might want to instill in their children. This kind of direct moralizing would be toned down in Disney's following films, perhaps because of the lukewarm reception to *Pinocchio*, but the presence of moral lessons does not disappear. Additionally, though undoubtedly a children's story, *Pinocchio* tended to skew a little darker than Disney's traditional fare, deviating from the softening that is so common in Disney's adaptations. In time, the film would come to be seen as one of the best artistic works Disney produced, perhaps partly because of its unusually high faithfulness to the original narrative, and would be re-released several times to great popularity and acclaim, and eventually be inducted into the Library of Congress as "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant." *Pinocchio* is significant as one of the few Disney films which directly moralizes and creates a clear narrative that its viewers are supposed to follow. The children's book source material, the adherence to the middle-class values of its likely audience, and the obviousness of its moral message all combine to make *Pinocchio* one of Disney's most kid-focused films. Not intended to be fluffy entertainment like many of Disney's later films, *Pinocchio* instead makes a much less innocuous tack. But that tack is still very much within the established path, and simply demonstrates just how rapidly ubiquitous the idea of 'animation for children' had become.

Dumbo, released in 1941, was the first film after *Snow White* to be unreservedly successful. It was also exactly the kind of fluffy, unpretentious film that *Pinocchio* hadn't been. Receiving a generally positive critical reception for its amusing tone and fun, engaging story, it was a box office success, making $1.6 million during its initial release and handily recouping its relatively small budget.[50] [51] In terms of animation, the film was neither the most ambitious nor the most beautifully crafted, and the story

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[49] Booker, M. Keith. *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009, 12
[50] "Dumbo." Box Office Mojo, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=dumbo.htm
[51] Holleran, Scott. "TCM's Leading Ladies, 'Dumbo' at the El Capitan" (2006). http://www.boxofficemojo.com/features/?id=2077&p=.htm

is once again relatively simplistic. The Disney animator's strike did occur during the production of the film, and several of the striking animators are caricatured in it, but it had little direct bearing on the grievances of the strikers or the ultimate production of the film.[52] In many ways, *Dumbo* seems an unremarkable film, just an effort by Disney and his studio to make back some of the money they'd lost in their unbridled ambition. First, *Dumbo* represented a move back towards cartoon animals reminiscent of Mickey and his ilk, something that would become a staple of many Disney films going forward. Second, it represented the move to cement the shift towards the children's market and to consolidate Disney's hold on it. Though not a fairy tale, the film was still based on children's fiction. It still had the same kinds of story beats, fun, simple characters, heavily stylized and engaging animation, as well as some underlying morals about finding yourself and following your dreams. Though not the same kind of children's fiction as Disney's previous work, it was still very much children's fiction and represents the shape the medium would take as time went on.

  Bambi, however, is another story. Unlike *Dumbo*, which was a fun, quick, light film and had been made as almost a stopgap for the studio, *Bambi* was an incredibly ambitious film. Also unlike Dumbo, it was a rather controversial affair: Decried by hunters and criticized for its lack of fantastic elements, the film lost money on its release and received very mixed initial reviews.[53] [54] The film made many elements of the American public uncomfortable with its characterization of humans as the villains, and the idea of a Disney film without the whimsy and magic that had thus far been a staple simply didn't sit right with many people. However, *Bambi* has endured, and is today seen as one of the best and most artistically significant Disney films made, as well as a masterpiece of animation in general. Part of the Library of Congress' National Film Registry, rated the third best animated film ever by the American Film Institute, and rated highly by most critics, the film is today seen as the best and most mature of Disney's early works.[55] Seen by some as the "crowning achievement of Walt Disney's animation studio", the film is today one of the classic Disney films still shown to children and still seen as a well-made and intriguing piece of art and storytelling.[56]

  Not mired in various stereotypes and not focusing on humanoid characters, *Bambi* differs in many ways from its predecessors, setting itself apart in nearly every way from previous films. Firstly, as said, the film tends to avoid the stereotypes and other ridiculousness that films of the 1940s are often plagued

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[52] "The Disney strike." The Animation Guild. https://animationguild.org/about-the-guild/disney-strike-1941/
[53] Bjorkman, James. "Bambi (1942) -A Disney Movie Learning Experience Straight From Walt". Animated Film Reviews. http://animatedfilmreviews.filminspector.com/2012/12/bambi-1942-learning-experience.html
[54] Gabler, *American Imagination*, 230-250
[55] "AFI's 10 Top 10". American Film Institute, 2008. http://www.afi.com/10top10/. Nuckols, Ben. "Forrest Gump, Hannibal Lecter join film registry". Deseret News, 2011. http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700210661/Forrest-Gump-Hannibal-Lecter-join-film-registry.html
[56] Martin, Mick, and Porter, Marsha. DVD &Video Guide 2005. New York City: Ballantine, 2004.

with. Secondly, it was a remarkable artistic achievement, with the animators and concept artists using live deer brought in for use as templates, and a new style of impressionistic background art being pioneered by Tyrus Wong which bears its legacy into the present.[57] These were an especially significant innovation for animation because they contained more detail towards the center and less around the edges, thus subconsciously drawing the eye of the viewer towards the action and characters.[58] From a storytelling and thematic standpoint as well, *Bambi* stands apart. The darkest and most thematically intense of the early Disney films, the film contains a complex emotional core, a simple but well-fleshed out story that easily fills out the seventy minute runtime, and a small set of fully formed characters. It also, as said, brought up some uncomfortable questions to the American public, framing an issue that had never really been seriously considered in a compelling way both towards adults and children. It also, like Dumbo, helped normalize the idea of talking animals to the public, creating a legacy that many of the studio's later works would follow. However, in the tradition of Disney films before and after it, *Bambi* is still undoubtedly a film suited best for children. Unless you want to make it truly disturbing, a film about talking animals and growing up in a beautiful forest with whimsical music framing the narrative is inevitably primarily a children's affair. Even with some experimentation, Disney's films continued to cement animation's reputation as something for younger audiences. Thus, even with steps forward, true progress eluded Disney and the medium. Though a more complex and more enduring film than many previous offerings, *Bambi* represents more of deepening of what was already there than a leap towards something new. Disney's way, though refined, remained fundamentally the same.

The release of *Cinderella* in 1950 marked the cementing of Disney's way. After a troubled decade marked by little technical or structural progress after the release of *Bambi*, *Cinderella* reminded the public that Disney was still the studio to beat with regards to feature length animation. The first single narrative animated film from the studio since *Bambi*, *Cinderella* was the highest grossing film of 1950, animated or otherwise, as well as a huge critical success, complete with Academy Award nominations.[59] Walt Disney Studios went from being millions in debt and on the verge of bankruptcy to being both financially and critically successful once again. Based on yet another European fairy tale, it hearkened back to the early days of Disney feature films, refreshing a tested formula for a more contemporary audience. Its success, despite its sizable budget, would, like *Bambi*, eventually lead to Disney's development of its now classic stable of film types, with its fairy tale princess films becoming enduringly popular. *Cinderella*, in particular, is still seen today as one of the most iconic Disney tales, spawning

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[57] "The Making of Bambi: A Prince is Born." *Bambi* Blu-Ray, Disney, 2011
[58] Ibid
[59] "Cinderella." The Walt Disney Family Museum. http://www.waltdisney.org/content/cinderella-premieres. "The 23rd Academy Awards (1951) Nominees and Winners", Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (1951). https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1951

remakes, merchandising, and endless video re-releases. From a technical and artistic standpoint, it was more ambitious than anything since the earliest Disney films, with rich coloring, carefully constructed clothing, and live action references for more faithful mannerisms and movement. [60] Although *Cinderella* didn't necessarily pioneer any great technical advancements or do anything revolutionary with its structure or concept, it did serve as an example of just how successful animation could be if done properly. Appealing to old and young, American and European, the film showed the power of the kind of storytelling that Disney could muster. It cemented the idea of a 'fairy princess story for children' in the minds of the American populace, both opening the way for more stories of a similar nature and aiding in determining how the medium could be successful in the future. The era of compilations of shorts and other hybridizations of the past and the future had passed, and it was time for the company, and the medium, to move forward. *Cinderella's* success, along with digging the studio out of debt, also allowed the studio to finance its projects going forward through the decade, as well as Disneyland—perhaps the ultimate expression of the "child-friendly, family spirit" that Disney was trying to create with his films.[61]

With *Cinderella*, Disney stood decisively on the kind of storytelling it had become well known for, showing the world that the market was still very much open to Disney's brand of filmmaking. After *Cinderella*, Disney's focused its filmmaking efforts exclusively on the kind of films that had brought it success in the past. And after *Cinderella,* it wouldn't be until near the close of the century that either Disney or anyone else would experiment seriously with animate film again. Disney had shown itself to be engaged in a fundamentally conservative endeavor, and it would continue to ride its success until change was necessary. Though *Cinderella* is a move forward from a certain standpoint, from another, it's really just more of the same.

Warner Brothers: The Continuation of Short-Form

So far we have left the works of the Warner Brothers alone, but to ignore them completely would be a disservice. While Walt Disney Studios was pioneering the industry of feature film animation, the Warner Brothers had continued to perfect and hone the cartoons that had started it all. Though for a while they remained squarely within the realm of past ideas about humorous cartoons and characters, their continued work in the medium allowed them to discover things about it that would not have otherwise come to light. Ultimately, they would help lead to the now ubiquitous idea of the thirty minute television production, helping to usher in an era of home television consumption and setting the stage for the animated television shows of today.

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[60] Whitburn, Joel. ''Top Pop Records 1940-1955''. Record Research, 1973.
[61] Gabler, *American Imagination*, 476–478

The story that led to the Warner Brothers' more famous productions and characters is long one, but we'll summarize it briefly here. The company name originates from the four 'Warner Brothers', of Jewish descent, three of whom emigrated from Russian-controlled Poland to North American in the late 19th century, and the last of whom was born in London, Ontario. They invested in the film business early, purchasing a movie projector which they would cart around to various small towns to put on shows, eventually opening their own theater.[62] They continued down the movie business road, eventually opening their own studio in Hollywood and beginning to buy distribution rights to films and produce their own content. Though they had some successes, the traditional film business was already fairly saturated with content and distributors, and they remained a fairly small, inconsequential studio up until the 1920s, when they were able to break into the market with a couple big successes. But it wasn't until 1927, with the release of the first feature length film with full dialogue synchronization, *The Jazz Singer*, that they truly managed to break through, becoming one of the most successful and influential studios in the business.[63]

Now one of the major distributors and content creators in Hollywood, Warner Bros started turning its attention towards other creative avenues for further expansion. Well aware of Walt Disney's near meteoric rise in the field of animation, they decided that they, to, could benefit by entering the field and taking advantage of the love for cartoon shorts and characters that had grown in the minds of the populace. Thus, in 1930, they partnered with two former Disney animators and founded what would later be known as Warner Bros Cartoons under the guidance of Leon Schlessinger, starting with what was dubbed "Looney Tunes"—then, a parody of Disney's *Silly Symphonies*, but now, far better known and better remembered than its predecessor has ever been.[64] Initially meant to be paired with their music publishing business, another business in which they had done quite well, and played against their near identical *Merrie Melodies* line, their cartoons would eventually become enduring and charming for their own sake. The content was not initially hugely popular, nor did it initially do anything of real note with regards to the development of animation until the late 1930s and the1940s, when the injection of the creative direction of Chuck Jones, Tex Avery, Bob Clampett, and others turned *Looney Tunes* into something special. Not only would they soon eclipse Disney and their other competitors with their theatrical shorts, but they would soon begin a pioneering process for a new way of enjoying animation in general.[65]

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[62] Green, Fitzhugh. "The Film Finds Its Tongue." New York: Benjamin Blom Inc, 1971

[63] Warner, Jack L, and Jennings, Dean. *My First Hundred Years in Hollywood*. New York City: Random House, 1964, 180-181

[64] "Looney Tunes." bcdb.com, 2012, https://www.bcdb.com/cartoons/Warner_Bros./Looney_Tunes/

[65] "Warner Bros. Company History." warnerbros.com. http://www.warnerbros.com/studio/about-studio/company-history

Though they made some progress before, it all truly began with Bugs Bunny. Though a rabbit with similar features had appeared in several earlier shorts, Bugs found his proper debut in 1940, in the short *A Wild Hare*.[66] This short was significant in a number of ways: Not only did it introduce Bugs as a focused-upon character, but it also represents a finalization in Elmer Fudd's design and a move in form towards what is today seen as the 'classic' Warner Bros cartoon. This is seen best in the delivery of two classic lines. Elmer Fudd's "Be vewy, vewy quiet, I'm hunting wabbits" has been repeated by the tongues of countless young children for decades. And Bugs' "What's up, doc?" is probably the defining line in all of animated shorts throughout the 20th century. These two lines, for whatever reason, cemented themselves both in the characters, helping to make them distinctive, and in the minds of the public, creating the kind of shorthand recognition and appeal that can make animation so powerful. Along with establishing the classic look and demeanor of the characters—Elmer's half-remorse, half-determination, Bugs' constant cheekiness, ability to escape any situation, and love for carrots—it also marked the debut of the now-famous Mel Blanc as a major character-actor.[67] *A Wild Hare* would go on to be nominated for an Academy Award, cementing it as the breakout animated short of the year.[68] After the release of *A Wild Hare*, things went quickly, and by 1942, the studio had eclipsed Disney in popularity with its animated shorts.[69] Despite Tex Avery leaving the studio in 1941, their theatrical shorts remained within the same vein as those that had come before. Though the storytelling and the writing quality continued to improve with time and practice, the shorts still relied upon the same types of humor and entertainment that had served their predecessors. Bound by the Hays Code and made to appeal to all audiences, they continued to default to the lowest common denominator. Though animated shorts had not yet become explicitly children's entertainment, they nonetheless remained primarily enjoyable by children.

The studio would continue to refine its characters and style through the 1940s and 1950s. Many of the most beloved animated shorts in the 20th century came from the studio during this period, with Friz Freleng, Chuck Jones, and Bob Clampett directing and overseeing the creation of shorts like *Knighty Knight Bugs, Duck Dodgers in the 24 ½th Century,* and *The Corny Concerto.* Although the names of the shorts themselves may not be easily recognizable, images of Bugs Bunny running from a fire-breathing dragon, Daffy Duck arrayed as a spaceborn hero accidentally blowing up a planet containing the last remaining vestiges of the "shaving cream atom", and Porky hunting Bugs to a stirring classical score were ingrained into the minds of many. And the characters themselves, more than the individual shorts, became infused into the cultural consciousness of an era, showing up in merchandise, advertisements, longer form films, and ultimately becoming Warner Brothers face to the world. Though the characters didn't really

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[66] Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 323-366
[67] Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 323-366
[68] "Academy Awards (1940)." http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0148142.html
[69] Warner Bros. Company History

develop or grow over the years, they were consistently refined and polished, becoming iconic as they found their way into the lives of everyday Americans. Their very simplicity, the comfortability in the knowledge of how they would act and who they were, allowed the audience to easily slip into the stories, to quickly assimilate these simple but ridiculous animals and aliens into their cultural consciousness.

These cartoons became more and more common, and the characters more and more prevalent, as the fifties and sixties ran along. By 1960, all of America was familiar with Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and other classic characters. However, through this, there was very little fundamental change. Theatrical shorts featuring the same, unchanging characters interacting with one another can only go so far, and though they were continually refined, they never truly grew. This would ultimately make them ideal for children as the age of the theatrical cartoon ended and the age of the Saturday morning cartoon begun.

However, in some ways, progress was made. Although their cartoons were always ridiculous and could usually be easily enjoyed by younger audiences, by the late 1940s and the 1950s, much of the humor included—puns and other wordplay, cultural references, and social commentary—was not aimed at children at all. This was partly a function of the way that the shorts were presented. Although shorts, having the origins they have in newspaper cartoons and other short-form humor as well as a long history of simplicity because of their length, had long been noncomplex and seen simply as a kind of appetizer to the main course of the movie, those movies were still typically seen by adults. Consequently, although the formatting had developed because of inherent limitations in narrative and other respects of the short-form as well as the Hays Code, the medium began to develop more towards adult tastes as time went on. The comparison of one of their earlier cartoons, such as *A Wild Hare*, with one of their later pieces, such as the first *Duck Dodgers*, illustrates this. *A Wild Hare* primarily utilizes slapstick and gag humor, creating situations in which characters do ridiculous things and the audience can laugh at them. There is a clear object of ridicule, in Elmer, and his failure carries the humor of the video. This format continues with many following Bugs Bunny cartoons, of course, but *A Wild Hare* is the first and by far the simplest. On the other hand, *Duck Dodgers in the 24½th Century* functions differently by both making fun of pretty much all characters involved, as well as by painting ridiculousness and bits of referential humor (it's in the name, after all) throughout. Not only is the type of humor more adult, but the narrative structure is more complex, with strange political motivations, parodies on human greed over resources, and an ending in which nobody wins due to mutual shortsightedness. Of course, not every later cartoon follows this pattern, and Bugs Bunny in particular does tend to follow the earlier structure as set forth by *A Wild Hare*, but the type of comedy and narrative put forth in *Duck Dodgers* simply wouldn't have found a place in the cartoons of the 1940s. This type of humor in animation, and the way in which it was aimed towards both children and adults, being understandable and potentially enjoyable to both, would have a major impact upon what would later become "adult animation" as well as upon the style of humor and

storytelling that would become common in animation throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Shows like *Archer* and *The Simpsons*, movies like *Shrek*, and even now-classic Disney films like *The Lion King* all descend, to some degree, from this movement in theatrical shorts. Despite the Hays Code and the restrictions of such an abridged format, theatrical shorts nonetheless set the stage for what was to come in a valuable way.

And yet, simultaneously, the notion that animation was to be enjoyed primarily for children had become even more deeply entrenched in the American public consciousness, as studios continued to produce animation aimed primarily at younger audiences throughout the century and the ability to market and merchandise towards children increased. Even with the more sophisticated humor of later productions, the continuity with old characters and the continued use of slapstick and lack of a cohesive story or exploration of themes prevented adults from seeing animation as 'for them'. Although *Looney Tunes* and Warner Brothers' other properties were certainly not exclusively responsible for this trend, they, in the tradition of *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, did much to cement existing perceptions. During this period, theatrical animation remained largely the same regardless of creator, with only the complexity of the humor and relevance of the references changing. Although the attempt to improve on existing concepts did bear fruit for the medium as a whole in terms of general development, it was not nearly enough to seriously change broader perception. And this trend continued to be borne out in the 1950s and 1960s, when color television became ubiquitous and television animation began to rear its head. With the rise of television animation came the fall of everything else, as theatrical shorts began to dry up, Disney films became less profitable, and many of the larger animation studios began to go out of business. Though this was obviously a temporary setback for the medium, as animation lost much of the credibility and ubiquity it had enjoyed during the 'golden age'. However, after nearly three decades, animation's rebirth in the 1990s would bring about the sort of general growth in the medium that had long been put off as well as a broadening of perceptions that would allow for a wider range of content, including even some aimed explicitly towards adults. But before that, the advent of the television era must arrive to spell the end of the golden age.

Television animation got its start in the late 1930s with a showing of *Felix the Cat*, but it wasn't until the 1950s that it began to truly ingrain itself into the way Americans consumed entertainment, pulling people away from movie theaters and back to their living rooms.[70] Though many people still attended movie theaters, it was no longer as great a social staple as it had been previously, and few people went to the theater with the thought of seeing an animated short in mind.[71] In many ways, this phenomenon was the death knell for the theatrical cartoon, and it wasn't long before it was no longer

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[70] Beckerman, Howard. *Animation: The Whole Story*. New York City: Allworth, 2003
[71] "Short Film." Wikipedia.com. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_film

profitable to produce new shorts. This led to a decline in their creation beginning in the 1950s as television proliferated, and ultimately led to nearly all short animation creators shutting down, being spun off, of being severely downsized. Although some works would still be created, and many of the older cartoons continued to be proliferated on the small screen, the era of the theatrical short had ended, and by 1969, Warner Bros had shut down its studio. By 1980, the *Pink Panther* series, which was the last long-running theatrical animation series, had closed out its run as well. The Golden Age of animation had ended, although it would live on across the television screens of millions of Americans.

The End of Disney's Golden Age

We have neglected Disney for quite a while now. However, they did not simply cease to make animated films after *Cinderella* in 1950. The money from *Cinderella* was enough to put the studio solidly in the black once again, and with it Walt Disney was able to finance both a spate of new films and his own personal project, the ambitious 'Disney' themed amusement park, 'Disneyland', in Anaheim, California. But, while Disneyland became successful fairly quickly, the popularity of the legacy characters and the fact that Disney had become a household name by this period did not necessarily translate into success for Disney's new films. Some of these were live action, and had their own interesting and somewhat troubled history, but many were animated in the tradition of classic Disney. In 1951 and 1953 respectively, Disney released *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*, both of which had been in production much earlier but had been put on hold due to the war and the company's financial difficulties. *Alice's* bizarre setting and softening of adult themes demand our attention more than *Peter Pan*, however.

Alice was a critical punching bag and a financial disappointment, despite its many reworkings and carefully crafted art, world, story and setting. Many British critics in particular considered it a somewhat heretical 'Americanization' of a great British work of literature, believing it to be far too light, comedic, and insubstantial.[72] They claimed that is was a softening of the original material which removed too much—the portrayals of absurd violence, drug use, and other adult-themed things were all toned down considerably in the film. This was done out of a desire to modernize the story as well as make it palatable to young viewers and their parents, who were Disney's primary demographic. As usual, of course, the perceptions would change, and today it is considered perhaps the best film adaptation of the story, as well as one of Disney's classic films.[73] The striking modernist sensibilities of the art style and the narrative

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[72] Thomas, Bob. *Walt Disney: An American Original*. New York City: Hyperion Press 1976, 220–221

[73] "Alice in Wonderland (1951)." Rottentomatoes.com, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1029112-alice_in_wonderland/

direction and tone of the film that are also of note. *Alice*'s ambitious aesthetic, though not necessarily well-received at the time, pushed the envelope of what animation could be from a visual perspective by tone-matching content to style in a very real way. Mary Blair, a background artist working on the film, suggested the change in style after several aborted attempts at coming up with something that was appropriate for the weirdness and whimsy of the original story, and the striking, almost surreal color scheme combined with thick, bold lining were immediately snapped up by Disney. This change in art style also led to writing changes in the form of a renewed focus on the comedy and clever whimsy of the original novel—another departure from the mostly simplistic, visually-drive stories and comedy in previous Disney films.[74] In fact, Walt was very insistent that the film maintain fairly strict similarity to the original work, wanting to rely on the clever humorous writing of the book to help sell the film. Ultimately, despite the hue and cry of many of the contemporary critics, it stands as a fairly faithful and accurate representation of the original work, hewing to both the tone and the general narrative structure. Although it is missing several scenes from the original and has a somewhat lighter tone, its commitment to the integrity of the characters, the story, and the narrative despite its couching for a family audience is surprising. And though it would be forgotten until the late sixties and the rise of drug culture, its resurgence and example are an important part of the progressive story of American animation.

Fundamentally, though, *Alice in Wonderland* remains very much within the then-accepted bounds of animation. It is based on an extremely well-known and cultural significant piece of children's literature, the interpretation it features tends to make the content *more* friendly to children rather than less, and though it was watched by many, it was still primarily directed towards children. Disney simply continued to hone its formula, largely avoiding reinvention and focusing on building what it had rather than creating something new.

After *Peter Pan* and *Alice* came a spate of lesser known films, mostly live action or otherwise non-fully animated works, with a couple of exceptions. First, in 1955, another in Disney's long line of animal films, *The Lady and the Tramp*, was released. The *Lady and the* Tramp was a technical masterpiece and had a complex and interesting story, but its overarching themes revolved around middle-class morality and hard-work in a way that is clearly intended to seep into the DNA of the children watching. Then, in January 1959, as the new decade began rounding the corner, another princess film, *Sleeping Beauty*, was released. Though *Peter Pan* and *Alice* had both represented, in their own way, the beginnings of the transition into the new and not-so-golden age of animation, *Sleeping Beauty* represents it even more clearly.

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[74] "Through the Keyhole: A Companion's Guide to Alice in Wonderland." Alice in Wonderland: 60th Anniversary Edition, Disney, 2011 Blu-Ray

Sleeping Beauty is the third proper "Disney Princess Movie." The studio had made it through the fifties largely intact, doing well with most of its major endeavors, and they hoped to end of the decade with yet another stunning success in the form of yet another classic fairy tale. However, unlike *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, which were both enormously successful both financially and critically, *Sleeping Beauty* was quite a disappointment, and begun one of the most troubled eras in Disney's history. It also kicked off nearly three decades in which no studio, including Disney, made serious efforts in animation whatsoever, either for children or for adults.

The film was supposed to be a grand return to the type of stunning and industry-changing animation Disney had once had a monopoly on, in the tradition of *Snow White*.[75] However, because of the ambition inherent in the project as well as from other factors, it was continually delayed. This troubled release schedule, along with the expense in the type of animation being used and the expenses for things like a widescreen format and stereophonic sound, made it a remarkably expensive film to make, making it even more critical that the film do well. Unfortunately, that was not to be the case. The film underperformed at the box office, grossing $700,000 under its six million dollar production budget and was viewed unfavorably by critics, described by Bosley Crowther of the New York Times as "sorely lacking in notable melodies" and with "humor [that] is also rather scanty."[76] The same review also characterized Prince Phillip, who carries much of the action in the film, as a "saccharine cartoon likeness of a crooner on the cut of Tommy Sands or one of the Crosby youngsters, replete with educated horse."[77] This view of Prince Phillip—as a fairly empty, heartless, rip-off of a character—is especially relevant, given our interest in watching the progression of animation, and it shows that Disney's storytelling hadn't necessarily progressed quite as far as one might believe. The film was also seen as both too similar to *Snow White* in many ways, but lacking the novelty and charm that original film had laid claim to. Though the film had a more developed male lead, a more fully fleshed out villain, striking animation, and other positive qualities speaking to its maturity as compared to its predecessors, it nonetheless was simply not enough to capture the interest of the public. Though these negative views would fade over time, and today *Sleeping Beauty* is seen as a classic animated feature and has been quite successful with various re-releases after Walt Disney's death, at the time, the film was the nail in the coffin of Disney's golden age of animated film-making.

As a whole, the film simply didn't have the complexity, originality, or depth to carry it forward. Although it is seen as a classic today, as is *Snow White*, neither could necessarily be characterized as

[75] Geronimi, Clyde. "Gerry Geronimi - An Interview by Michael Barrier and Milton Gray." (2015) MichaelBarrier.com. http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Interviews/Geronimi/Geronimi.html
[76] Crowther, Bosley. "Sleeping Beauty (1959) Screen: 'Sleeping Beauty'", The New York Times (1959) http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C0DE1DB1338EF3BBC4052DFB4668382649EDE
[77] Ibid

mature or well-developed stories. They are seen as classic because they reflect the simplicity and nostalgia of the fairy tale mentality: Archetypal characters go about their business, driving a near unavoidable plot, all tied up with some sort of moral. There's nothing inherently wrong with this structure, and it functions well for children, both entertaining them and framing important social cues and moral lessons in a way they can easily understand and internalize. However, it does not represent much progress when it comes to the medium as a whole. Not only did the last film of the Disney golden age fail financially and critically, but it failed animation as a whole: Without new ideas and new ways of framing them, the medium would remain stagnant. And that is, more or less, the story the next two decades would tell. Though many films would be released, and some of them are today looked upon fondly—*The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Aristocats*, et cetera—they were, on the whole, neither as commercial and critically successful nor as culturally striking as those that had come before. The end of an era had come.

The 1960s-1980s: A Drought

New challenges bring new growth. Although much of the 1960s, the 1970s, and much of the 1980s were largely devoid of the kind of theatrical short that had dominated the industry for so long and Disney films had become both less frequent and less popular, they were not devoid of animation, and the changes in the way people consumed content forced animators to come up with news ways to create and present their work. Television animation, although it used extensively the work that had come before, did give birth to its own series and its own ways of doing things, paving the way for more dramatic departures to come. Technical innovations and restructured formatting both contributed to changing and refining the medium, turning it into what we're familiar with today and both permanently leaving behind short-form theatrical animation and carefully keeping in mind the lessons that had been learned before.

This began with limited animation. An attempt to decrease the costs of animation and make the medium more cost effective, it was a very important step towards making television animation viable and creating an environment in which animation could be consistently made. Through the creative use of stylization and economic artistry, creators were able to experiment more broadly and cheaply, and studios were able to choose to focus more on writing without sacrificing animated content. The technical specifics are unimportant for our purposes, but suffice it to say: From both a positive and a negative standpoint, limited animation stands as a remarkably important development in the medium.

Many comedic series took this lesson to heart: Instead of relying on the sight gags and visual humor of the theatrical shorts of the past, they relied primarily on clever writing and good voice acting to sell the story. This became common during the 1960s and the 1970s, but has remained just as popular in

modern animated television series, especially those marketed to adults, with series like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* relying far more on jokes, references, and character humor than on slapstick or physical comedy. The rising quality standard in dialogue writing and delivery would also carry into different types of productions as the century went on, with higher budget series and films benefiting from the type of character work and improved writing as well, as a better standard of quality came to be expected of the industry and as well-known writers and directors both within and without the medium began to exercise their talents. However, during the time period between the end of the golden age, around 1960, and the beginning of a new era of animation, around 1980, these limited animation techniques were primarily simply a way to cut costs and allow animators to continue to work. And this period, while not part of a particular blossoming of any kind for the medium, did have important effects on how animation would be perceived, how it would grow, and what kind of audiences typically would be drawn to it. During this period, animation would become even more ingrained into American consciousness as a children's medium, and that fact would have lasting repercussions.

The primary engine for animation during this in-between period was the Saturday morning cartoon. Incidentally, the Saturday morning cartoon was also the primary way in which animation became even more cemented as a children's medium in the United States. Even today, it remains a staple of how many children enjoy animation, though the specific timeslot has become less set in stone as the advent of the Internet, cable, satellite, and other factors changed the way television is marketed and presented. Initially conceived as a way of distilling children's programming for the benefit of advertisers, the idea quickly cottoned on.[78] Cartoons like *Tom and Jerry*, *Popeye*, the now classic *Looney Tunes*, and others became a staple of Saturday morning children's fare, carrying them and their characters forth through the rest of the century in now familiar thirty minute segments. Classic animation continued to be transmitted through the decades in a way that allowed it to seep into the minds of the children watching it, and, when they began to grow up, a select few were willing to give animation a try and take it in a new direction. During the period itself, though, animation was seen almost exclusively as a children's medium, and on those Saturday mornings nearly nobody but the kids themselves watched the antics of the classic characters.

The 1960s to 1980s may have been a relative drought for the art of animation, but things never died completely. Limited animation did allow the medium to continue to grow and change: And nowhere is it easier to see than with *The Flintstones*, one of the few animated properties not relegated to the Saturday morning slot during the period. Debatably as popular today as *Looney Tunes*, *The Flintstones* are both perfectly representative of the kind of animation popular and accepted in the era, as well as a

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[78] Boyer, Peter. "Toy Based TV: Effects on Children Debated." *The New York Times*, 1986, http://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/03/arts/toy-based-tv-effects-on-children-debated.html?pagewanted=all

marker in the continuing progression of animation as a medium. Heavily reliant on the family stereotypes of the fifties and sixties, *The Flintstones* captured the zeitgeist of the era while simultaneously stretching the medium, its structure, and its storytelling in new directions. Starting right at the cusp between the golden age and the middle period, *The Flintstones* ran from 1960 to 1966 and was a sign of the past, the present, and the future. Its idealized presentation of ideas about family and the world represented the fifties and the past, while its low animation budget and art direction placed it squarely in the middle period, and its popularity and placement during primetime pointed to the future. It wasn't until *The Simpsons* came along in 1989 that *The Flintstones* would be eclipsed either in popularity and financial success or in the impact they would have on the medium and the American public.

  The Flintstones is exemplary of the limited animation style of the time, and of the medium's general bent and mood during the period. It also represents a very major effort to capture the adult audience, despite the many difficulties in doing so. Hanna and Barbera, on the heels of the success of *Tom and Jerry*, wanted to create something with the kind of broad and enduring appeal that many theatrical cartoons had enjoyed in earlier decades.[79] Finding success, but not mainstream success, with the adult market, the studio set upon the idea of reflecting and playing with the modern family life in a fanciful manner, spoofing popular situation comedies like *The Honeymooners*.[80] This idea was ultimately fruitful, playing on the sensibilities and expectations of the adults while appealing to children with colorful characters and ridiculous gags. Its continued popularity throughout the decade rested on this, with the show constantly creating a humorous (but still respectful) juxtaposition between the contemporary era and its fantastical portrayal of "The Stone Age."[81] The show, in terms of its formatting, was presented like the situation comedies of the era, with a laugh track, adult and familial humor, and the typical gamut of sitcom situations and stories (pregnancy, arguments over work and money expenditures, etc). To properly sell this kind of story, several writers from the live action sitcom world were brought in, including some from Jackie Gleason, creator of *The Honeymooners*, own staff.[82] Although the animation itself was exaggerated and stylized towards the humorous, the show was clearly intended to be marketed towards adults—it was the first animated show to include a man and a woman sleeping in the same bed, the first to deal with the issue of infertility, and it dealt with Fred and Wilma's marital life and troubles more than any other subject.[83] It was by far the longest running animated primetime television series during the era, running for six seasons between 1960 and 1966, but eventually, the ratings declined and the show was

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[79] *The Flintstones*, season 2 DVD documentary. Turner Home Entertainment, 2006
[80] Stinnett, Chuck. "Rango is latest reminder that animated films are thriving." Evansville: Evansvile Courier & Press, 2011
[81] "Saturday Mornings: Cartoons' Greatest Hits", CD liner notes, 1995 MCA Records
[82] "IMDB: Herbert Finn." IMDB.com http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0278115/
[83] "First TV Couple in Same Bed." Snopes.com, http://www.snopes.com/radiotv/tv/marykay.asp

pulled off the air. Much like work from the previous era, *The Flintstones* would continue to be syndicated through reruns throughout the next few decades, but it, and animation, had been removed from the spotlight of American entertainment. However, the show remained popular through the decades, as merchandising and reboots of various types and quality continued to appear. Fundamentally, *The Flintstones*, although not necessarily revolutionary in content, was a major step forward towards the types of animation that would become familiar and accepted come the late 20th and 21st centuries: Adult, comedic animation produced for a low budget, intended to be entertaining with words and characters rather than with action. Shows like *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy, Archer,* and many others owe a debt to *The Flintstones* for paving the way decades earlier.

While *The Flintstones* was explicitly marketed towards adults from a content perspective, the aesthetic and visual presentation of the show was still very much in line with the other animation of the period and did little to reflect a change in target audience. In general, the idea of matching visual style closely to content did not necessarily catch on in small-screen animation until the 1980s and 1990s when animation once again began to receive serious attention and funding, as animation had adopted a certain 'cartoonish' style that was not easily ignored. The heavily rounded, oversized features, exaggerated movements, bright, primary coloring, and simple visual-narrative coding remained a staple of American animation for several decades after they had been established, and to some extent persist into today. They remain indicative of the kind of assumptions and preconceptions lumped upon animation as a medium even today, a reminder that things have really only changed so much.

Overall, this period represents an undoubted drought in the history of American animation. Disney produced fewer and less well-received films, theatrical shorts dried up, and television animation did little to take a place as a serious method of making animation. Some individuals and creators did manage to make things of artistic value during the sixties and seventies. But these were oases in a desert. And it wouldn't be until the late 1980s, when new animators and writers interested in animation began to come onto the scene that things would begin to change.

<p style="text-align:center">Part III</p>

<p style="text-align:center">After the Drought: The Rebirth of Animation</p>

Thus far, we have chronicled the development of modern animation from its beginnings in the early nineteenth century to its supposed zenith in the mid-twentieth century, with a little exploration of its following decline as well. Throughout the entirety of this period, several important threads have surfaced, but of all, the tendency to market animation near-exclusively to children is the most significant. There was fluctuation, to be sure, and exceptions—but *The Flintstones* and others like it were far from common, at

any time during this period. The vast majority of significant, memorable animated films created over the last near-century were created by Disney, with neither significant variation in style and form nor notable competition from other quarters.[84] From the moment of its inception, the medium began to lean towards the younger audience, and little about that trend changed in nearly a century. Some inherent factors helped to guide this trajectory, such as the prohibitive difficulty of making non-stylized animation and the medium's partial origins within vaudeville theater and humorous newspaper cartoons, as well as the natural limitations of the short as an artistic medium and storytelling method. In particular, its early reliance on lowbrow vaudevillian gags and physical humor created certain preconceptions about its quality as a medium and intended class audience that would be difficult to shake.[85] However, as time went on and the medium continued to grow and develop, the directions in which animation was being taken became more evident— specifically by influential individuals like Walt Disney, who essentially created the medium of long-form animated storytelling on his own, creating a pattern which very few dared eschew. The economic and societal limitations put on the medium by its contexts also became clear, as animation began to grow in two directions: Simultaneously more and less for adults, with cartoons like *The Looney Tunes* becoming more complex and multi-layered with time and with shows like *The Flintstones* gaining prominence, but also with the vast majority of animated material being catered exclusively to children and fed to them at the times of the marketers' choosing. The nature of the animated theatrical short, the rise of the animated film, as well as the advent of television and the massive changes that brought about were all examined. The beginnings of animated television, but also saw the difficulties creators faced, as fewer and fewer creators were able to afford to make anything at all, also came to light. But, in all that, the seeds of hope were planted as new ideas began to percolate and as a new generation of young people grew up with iconic animated characters ingrained in their consciousness. The first half of the twentieth century was quite simply an incredibly formative time in the history of American animation.

On the surface, the latter half would seem to be far less so. And, to an extent, that is a fair analysis. As mentioned, the sixties and the seventies in particular were quite barren. Though the idea of adult animation had been played with previously, it wasn't until the late eighties that it became prevalent or as explicitly aimed towards adults as it is today. In particular, *The Simpsons* is a hugely important milestone in the history of the medium, although in many ways it still resembles that which came before. Additionally, it was during this period that Disney finally began to get back on its feet again, regaining some of the confidence it had lost with the failure of *Sleeping Beauty* and the death of Walt in 1966. Pixar, today renowned for its computer animation and thoughtful, gap-bridging storytelling, also got its start during this

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[84] "The 25 Best All-TIME Best Animated Films." TIME, 2011. http://entertainment.time.com/2011/06/23/the-25-all-time-best-animated-films/

[85] Hubley and Schwartz, *Animation Learns a New Language*, 360-363

period, beginning a trajectory that would take it to the pinnacle of 21st century animated fame. Though the historical and technical beginnings of the medium lie in the 19th century, and the practical beginnings lie in the first half of the twentieth, it is in these last two decades of that century that what we know today as animation truly got its start.

The first step in this renaissance came in 1968. This new direction was, in part, brought about by the end of the Hays Code, which finally allowed visual mediums to portray more adult content as long as it was properly rated. Though the code's life ended in 1968 there was little interest in experimentation, and it wasn't until later that the new lack of restrictions and freedom provided to animators did much to encourage the advent of more adult oriented productions. Animator Ralph Bakshi, who had been involved with the Terrytoons studio during the golden age and its decline, was especially intent on pushing the medium towards a more adult audience, producing a number of controversial films and shorts from the early 1970s onward, including *Fritz the Cat*, the highest grossing independent animated film to this day, as well as the first animated film to receive an 'X' from the MPAA. This was for now-typical things like sexual content and violence, as well as for sharp satire of 1960s drug use and racial tensions, things that never would have been allowed not too long before.[86] However, though his work was undoubtedly groundbreaking, it was also fairly niche, and it would be a while before animation aimed at adults became anything more than a novelty.

1988 and 1989 are the years to look at when it comes to long-lasting, cultural impactful adult animation. After a couple decades of fringe experimental work and lackluster performances from 'major animation studios' like Disney, the release in quick succession of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *The Simpsons* quickly put animation back on a positive track, while simultaneously expanding the horizons of what a positive track could look like. Each of these would lead animation to the cusp of a new track, and would help revive the medium in its own way.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit came first, and on the surface it's a little more difficult to parse than *The Simpsons*. Very much outside Disney's time-honored tradition of traditional hand-drawn animation, it helped open technical doors that few had known existed, while also setting a precedent for a tone and way of storytelling far outside both Disney and animation's previous norm. And, despite the fact that Disney mostly stayed away from many of the technical decisions made in the film, it still was enough to begin the process of waking both the medium and its potential audience up to the potential of animation as something more than reruns on Saturday morning. It was also very much not a movie intended for children. Through all this, it was both commercial and critically successful, winning the year's Oscar for animation, Roger Ebert's praise, and a mark in the black for Disney's books that they had been sorely missing.[87]

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[86] Grant, John. *Masters of Animation*. New York City: Watson-Guptill, 2001, 18–29
[87] "Who Framed Roger Rabbit (1988)", Filmsite.com, http://www.filmsite.org/whof.html

The most obvious difference between *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and most of Disney's filmography to that point is the combination between animation and live action. Though Disney had experimented with the idea before with *Song of the South* and other fairly unmemorable or unsavory endeavors, this was the first time in a very long time that it had done anything of the sort in earnest, and it was certainly the first time that the narrative had directly integrated the cartoon elements with the live action. The film also made an unusually serious attempt to aim the film towards all audiences, and the humor, setting, and story of the film demonstrates that.[88] In particular, the presence of a number of sexual references and pieces of humor demonstrates the skewing towards an older audience present in the film.[89] In fact, the film's release experienced some controversy because of disagreement among the director and Disney's CEO as to how the movie should be presented and the kind of content that was acceptable. And ultimately, because of the adult nature of the film, Disney declined to release the film under its ordinary 'Walt Disney Pictures' label (the one responsible for all of its animated works up to that point), and instead released it under their Touchstone Pictures label, which released films for older viewers.[90] This was a huge milestone for the company, representing a daring that had long been missing from Disney and building on the idea, then still barely percolating, that animation could be for adults, too.

However, a broad brush simply doesn't do *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* justice when examining the unique place it holds both as a piece of art and as a cultural milestone for the medium of animation. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* is a strikingly unique film, for many reasons, but one of the foremost is almost difficult to believe without seeing it firsthand: The combination in the story of not only animation and live action, but of the animated stables of both Disney and the Warner Brothers, as well as a wide variety of other Golden Age characters from other studios.[91] This was a very ambitious and bold move, and it was in large part this bringing together of disparate yet similar elements from the golden age of American animation that made this film successful.

Once the film is examined more closely, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* becomes an even greater achievement, one that essentially kicked off the modern era of animation where everything else had failed. A daunting array of pieces had to come together to make the film work, and, somehow, they all did. As strange as the film is—the combination of live action and animation, the coming together of a huge array of classic animated characters, and the marketing towards the adults who had grown up loving those characters—all come together to make an implausible, but striking, film.[92] With Steven Spielberg's help in

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[88] Stewart, James B. *DisneyWar*. New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2006, 88

[89] Ibid

[90] Ibid

[91] King, Susan. "Classic Hollywood: On the case of 'Roger Rabbit'". The Los Angeles Times, 2013. http://articles.latimes.com/2013/mar/31/entertainment/la-et-mn-roger-rabbit-classic-hollywood-20130401

[92] Kagan, Norman. "Who Framed Roger Rabbit." *The Cinema of Robert Zemeckis*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, 93–117

getting legacy characters like Bugs Bunny from Warner Bros and others, and an incredibly high production cost, the film was both very risky and very new. Robert Zemeckis, a relatively young but successful director at the time, was hired to direct the film and stated that he wanted it to have "Disney's high quality of animation, Warner Bros.' characterization and Tex Avery humor."[93] The film would find critical acclaim, make $156 million at the box office, win three Academy Awards (Sound Editing, Visual Effects, and Film Editing) and help spur the renaissance of animation. It "heralded a renewed appreciation of the Golden Age of animation and spawned the modern-era of animation, especially at Disney", something that was, given Disney's waning influence and popularity during the last thirty years, nearly a miracle.[94]

Sorting out why all that occurred is the more difficult task. In part, it was due to a certain intentionality to it: The film was specifically created with the idea of revitalizing Disney's animation department, and, to a certain extent animation itself, and that no doubt had an effect on the way the film was made and received. Tied into that was the ambition and scope of the film, including both a bold combination of mediums, an unusual story and setting, the mixture of well-loved characters from many different sources, and the nature of the content included. Ultimately, the fact that the film was very clearly *not* marketed exclusively towards children—in fact, it wasn't really marketed towards children much at all, given its release label—contributed greatly to both its success and to the powerful effect it had upon animation. Instead of trying to get kids who had little emotional or nostalgic connection to the characters to see the film, and instead of focusing the humor and characterizations of the film on the types of comedy children tend to gravitate towards, the film chose to play upon the nostalgia of the adults who had grown up with those iconic characters on their television screens, neatly pushing and pulling on both the novelty of the idea and the familiarity of the characters. The story itself was also intended to call back to the 'good old days' of American animation, with the live action plotline occurring in 1947 Hollywood—during the golden age itself. This not-so-subtle callback to times gone by created an immediate connection between the viewers and the good old days that the film was trying to promote, making the viewers who were around remember it fondly and those who weren't look back and think about what they'd missed. This careful use of nostalgia, combined with the decision to focus the film towards an older audience, played a large role in shaping the movie's success.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit was far more than just a successful film that happened to be animated. It helped kick off what would later be known as 'the Disney Renaissance': A period between 1989 and 1999 where Disney regained much of its lost influence and popularity, and where fairly ambitious and well-received animated films that hearkened back to the golden age were released at a remarkable pace. *Roger*

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[93] Hahn, Don, and Schneider, Peter. "Waking Sleeping Beauty" DVD commentary, 2010, Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment

[94] King, *Classic Hollywood*

Rabbit was followed quickly by *The Little Mermaid*, which was the first 'Princess' style Disney film since *Sleeping Beauty*'s release in 1959, and marks the true beginning of the Renaissance—a renaissance that, in turn, would be part of the movement that finally moved animation away from the sluggishness of the mid to late twentieth century and birthed modern animation. Without *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, perhaps we would never have seen the rebirth of animation. However, the trajectory that the film helped create was not a simple one—as we will discover as the twentieth century comes to a close. And the film itself, with its reliance on nostalgia and legacy characters, PG rating, and wide range of humor intended to be enjoyable by most audiences, did not leave Disney's past behind entirely.

However, before going too much further and focusing on broad movements and general trends, we must explore another piece of animation essential to the resurgence and continuing growth of the medium. In the same way that *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* helped to shape and drive the growth of film animation, particularly Disney's work, *The Simpsons* is the foundation for much of what we take for granted in animated television today. Though *The Flintstones* were the first memorable and popular piece of adult television animation, *The Simpsons* would be both far more enduring—continuing from its debut in 1989 till the present, over twenty years later—and have had a far more lasting and significant effect on the shape of animation as a medium. A new era of adult animation had begun, and it would be ushered in by the stories of a dysfunctional yellow family that just never seemed to grow up.

The Simpsons is significant in many ways. An obvious point showing the power and significance of the show is its length. Very few shows having any kind of actual narrative come even close to the 27 seasons that *The Simpsons* has run for; and being the longest running piece of American television ever is nothing to sneeze at. However, though perhaps some of its continued endurance is because of simple cultural inertia, *The Simpsons* has lasted as long as it has because, despite becoming increasingly unwieldy, and despite the fact that it should have gotten old long ago, people still watch and enjoy it. In fact, it is frequently touted not only as one of the defining works of animated television of the twentieth century, but as one of the defining works of television in general, with *Time* naming it the best television series of the century and *The A.V. Club* remarking that it is "television's crowning achievement regardless of format."[95] [96] It has won over thirty Emmy awards in multiple categories, as well as numerous other awards from a host of different sources, while the titular family has earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. *The Simpsons* is also responsible for a number of colloquialisms entering the English language, including 'd'oh/duh', 'meh', 'embiggen', as well as a number of others, replacing "Shakespeare and the Bible as our

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[95] "The Best of the Century." TIME (1999). http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,993039,00.html

[96] "The Best Animated Series Ever." avclub.com. http://www.avclub.com/article/best-animated-series-ever-adventure-time-whatever--214799

culture's greatest source of idioms, catchphrases and sundry other textual allusions."[97] To have the ability to directly influence the very way native English speakers communicate, to be so ubiquitous so as to enter the vocabularies of people who don't even watch the show—that is the mark of a significant cultural impact.

Most importantly, however, was the show's impact upon the medium of animation itself, and its relation to animation's perception as a children's medium. It managed to completely re-form and recreate the idea of what an animated television series could be, exploring social issues satirically, utilizing a combination of both highly crude and highly sophisticated humor, and generally pushing the boundaries of what the general populace would accept from animation as well as effectively capturing the zeitgeist of contemporary American middle-class life. A show in which both an episode portraying a ridiculous James Bond parody (*You Only Move Twice,* Nov. 3 1996) and an episode exploring the hardships and sublime moments of childrearing and family life like *Lisa's First Word* (Dec. 3, 1992), as well as incredibly biting yet insightful satire regarding homophobia and the state of homosexuality in America (*Homer's Phobia*, Feb. 16, 1997) is a show with a remarkable amount of depth and nuance, able to successfully play with and explore numerous issues and ideas in a clever, humorous way all through the eyes of this simultaneously quintessential and totally absurd family.[98] Many shows would endeavor to follow the formula, and many would be successful—*Family Guy, American Dad*, etc—but none that followed the formula so strictly would ever come close matching *The Simpsons* in popularity, cultural impact, or quality. Unlike many of its successors, *The Simpsons* was careful to maintain an emotional core of characters as people, and this care speaks to a surprising maturity for such an early example of the trend in the medium. Despite being a show meant to entertain adults with its irreverence and absurdity, *The Simpsons* always made certain to keep it grounded in the people—and only a few animated adult television shows of the coming century would learn that lesson properly.

It also had a significant impact upon what how animated television was structured and presented, and who it was presented to. Being the first successful primetime animated television series since *The Flintstones*, it opened up once and for all the possibility of the 'entirely adult focused animated series', not only spawning a host of successors but also beginning a change in the attitudes of the American populace as to what animation could and couldn't be.[99] Before *The Simpsons*, animation was seen as too expensive, too childish, and too limited in scope artistic flexibility to be worth making anything for adults. According to Seth MacFarlane, creator of a number of successor adult-oriented animated shows, "The Simpsons created an audience for prime-time animation that had not been there for many, many years…As far as I'm concerned, they basically re-invented the wheel. They created what is in many ways—you could classify it

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[97] Macintyre, Ben. "Last Word: Any Word that Embiggens the Vocabulary is Cromulent With Me" The Times (2007)

[98] "The 25 Best Simpsons Episodes", TIME, http://time.com/3638567/the-simpsons-25-episodes/

[99] Deneroff, Harvey. "Matt Groening's Baby Turns 10". Animation Magazine 14 (2000) (1): 10, 12.

as—a wholly new medium."[100] The era of adult animation had dawned, and *The Simpsons* was to be its harbinger.

    The Simpsons and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* were both very different attempts at the task, but both together managed to successfully revitalize animation. While one hearkened back to old characters and played on old sentiments while using new technology and an abundance of funds, the other looked into the present and to the future while relying on old, simple, inexpensive methods of animation. Part of this difference is simply a function of television versus film as formats, but part of this difference lies in different attitudes about how the future of animation should take shape. For some—namely Disney—the strategy, throughout the 1990's and into the 2000's, was to "bring back the good old days"; to recreate the success and acclaim that they had enjoyed in the past through a return in content and style to those days of success. Simultaneously, however, Disney realized that a certain freshness, a certain vibrancy, would be required to revitalize their way of doing things, and would continue to hone and reshape their way of doing things, incrementally progressing their works along with society and technology. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* was a stunning and highly important success, but it would and could not provide a template for Disney's continued work—but its eye for the past, and the success that brought and the interest the film itself generated, helped shape Disney's path through the remainder of the century.

    The Simpsons, on the other hand, was both *not* as brazen with its newness and yet far more so. Instead of targeting itself towards the youthful nostalgia felt by adults raised on Saturday morning cartoons, it set itself squarely in the decade it was created in, and would continue to grow and change as time rolled on. Though the concept is not nearly as bizarre, and on the surface it seems like far less of a risk, *The Simpsons* was in fact a huge and risk-filled step forward: By establishing its own universe, its own world so fully grounded in our own (and yet highlighting the absurdity therein), it forced animation into a space where it had never been able to fit comfortably before. Although it was grounded in the situation comedies of the time, and the concept of the setting and characters seems predictable and ordinary on the surface, it cannot be stressed enough just how novel and ambitious it was at the time. Not only was the very decision to put that kind of archetype into an animated setting a risky path to take, one at which only one show had navigated successfully previously (and that many years prior, and with a very different in tone and context), but the way that decision reflected itself in the content and the overall tone of the show was far from the kind of material that was generally accepted at the time. *The Simpsons* brought the idea of highlighting issues and situations with absurdity to the forefront of adult humor, with the animated format allowing the creators far more leeway at portraying outlandish characters and situations than a live action show. This proved to be an inspired choice, and that method of humor and satire has only gained momentum through

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[100] Ortved, John. "Simpson Family Values." Vanity Fair (2007)
http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2007/08/simpsons200708

the 21ˢᵗ century. Though obviously this method was not originated by *The Simpsons*, it brought it to the fore in its explicit form and proved that animation was the ideal format for its use. However, in terms of its distribution and general format, as well as the art and framing itself, the show was innovative only the sense of refinement over time, with the show using the same art-style and production methods consistently throughout the series. And, in turn, in the wake of the show's innovation, it spawned numerous shows which attempted to capitalize on the market it created while doing very little to differentiate themselves in a positive, meaningful way.

Of course, this new style of adult animation was also highly limited. Always humorous in nature, usually with little action and low-budget animation, there were certain boundaries that were just not crossed. The animation itself always remained fairly simple and inartistic, meant to highlight the humorousness of the characters and gags and not to highlight themes or engage in complex visual storytelling, outside of the simple portrayal of a kind of normalized absurdity. Between most of the shows that got their start in the 1990s after the initial release of *The Simpsons*, there is remarkable similarity in art-style and tone, with things like *Futurama,* and *Family Guy* looking remarkably similar to *The Simpsons.* Outside of the visuals, each of these shows all really fall into their own, new genre: Adult satirical comedy. Though this is certainly a step forward, it still does not come close to exploring the full breadth of content that live action film or television do. Adult animated shows focusing on drama, on character conflict, on romance, on gritty action, on all sorts of popular adult themes are still largely nonexistent. This new phenomenon has largely avoided film, as well, showing just how limited it truly is. This lack of diverse content, on multiple levels, makes it clear that animation still has a ways to go before reaching a place of real maturity. It would take quite a while for this to change even a little, and the inability of creators to explore the whole breadth of adult themes is telling, showing just how ingrained preconceptions about animation had become.

In the end, though *Roger Rabbit* and *The Simpsons* were essential to the revival of animation at the close of the twentieth century, neither had a uniform or wholly positive effect upon the medium. But without them, it is possible that animation in the United States might have died on the vine even further, or entirely.

Although the renaissance of animation was begun by *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *The Simpsons*, there are works of significance in both film and television during the period that bear mentioning. These appear in both television and film, with television providing a broader range of content than film, now that some shows were attempting to appeal primarily to adults. The bulk of animation still took place in a limited number of studios appealing primarily to kids, however, as the rise of Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network demonstrate.

The rise of the new era of children's animation came along with the fall of Hanna-Barbera, pretty much the only successful animation company through the drought (having made *The Flintstones*, *The Smurfs*, *Scooby Doo*, and others) and the decline of the Saturday morning cartoon. Though there were a

number of factors involved in this shift, the fall was primarily precipitated by a total lack of animated hits during the early nineties by Hanna-Barbera or any of the established studios, the decreasing shelf-life of existing properties for continued exploitation, and the encroachment by several new studios with newer ideas and methods. Eventually, these factors led to Hanna-Barbera being sold off to other companies, finally ending up in the hands of Turner Broadcasting System, which also had control of the rights for a wide variety of other popular cartoons, including *Tom and Jerry* and the *Looney Tunes* shorts created before 1948.[101] After some thought, Turner decided to turn Hanna-Barbera into something new, creating Cartoon Network with the aim of exclusively airing both legacy and newly-created Hanna-Barbera cartoons.[102] Though initially the studio tasked with creating new content was constantly under threat of closure, they were eventually able to get their feet under them by creating a slew of new hits—and with these, the modern generation of children's cartoons was born. Many of these cartoons are still well-known and regarded today, with shows like *The Power Puff Girls, Dexter's Laboratory*, and *Johnny Bravo* still circulating and demonstrating the staying power of children's animation. The creation of Cartoon Network, and the fall of Hanna-Barbera as it had been, quickly spelled the end of the Saturday morning cartoon as it had been for the last several decades, with children suddenly able to watch their favorite shows at pretty much any time they were allowed. Other companies and networks soon followed suit, and a new era of television was born.

Meanwhile, those other networks were having their own ideas about how to turn animation into something meaningful and profitable in the modern era. In particular, Nickelodeon, a division of MTV and Viacom, began to grow to prominence after over a decade of languishing in a lack of quality content. [103] Nickelodeon had gotten its start sooner than Cartoon Network had, and by the nineties had already established itself as the dominant channel for children's programming, being, for a long time, the *only* channel specifically dedicated to that market.[104] Between 1984 and 1997, Nickelodeon existed in what is today referred to as its 'golden age', and the company produced numerous shows and other content, including sitcoms, game shows, the 'Kids Choice Awards', along with others. It wasn't until the nineties, however, that animation began to make a serious mark on Nickelodeon's programming, with 1991 bringing several shows, most notably *The Rugrats* and *The Ren and Stimpy Show*.[105] These shows were both quickly

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[101] "COMPANY NEWS; Hanna-Barbera Sale Is Weighed." The New York Times (1991). http://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/20/business/company-news-hanna-barbera-sale-is-weighed.html. Carter, Bill. "THE MEDIA BUSINESS; Turner Broadcasting Plans To Start a Cartoon Channel." The New York Times (1992). http://www.nytimes.com/1992/02/19/business/the-media-business-turner-broadcasting-plans-to-start-a-cartoon-channel.html

[102] Carter, Bill. "COMPANY NEWS; A New Life For Cartoons." The New York Times (1993), http://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/02/business/company-news-a-new-life-for-cartoons.html

[103] Healon ,James V. "New Look for Kids' TV." The Bryan Times (1979)

[104] Lewin, Tamar. "Hey There, Dudes, the Kids Have Grabbed a Network." The New York Times (1990). http://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/21/arts/television-hey-there-dudes-the-kids-have-grabbed-a-network.html?pagewanted=all

[105] "Nickelodeon to Offer Cartoons." Victoria Advocate (1991)

popular and quickly controversial, *Ren and Stimpy* in particular, with consistent censorship battles within Nickelodeon and bouts of public outcry over the perceived overly risqué nature of the series.[106] This battle, over both what children should be exposed to and what animation could be and do, remains relevant today. Discovering the soul of animation has not historically been an easy task, and the battle over *Ren and Stimpy* is emblematic of that conflict.

  The Ren and Stimpy Show is, in a long tradition of controversial media, an example of a piece of content caught between two worlds. Nominally a 'children's show' aired on a children's network, the strange show about a neurotic chihuahua and a dull-witted cat was infamous for the inclusion of gags, jokes, and plotlines filled with innuendo, political, religious, societal satire, and violence considered too graphic for a young audience.[107] References to alcohol, sexual comments, jokes about the pope, and even decapitations filled the show, although many of these moments were cut down or removed entirely by Nickelodeon before release. The fact that the show was created by a protégé of Ralph Bakshi no doubt had significant impact upon the show's unusually risky content.[108] However, although many parents reacted strongly to the show and it was ultimately cancelled, it received critical praise and quickly developed a cult following, and ultimately even a brief reboot. Partially, this was due to the influence of Bob Clampett's early Golden Age animation style, which evoked a certain wacky aesthetic and tone that greatly helped establish the show as unique and carefully crafted, but it was also due to a certain unapologetic, innate zaniness that tapped into a youthful enjoyment of ridiculousness and crassness.[109] Though not the relatively complex social satire of *The Simpsons*, and not marketed exclusively towards adults, the series certainly does not fall neatly into the category of 'children's television.' The humor was frequently highly juvenile, with its "caca, booger" flavor, but that lowbrow sensibility meshed well with both the senses of humor of many young adolescents as well as with many adults looking for something ridiculous and crude to entertain themselves.[110] Despite its presence on 'the children's channel', many critics considered *Ren and Stimpy* to have passed out of the realm of children's television, both hearkening back to the simpler times of the forties and fifties with its sight gags and off-color jokes as well as to a future in which adult content could be anything considered controversial.[111] And partially because of that, and partially because of its arrival at a time in which animation had begun to arrive but had not yet crystallized into definite patterns, *The Ren and Stimpy Show* is credited along with *The Simpsons* with helping to usher in the new animated era, directly

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[106] Novinskie, Charles S. "Bill Wray, Interview." David Anthony Kraft's Comics Interview issue 122 (1993).
"Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: A Content Analysis of Children's Television." Parents Television Council (2006). https://www.parentstv.org/PTC/publications/reports/childrensstudy/childrensstudy.pdf
[107] Ibid
[108] Digilio, Nick. "John K interview." WGN Radio (2003)
[109] Kanfer, Stefan. "Loonier Toon Tales." TIME (1992). Lyttle, John. "TELEVISION." The Independent (1994)
[110] Zimmerman, Kevin. "Not Just for Kids Anymore." Daily Variety (1995)
[111] Ibid

influencing the greenlighting of shows like *Beavis and Butthead*, and helping to create space and financing for shows like *South Park*.[112] It also had artistic influence upon the medium, hearkening back to the days of old with its richer, more complementary color palette and its use of 'grotesque close-ups' (close-up shots which show the true nature of something in a detailed and grotesque way) for humorous effect. *Ren and Stimpy* is a show on the crux of two worlds, and it helped tip animation over the edge into a new era in which growth and maturation could begin again. Though this ethos would continue somewhat with the likes of *Spongebob Squarepants*, an enormously popular show getting its start at the close of the 20th century and continuing to this day, *Ren and Stimpy* is the first example of a trend that would become very much a part of 'children's' animated television.

South Park takes that the ideas behind *Ren and Stimpy* even further, combining them with the more adult sensibilities of *The Simpsons* and an adult network which avoided censorship. *Ren and Stimpy*, though rather crude and meant in many ways to appeal to older viewers, still remained fundamentally a show watchable by kids, at least for the most part. *South Park*, first aired in 1997 and still running today, is not a show for children. Despite having a cast made up primarily of children, few parents would allow their children anywhere near the *South Park*. The show is, in many ways, more mature in its content and intended audience than *The Simpsons*. *South Park* sets itself apart from *The Simpsons* in both tone and content, leaning towards a much more biting, 'equal opportunity' satire and offensiveness than *The Simpsons* typically displays. In fact, the creators have made it very clear on multiple occasions that the show was not ever intended for kids, and the show was the first cartoon ever to receive a 'TV-MA' rating. [113] Being aired on Comedy Central, rather than a major network like Fox as with *The Simpsons*, the show experiences considerably less censorship and is well known for its employ of typically taboo profanity, as well as for broaching topics other media refuses to touch. Following the adventures of four young boys and their journey from third to fourth grade and onwards in the 'normal' American town of South Park, Colorado, the show has made its mark as America's prime source for biting, caustic satire of anything and everything in vogue. Particularly noteworthy is the show's ability to consistently remain current and relevant, with many episodes being written in the week before being aired in order to remain constantly up to date.[114] And the show has been successful in this endeavor, with it remaining at or near the top of ratings for basic cable throughout its run.

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[112] Cox, Ted. "TV's Turning Points: A New Book Looks at Pivotal Moments in TV History." Daily Herald (2005). Archived on archive.org from the original on October 12, 2011

[113] Huff, Richard. "South Park's Still Top Dog on Basic Cable." New York Daily News (1998). Archived from the original on July 30, 2012. Antonacci, Christopher. "South Park stirs up controversy, laughs." Penn State University (1997). Archived from the original on September 21, 2004

[114] Leonard, Devin. "South Park Creators Haven't Lost Their Edge." Fortune (2006). http://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/10/30/8391792/index.htm

South Park is primarily of interest not just for how adult it is, but for how it combined that fact with its animation for positive effect. The fact that it is animated, rather than live-action like most adult themed content is, allows the show to contrast the content against the style it's being presented in. Thus, the fact that animation is typically seen as a children's medium only serves to enhance the impact of the absurdity and maturity present. Additionally, the use of animation also allows the show to take on issues differently from a live-action satirical show, with the show able to depict through representational art a variety of bizarre and unreal things (like the circumstances of Kenny's various deaths, or his battle with Satan). This method of using the freedom of art to depict things real people and props never could, and the intensification of content that often ensues, would become ever more common as time progressed. Though *South Park* is far from the first to use the technique or realize its potential, it was one of the first to use it in such a heightened or adult-oriented way, outstripping *The Simpsons* and other adult shows from its era with sheer ambition and lack of compunction. Many other shows would take lessons from this willingness to go anywhere and do anything, as is quickly apparent when looking at adult animation going forward. This stylistic innovation demonstrates the unique ways in which animation can contribute to storytelling. It shows that the stylization can actually be used to enhance a variety of elements within the content, drawing the attentions of the audience to where it needs to go. Instead of being limited by its 'cartoonishness', *South Park* was able utilize it to do something new. Appropriate use of stylization is essential to the growth of animation into a mature medium, and *South Park* stands as an important early adopter.

The 21st century is home to its fair share of shows following in *South Park*'s footsteps. Film would follow a different path, however, as Disney's renaissance will demonstrate. Film, largely due to the monopolizing influence of Disney, would not make such ambitious strides. Instead, it would continue to hone the formula that had been designed more than half a century before.

The Renaissance

Animated film during the nineties made a huge comeback, hearkening back to the 1950s in terms of both quality and quantity. Though the trend started in the late eighties with *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *The Little Mermaid*, the nineties include a large amount of Disney's most classic and well-loved stories: *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas*, *Toy Story*, *Mulan*, among others. These films had a notable impact upon the development of American children during the period, creating a persistent culture of Disney films to watch at home with family. However, though they were technically well done and often enjoyable or mature in their own way, they were rarely ambitiously different. *The Simpsons* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* may have kicked of the renaissance of animation, but their lessons were not necessarily learned by their successors.

Although it technically was not released in the 1990s, *The Little Mermaid* is far too much a part of the decade of 'Disney Renaissance' to simply skip over. It was the first film since *Sleeping Beauty*'s failure to truly go back to Disney's fairy tale roots. And, like the three Disney princess movies going before it, it marks yet another era in the history of Disney and film animation as a whole.[115] Once again based on a classic fairy tale, and once again focusing on the story of a beautiful princess, *The Little Mermaid* has the distinction of being the first princess story focused on a more impulsive, character-imbued heroine who drives the plot rather than simply going along with it, with Roger Ebert noting that "Ariel is a fully realized female character who thinks and acts independently, even rebelliously, instead of hanging around passively while the fates decide her destiny."[116] Disney, as usual, ensures that it changes with the times, reflecting the values and needs of the largest group of people possible in appealing to a broad, middle-class American audience that had recently begun to internalize the values of the new age as those raised in the turbulent and dynamic times of the sixties began to raise their own children. However, *The Little Mermaid* was also very careful to stay within the tradition of classic animated Disney films, including lighthearted singing, a love story between two beautiful people, talking animals, an over the top villain, and many other things had become a staple of Disney's animated fare. It also had the kind of artistic ambition that had been sorely lacking in many of the more recent Disney films after the failure of *Sleeping Beauty*.[117] With bright, eye-catching colors and environments, deftly-portrayed facial expressions, and beautiful background painting, *The Little Mermaid* did not innovate, but it did strike a standard of quality that had been missing for a very, very long time. Ultimately, *The Little Mermaid* reestablished Disney as the king of animated features, making them once again a source of profit and cultural significance, and caused a significant expansion of the animation department and both a renewal of interest by the public and burgeoning of high-quality animated features over the course of the next decade.[118] Though it took the ambition, capital, and catalyst of *Roger Rabbit* to get Disney to the cusp, it was *The Little Mermaid* that truly tipped them over the edge and back into a place of influence and creativity.

On a fundamental level, though, how different is *The Little Mermaid* from Disney's previous offerings? It certainly is a more polished, more attractive, more culturally relevant film than its predecessors. But with regards to the audience it's trying to reach, it remains the same. *The Little Mermaid* is a film intended to be enjoyed by families. The content is tailored to appeal to the sensibilities of children and their parents, not to appeal directly to adults in any way. Though it can be a light, enjoyable film for

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[115] Hahn, Don. "Waking Sleeping Beauty." Burbank: Stone Circle Pictures/Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures (2009)
[116] Ebert, Roger. "The Little Mermaid." The Chicago Sun-Times (1989). http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-little-mermaid-1989
[117] Musker, John, Clements, Ron, and Menken, Alan (audio commentary). Bonus material from "The Little Mermaid: Platinum Edition" [DVD]. Walt Disney Home Entertainment (2006)
[118] Ibid

anyone, it fails to deal with any real adult issues seriously. This would continue to be the case with following Disney films, although slowly some would come to update their tone and content for a more adult audience. Even so, *The Little Mermaid* kicked off a decade of films that would fall largely into the same grain.

If *The Little Mermaid* had announced that Disney had returned to its former heights, it was *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) that set that return in stone. It immediately cemented Disney's rise, winning huge commercial and critical success. Disney, back to the princess/fairy tale genre so soon after *The Little Mermaid*, took significant financial and creative risks with the film, and the film had a troubled release schedule.[119] Eventually, it was formatted like a Broadway Musical in the manner of *The Little Mermaid*, and Belle was adapted to be more bookish, more oblivious to and uncaring about her own beauty and "a little odd" in order to make the character more distinct.[120] Elements of her cleverness and assertiveness in her interactions with Gaston and the Beast were also enhanced from the fairy tale version in order to make her more appealing to a modern audience. Technically, the film also took advantage of a number of innovations, including an updated method for combining computer generated imagery with traditional hand-drawn art; this allowed the film to be completed on-time and for many of the iconic scenes in the movie, such as the scene of Beast and Belle spinning and dancing, to be filmed.[121] This new technique, known as CAPS (Computer Animation Production System) allowed for a wider and more vibrant range of colors, softer and more realistic shading, as well as the ability to simulate depth more effectively through separation of layers.[122] The success of these techniques would ultimately lead to Disney embracing a far more extensive use of CGI in the future, which would have a major impact both upon the content of the company as well as the rest of the industry.[123] The music was also both integral to film and hugely popular, re-cementing the idea of a musical Disney film with the help and precedent of *The Little Mermaid*, and capturing the public and critics to the point where a Broadway adaptation was both possible and successful. Ultimately, despite the problems with its development, the cast, crew, and Disney itself ended production confident in the quality and potential of their film—and they would quickly be proved correct, with a combination of both huge critical and commercial success.[124] *Beauty and the Beast* is the quintessential Disney film: family friendly but well-made and heartfelt, ambitious in scope, well-loved by all, and impactful for years to come.

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[119] Thomas, *Mickey Mouse to Beauty and the Beast*, 7-142. Trousdale, Gary, Wise, Kirk, Hahn, Don, and Menken, Alan. DVD audio commentary for Beauty and the Beast: Special Edition. Walt Disney Home Entertainment (2002)
[120] "Tale as Old as Time: The Making of Beauty and the Beast." Walt Disney Home Entertainment. 2002
[121] Ibid
[122] Trousdale et al, DVD commentary "Beauty and the Beast: Special Edition"
[123] Kanfer, Stefan. *Serious Business: The Art and Commerce of Animation in America From Betty Boop to Toy Story*. New York City: Scribner, 1997
[124] Hahn, "Waking Sleeping Beauty"

The Beauty and the Beast is difficult to dislike. It is exactly the kind of wide-reaching entertainment Disney is so keen on achieving. At this point, for Disney, success only truly comes when the entire family, from the youngest to the oldest, is sitting in the theater or in front of the television, enjoying their content together and relating through it. *Beauty and the Beast* is emblematic of this way of thinking, and the ideas would continue as the decade wore on. Though the film carried on the tradition of *The Little Mermaid* in many ways, both as a princess movie and a family movie, it also helped cement a newer trend. Although Disney films had always been enjoyed by all, the theater focused system of the past was now long gone. With the new 'home-focused' paradigm brought about by home television and VHS/DVD, Disney realized the necessity of creating films that would be consistently enjoyable to the widest demographic ranges possible. Movies were no longer just a one-time thing, an event, but rather an experience to be shared with those close to you at home. Thus, making them consistently enjoyable by a wide range of people became even more essential to Disney's success. The introduction of more multi-layered films during the 1990s and into the 2000s is indicative of this.

The Lion King, released in 1994 during the height of the renaissance, on the heels of successes like *Aladdin* and *Beauty and the Beast*, is one of Disney's most enduring and well-known original productions. Although heavily influenced by *Hamlet*, the film nonetheless is one of the few successful fully animated films by Disney that is not explicitly based on a previous work, as well as the first.[125] The film would set a standard for all original works from then on, and open up new doors from a creative perspective for the studio, which would soon become more comfortable with the idea of original production. *The Lion King* was also significant technically and artistically, pushing the boundaries of what had previously been possible and setting the medium up for greater things in the future.

As is often the case with these types of films, *The Lion King* underwent a number of script rewrites, talent losses, and other production difficulties over the course of its development. The challenge of creating a good story, especially one that wasn't a direct adaptation of something else, was a difficult one. But ultimately, the simple story of a young man growing up to take responsibility in a chaotic world despite trials and tribulations was a compelling one, representing the kind of growth that Disney had undergone with regards to storytelling over the years. The focus on something that was universally relatable, couched in a framework of humanized animals in order to separate the audience from deeply ingrained prejudices and preconceptions, was powerful, speaking to both the changing times and the development of the medium. The film was eminently successful even by Disney standards—it rests as the fourth highest grossing animated film of all time, received universal critical praise, and has gone through numerous

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[125] "The Lion King: Platinum Edition." Origins (DVD). Walt Disney Home Entertainment (1994)

rereleases, sequels, and merchandising of all stripes.[126] Commentators also noted that the film was, perhaps, a strange fit for children given some of the themes it contained—fratricide, framing of a family member, etc. "Shakespearean in tone, epic in scope, it seems more appropriate for grown-ups than for kids. If truth be told, even for adults it is downright strange" noted the reviewer for the Washington Post, and that comment is incredibly significant given the demographic realities of the medium.[127] Other reviewers would remark similarly, with the reviewer for Entertainment Weekly noting that the film "has the resonance to stand not just as a terrific cartoon but as an emotionally pungent movie", and another reviewer grudgingly commenting that "With each new animated release, Disney seems to be expanding its already-broad horizons a little more. The Lion King is the most mature (in more than one sense) of these films, and there clearly has been a conscious effort to please adults as much as children. Happily, for those of us who generally stay far away from 'cartoons', they have succeeded."

Animated film had begun to breach the till then unquestioned lines between adult and children's entertainment, and for many who had watched the medium for a long time, that was immensely bizarre. Instead of a strict delineation between 'adult' and 'children's' entertainment, as is seen with *The Simpsons* and most Disney films till that point, animation was starting to move into a unique space in which it could appeal deeply to both. Instead of using nostalgia to appeal to adults, as with *Roger Rabbit*, *The Lion King* and a number of films following it would appeal to older and younger audiences by hitting at fundamental aspects of human nature on multiple levels. Though *The Lion King* is still a family movie in the Disney tradition, it greatly broadened the scope of what that could mean. Instead of only including more complex characters or humor more accessible to all age groups, *The Lion King* also explored tone and themes typically relegated to adult spaces. The separation between 'cartoons' and animation had begun to take shape.

1995's *Toy Story* tells a mirroring story. If *The Lion King* had broken new ground with regards to storytelling, originality and maturity of tone, and *The Beauty and the Beast* had done so in quality and technical innovation, *Toy Story* took advantage of both. And if *The Lion King* was darker in tone than previous films, *Toy Story* was unabashedly optimistic, playing to adults directly through an avenue of childhood memories and nostalgia. Although *Tron* took the first steps with regards to extensive use of CGI, and *Jurassic Park*, two years earlier, had proved that extensive use of CGI for entire character models was

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[126] Bryman, Alan. *The Disneyization of Society*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004, 86. Susman, Gary. "Lion King" Sets New Records with DVD Release." Entertainment Weekly (2003). Gray, Brandon. "Forecast: 'Lion King' to Roar Again." Box Office Mojo (2011). Hinson, Hal. "The Lion King Review." The Washington Post (1994). http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/review96/lionkinghin.htm
http://www.boxofficemojo.com/news/?id=3272http://www.ew.com/article/2003/10/13/lion-king-sets-new-records-dvd-release
[127] Ibid

possible, *Toy Story* was the first film to fully take the plunge into the realm of CGI.[128] Technology and content go hand in hand, and the advent of computer animation and its rapid effect on the medium as a whole shaped the form of 21st century animation profoundly.

Toy Story is remarkable not only because of its technical innovations. The film is known for the power of its story and characters, for a unique and troubled production history, and for opening the doors for collaboration between Disney and outside studios. After several rewrites, format changes, and a period in which production for the film was completely shut down, the film would be released—but the production shutdown itself is of interest. The movie, from the beginning, had a very specific ethos in mind, with creative director John Lasseter specifically aiming to make a film that appealed to younger audiences through a charming, simple, warm story about toys, their adventures, and growing up.[129] It was also intended to appeal to adults through the same elements, by way of nostalgia.[130] However, Disney, still remembering the success of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and its cross-audience appeal, was adamant that the film be specifically marketed to adults as well, and that the characters have more of an 'edgy' tone to them to appeal to older audiences.[131] Ultimately, this approach proved unsuccessful, with Lasseter and others at Pixar decrying the soullessness of the film.[132] The film was returned to its original vision, and Disney's 'edgy' version was forgotten.

But *Toy Story* and its developmental problems show the difficulties and different paths present when developing a medium for new audiences. Deciding who to aim your content towards can be a remarkably difficult decision, and as CGI came on the scene, decisions about what kind of tone this new content would have had to be made. A very distinct divide between the adult audience and the children audience still existed, and the pioneers of computer animation, and the stories they wanted to tell and the way in which they told them, had a huge effect upon the continued development of the medium. The fact that the first fully animated film was made by Disney, a company known for its children's entertainment, and that it was specifically about children's toys, created a blueprint on which nearly all well-known CGI entertainment following was based. And the fact that there was disagreement about whether that was the appropriate tone and direction to take things in indicates the reality of contingency in this nascent development.

The fact that *Toy Story* was incredibly successful in its final, fun-loving, un-edgy, for children form certainly had an effect as well. The film earned great critical and commercial success, a spot on the National

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[128] Price, David. *The Pixar Touch: The Making of a Company*. New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, 133
[129] Ibid
[130] Ibid
[131] Ibid
[132] Ibid

Film Registry, and heaps of praise for its innovation.[133] Numerous critics cited its technical achievements and the newness of the style as a major reason for their appreciation, and several noted how significant it was, to animation and to cinema itself. Roger Ebert remarked that the film was similar to *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* in that "both movies take apart the universe of cinematic visuals, and put it back together again, allowing us to see in a new way", and gave it a four star review, talking extensively about the cinematic versatility provided by computer animation and showcased in the film.[134] Additionally, a number of critics praised the movie's ability to appeal to all age ranges, with the reviewer for Entertainment Weekly commenting that the film "…has the purity, the ecstatic freedom of imagination, that's the hallmark of the greatest children's films. It also has the kind of spring-loaded allusive prankishness that, at times, will tickle adults even more than it does kids."[135] This is interesting to note: To many of the critics, and apparently to audiences as well given the numbers at the box office, the film was broadly appealing precisely *because* of the way in which it catered to the sense of wonder, optimism, and play that is typically associated with children. The film, despite, or perhaps because, of being about children's toys, appeals to an older audience, taking those youthful feelings and bringing them to the present, couching them in a way that is appealing to both young and old.

However, unlike *Roger Rabbit*, *Toy Story* doesn't rely on the use of pre-established characters or a revived 'golden age' past, but on inherent feelings of remembrance and appreciation for childhood and its ways. Although there is an element of nostalgia in the way the film is presented, the narrative of obsolescence, friendship, and growing up the film presents is universal. In the end, removing the 'edginess' that Disney had thought so necessary for the success of the film with older audiences proved to be the film's saving grace, an irony that was no doubt felt by everyone involved in the convoluted development process. And it provides us a lesson: Being 'adult', does not necessarily mean being darker, edgier, and grittier. That doesn't mean it can't be: *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* certainly takes a certain darkness and grittiness to heart, with discussions of torture, rape, and graphic violence strewn throughout the films, along with the ridiculous talking gargoyles.[136] And entertainment meant for adults does not even, necessarily, need to involve them in any meaningful way. Moreover, it shows us that animation, despite being 'for kids', is

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[133] Burrows, Peter and Grover, Ronald. "Steve Jobs, Movie Mogul." Bloomberg BusinessWeek (1998). http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/1998-11-22/steve-jobs-movie-mogul. Schlender, Brent. *Steve Jobs' Amazing Movie Adventure: Disney Is Betting On Computerdom's Ex-Boy Wonder To Deliver This Year's Animated Christmas Blockbuster. Can He Do For Hollywood What He Did For Silicon Valley?* Fortune (1995). "Films Selected to the National Film Registry, Library of Congress – 2005." National Film Registry (2005). "AFI Crowns Top 10 Films in 10 Classic Genres." American Film Institute (2008). http://www.comingsoon.net/movies/news/46072-afi-crowns-top-10-films-in-10-classic-genres

[134] Ebert, Roger. "Toy Story." Chicago Sun-Times (1995). http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/toy-story-1995

[135] Gleiberman, Owen. "Toy Story." Entertainment Weekly (1995). Archived from the original on December 20, 2007

[136] "Consider the Audience." Reviewing All 54 Disney Animated Films and More! (2014). https://54disneyreviews.com/2014/10/06/consider-the-audience/

heavily supported by adults, both those reviewing and recommending (or not) the content, the parents choosing whether to let their children view or not, and by the people going to see the film simply because they want to see something divorced from the mundane and often cruel realities of grown-up existence. Of course, animation doesn't have to be that type of entertainment exclusively, which is largely the point of this paper, but it is important to note just how closely tied in this supposed 'children's medium' is to the adult world, even without stopping to think about the fact that the actual creation of the content is done nearly entirely by adults. Thus, the very idea of a medium being for children is somewhat bizarre, especially in the context of films, which typically require some element of adult supervision to be seen by children anyway. The fact that most successful animated releases are so because they are able to appeal to adults as well as children points us toward and essential fact: Animated films, like *Toy Story*, can only be successful because of adults. And these animated films can be successful with this adult audience in numerous ways, although the historical inertia applied to the medium led a narrower range until the cusp of the 21st century. On that point, we will turn from the century that has occupied so much of our time to the one that stretches into the present, and examine just what effects all of this has had upon the animation of today.

It is important to note that *Toy Story* is still a story about toys, and children, animated in a fun, expressive style, and marketed towards children and their families. Despite huge technical differences, despite an increasing tendency to create films that appeal to both children and adults, Disney had still created yet another children's cartoon. Once again we see more of a refining than a true departure, and once again, we see Disney's conservative approach to moving forward. Would this change, going into the 21st century? Would animation continue down the path it had been set on, or branch out?

The 21st Century: The Challenges and Opportunities of Contemporary Animation

Though only a decade and a half of the 21st century has passed, the industry has already undergone significant change. After a century of maturation, the 21st century has seen the medium become ever more diverse and specialized in tone and content, as new ideas become more accepted and old ones are refined. Disney and Warner Bros have remained giants, overshadowing the industry with experience and deep purses. But smaller studios and creators have also had their day in the sun. Animation has become cheaper and easier to create and distribute with more accessible CGI and the Internet, and experimental films, student animation, online web series, and other niche works have proliferated greatly.

Artistically, the medium has experimented in style and tone, in borrowing visual inspiration from the animation traditions of other cultures, and in technique and method. And animation from different nations and cultures has crossed borders with ever greater frequency, with anime and critically acclaimed animated films from Japan, experimental work and cute children's television from France, and other styles

from other places making their way into North America as American animation's productions and techniques make their way outward. This greater cultural exchange between traditions has allowed for a flourishing of ideas and style, as the animation powerhouses of the world share some ideas and absorb others through osmosis. In particular, the United States and Japan have shared an increasingly fruitful bond, with art styles and art direction flowing from Japan and setting and themes flowing from the United States. But the United States has not absorbed many of the things that make Japanese animation so special. The United States has failed to absorb Japanese animation's ability to tell stories for all age groups. Japanese animation is well known for its ability to deal with a wide range of tones and themes, with stories aimed at everyone from little kids to adolescents to adults.[137] Shows like 2000's *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, which focuses on a group of children and their adventures playing with trading cards, are clearly for younger audiences. However, shows like *Psycho-Pass*, which explores life under a totalitarian police state in which ones' psychological state is constantly monitored, are clearly for adults. However, there is a certain blurring of lines which takes place on Japanese animation. The delineation between 'children's entertainment' and 'adult's entertainment' can become significantly muddled, resulting in children being exposed to things most Americans would consider unacceptable. This is evidenced in several series, most notably *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* and *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. *Fullmetal Alchemist* seems in many ways a children's series, with young protagonists, an optimistic ending, and plenty of humor. This is offset by many things: A failed necromancy leaving the protagonists permanently disabled, eldritch horrors controlling a Nazi-esque government, genocide, and disturbing scientific experiments that leave their subjects twisted in a variety of horrible ways. *Madoka Magica* occupies an even more bizarre space, with its presentation explicitly catering to a well-established children's genre but its content and tone soon veering into strikingly adult territory. But even this blurring of established genre lines speaks to the elements of adultness which have permeated the medium, allowing it to explore a wide variety of topics in numerous ways. American animation, though it has made progress, has not done the same.

Fundamentally, American animation in the 21st century has two things holding it back. One applies primarily to film, and the other to television, though there is some overlap. Film struggles primarily with the fact that its content is almost never intended solely for adults. Television is hampered by its inability to break out of satirical situation comedy. There are plenty of products in both that are aimed solely towards children, but few aimed solely towards adults. In film, things are either entirely for children or for 'all audiences.' Because of film's unique space in paid public theaters, the bigger budget pieces are usually intended to be at least somewhat enjoyable to adults as well as children. However, the direct to DVD products are made with the knowledge that parents are less likely to be watching with their children, and

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[137] Brenner, Robin. *Understanding Manga and Anime*. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2007, 89. Craig, Timothy J. *Japan pop! : Inside the world of Japanese popular culture*. Armonk: Sharpe, 2000

are presented accordingly. In general, the lesser quality pictures are directed only at children, while the better conceived and funded films are meant for all ages.

In television, where there are products intended specifically for the adult audience, they all fall within the same mold, more than two decades old, that *The Simpsons* set. And relative to film, television is far less concerned with creating content enjoyable by a broad audience, with most animation falling squarely within a single age demographic. Though exceptions exist, animated television series typically fall into either the *South Park* mold or the *Magic School Bus* mold. Because of the way television is enjoyed—at home, by specific audiences interested enough to tune in consistently, with advertisements—the shows are typically designed to capture and hold the audience seen to be most profitable to advertisers and the network.

These two limitations play a major part in the way that animation has evolved in the 21st century. Even with the growth that can clearly be seen, escaping them is difficult. It requires both ambition from creators and those who fund them, as well as a change in the way that media is enjoyed. The current status quo is maintained by the economic context in which it exists, and until that economic context changes, it will remain the same.

With the advent of Netflix, quasi-legal downloading and streaming, and other services, those economic imperatives may be on their way towards change. But, even in the beginning of the information age, many things have remained the same. American animation is still a medium with its sights set on younger audiences. Even the massive outgrowth of 'adult animation' has done little to leave behind the medium's roots in newspaper cartoons and lowbrow theater entertainment, as the total dearth of adult animation as anything other than humor makes clear. The vast majority of financially and critically successful works within the decade are still made by media giants and the old hands of animation, and the vast majority of those works are made for children, even if many are also intended to be enjoyable by adults. The potential for maturation exists, and hints of it can be seen in many places, but the journey is far from over. A hundred year-long history is not something easily overcome, and the continued existence of the same powerful companies has perpetuated the status quo.

Disney has remained a powerhouse in the animation industry. The only major change that has occurred is the near total transition to computer animation after a lukewarm reception of its last few traditionally animated features. Although the films have remained similar in tone, content, and intended audience, this fundamental stylistic change did have an effect upon Disney's work and does represent, in many ways, the end of an era.

The Princess and the Frog is Disney's final serious attempt to remain true to its long and storied past of traditional animation and feature film fairy tales. Featuring a person of color as its protagonist and taking several risks both in production and content, the film was in many ways the last gasp of a dying era.

Although Disney would continue to make animated films after *The Princess and the Frog*'s 2009 release, the end Disney's historically iconic traditional animation had arrived. The company was simply not seeing the kind of success it used to with its traditionally animated films, while the computer animated films such as *The Incredibles*, *Monsters, Inc*, and *Finding Nemo* being released by the affiliated Pixar were consistently achieving great success. However, *The Princess and the Frog* is not significantly solely because of the dubious honor of marking the end of an era: It also stands out due to a number of other factors as well, relating to everything from its production and creative choices to the ultimate form and content of the final film.

The Princess and the Frog is intended to evoke the style and form of films from Disney's Renaissance era in a wide variety of ways. Drawing on Disney's past in style, characterization, fairy tale story, and music, the film endeavored as best as possible to place itself among the classics that had defined the childhoods of many and revitalized the medium. One major way in which this was done was the return to the epic musical style that had served Disney so well in the likes of *The Little Mermaid* and *The Beauty and the Beast*.[138] In fact, more than perhaps most previous Disney films with a strong musical element, the film heavily integrated the music with the setting and general tone of the film, looking to New Orleans' vibrant musical history and the musical tradition of the black American south to impart the film with a sense of authenticity.[139] Music itself also plays a significant role in the character arc of one of the film's characters, further reinforcing the sense of music as a significant element. This is combined with the general artistic sentiment and stylistic choices of the film, all of which are designed to reflect the setting—dark and mysterious swamps, gritty but bright New Orleans, haunting and surreal voodoo, et cetera. The film makes a serious effort to reflect the culture and environment of New Orleans in the 1920s, creating an environment that is simultaneously fanciful and realistic, with primary characters undergoing voyages of growth and discovery while dealing with a combination of problems fantastic and mundane. These character journeys are essential to the thematic and moral core of the film, as the title character, Tiana, learns to understand people better and to enjoy herself, while the prince—initially a foppish playboy—learns to love someone other than himself.[140] This subversion of some of the typical roles seen in Disney's fairy tales is significant in and of itself, as well as for its departure from the old way of doing things. The creators of the film endeavored simultaneously to evoke many of the old ideas and feelings associated with traditional 'princess movies' while updating it for the modern audience and using some clever characterization and plotting to entertain the viewer and avoid falling into rote. Ultimately, this leads to a film with dynamic leads, a clever but simple central plot, and an authentic setting and aesthetic. It seemed the recipe for success.

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[138] "The Princess and the Frog Soundtrack." Walt Disney Home Entertainment (2009).
http://www.starpulse.com/news/index.php/2009/11/23/disney_s_the_princess_and_the_frog_sound
[139] Ibid
[140] "Magic in the Bayou." The Princess and the Frog Blu-ray. Walt Disney Home Entertainment (2009)

And, in some sense, it was. The movie was far from a failure, on the face of things: It grossed more than double its production budget and received critical praise as well as nomination for several prestigious awards, like many successful Disney films before it.[141] Perhaps it was not as stunningly successful as some of the films made in Disney's heyday, but it was certainly respectable, and competition with *Avatar*, the still-reigning champion of the international box office, didn't help.[142] However, despite this seeming success, the film was still seen as a disappointment by many at the studio. Blame was placed on a number of sources, from the 'princess' in the title and its apparent inability to appeal to boys or men to the release coinciding with *Avatar* to various controversies regarding the film to other marketing concerns.[143] The production team, in fact, had been confident that the film would be a 'four quadrant movie' (implying an ability to reach all four sectors of the audience: males under 25, females under 25, and so on) in the tradition of Disney films from the 1990s, and the film's ultimate failure to do so despite the production team's efforts to create accessibility was devastating.[144] And it would lead to the sort of slow decline that can often occur in the entertainment industry, with traditionally animated films largely disappearing over the next few years. Finally, after a severe underperformance in 2011 by *Winnie the Pooh*, many of the Disney's hand-drawn animators were let go in 2013 and the traditional animation department was functionally shuttered.[145]

Connecting to the failure of *The Princess and the* Frog, the concept of a tentpole film is very important to our conceptualization of Disney's metrics for success in the modern era. Because of their broad success in the nineties, Disney had determined that 'true success' for big budget products must be both financial and critical. Throughout its history, Disney had always been able to appeal to a broad slice of the American public, but in the increasingly globalized modern era, Disney saw success as something more. The films were now made with all four of the audience quadrants in mind. Though there was still marketing and development towards specific demographics, any major endeavor by the studio was expected to have a serious payoff with a wide range of people.[146] This new way of doing things began in the nineties with films like *Beauty and the* Beast and *The Lion* King, and the studio was soon unaccepting of anything lesser.[147] This raising of standards is significant in and of itself, but the way in which it was done is

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[141] "The Hurt Locker" Takes Top Honors at 82nd Academy Awards." playbill.com (2010). http://www.playbill.com/article/the-hurt-locker-takes-top-honors-at-82nd-academy-awards-com-166552. Barnes, Brooks. "At Disney, a Celebration That Was a Long Time Coming." New York Times (2014). http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/05/business/media/at-disney-a-celebration-that-was-a-long-time-coming.html

[142] Ibid

[143] Catmull, Ed and Wallace, Amy. *Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration*. New York: Random House, 2014, 268.

[144] Ibid

[145] Amidi, Amid. "BREAKING: Disney Just Gutted Their Hand-Drawn Animation Division (UPDATED)." Cartoon Brew (2013). http://www.cartoonbrew.com/disney/breaking-disney-just-gutted-their-hand-drawn-animation-division-81043.html

[146] Lund, Dan. "Dream on Silly Dreamer." Orlando: WestLund Productions (2005)

[147] Ibid

significant as well. It is indicative of maturation in the medium, to a degree. And yet, though animation makes millions, even billions, every year, it is still largely dismissed as a serious medium: Many individuals seem incapable of comprehending that animation is a medium, rather than a genre, while others dismiss people's emotional affectation by animation as childish.[148] Brad Bird, a director well-known in the medium responsible for a well-loved films such as *The Incredibles* and *The Iron Giant*, expressed his frustration thus:

> "People think of animation only doing things where people are dancing around and doing a lot of histrionics, but animation is not a genre. And people keep saying, 'The animation genre.' It's not a genre! A Western is a genre! Animation is an art form, and it can do any genre. You know, it can do a detective film, a cowboy film, a horror film, an R-rated film or a kids' fairy tale. But it doesn't do one thing. And, next time I hear, 'What's it like working in the animation genre?' I'm going to punch that person!"[149]

If someone like Brad Bird, who has worked in the medium for decades, is frustrated with the state of the medium the perceptions surrounding it, it seems fairly clear that we should take seriously the claim that the medium is not being taken seriously, even today.

This continues to be made evident with several of Disney's later films, including *Tangled and Frozen*. Their marketing strategy, their intended audience, and the manner and degree of success these bring are all pertinent to understanding the state of animation during this period. Both are undoubtedly 'princess films', with the main characters being young women of royal lineage with stories loosely based on existing European fairy tales. Both involve magic, and romance, anthropomorphic animals, and a whole host of things now common in the typical Disney film. Both were also CGI, using an in-house animation style that would become synonymous with Disney's non-Pixar work going forward. And both, in terms of marketing and intended audience, presented themselves as films that could be enjoyed by all demographics. Both had their titles changed to names evoking a more gender neutral feeling, with *Tangled* changed from *Rapunzel* and *Frozen* changed from *The Snow Queen*.[150] Both films feature driven, intelligent, unpretentious 'modern' princesses with sensibilities intended to appeal to the modern viewer, with Rapunzel not knowing she's a princess till the end of the film, Anna rejecting the strictures of her station, including any sort of propriety or royal elegance, and Elsa eventually snapping under the pressures of anxiety, depression, fear, and

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[148] Kenny, Charles. "Oscar Takeaway: Animated Features Are Only for Kids and Sissies." Indiewire.com (2015). http://www.indiewire.com/2015/02/oscar-takeaway-animated-features-are-only-for-kids-and-sissies-123559/
[149] Amidi, Amid. "NY Times Unaware That Animation is a Medium." CartoonBrew.com (2010). http://www.cartoonbrew.com/ideas-commentary/ny-times-doesnt-know-animation-is-a-medium-27566.html
[150] Chmielewski, Dawn C. and Eller, Claudia. "Disney Animation is Closing the Book on Fairy Tales." Los Angeles Times (2010). http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/21/entertainment/la-et-1121-tangled-20101121

responsibility to run off to the mountains.[151] These princesses are intended to have something for everyone: Pluckiness and modern feminine charm for the young boys, beauty and strength and relatability for the young girls, and complexity and subversion (to at least a small degree) of the tropes for the adults. Additionally, the larger than traditional focus upon the male heroes of each film, with each character acting far more like a modern boy than a nameless hero from a fairy tale, reflect both an updating for the modern audience and a desire to appeal to male viewers through the creation of more relatable and interesting characters sharing their gender. The marketing of both films reflected that, endeavoring to draw in as many viewers as possible. Both films also present their protagonists in a combination of older and younger, with their growth over the course of the film not only being a major and generally relatable thematic beat but a journey explicitly shown through little girls and boys turning into young adults. Though the films do bear differences, they both represent very strong and intentional efforts on the part of Disney to create true tentpole films for themselves and to reaffirm themselves as the ultimate purveyors of general film entertainment. [152]

And, for both films, the attempt was successful. *Tangled* had a massively expensive production stretching over nearly a decade, but ultimately the $591 million earned worldwide more than made up for it.[153] The film was also critically successful, made its way to the Oscars, and spawned a successful merchandising and home release campaign.[154] *Frozen* was even more successful, spawning a massive media craze, a huge merchandising campaign as well as spinoffs, garnering huge critical success, and earning over a billion at the box office.[155] It was hugely successful in numerous markets and with pretty much every demographic, and reaffirmed Disney's belief in the idea of creating films that appealed to everyone; it is

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[151] Warner, Kara. "Mandy Moore's 'Tangled' Heroine Not 'Typical Disney Princess'." MTV News (2010). http://www.mtv.com/news/1646720/mandy-moores-tangled-heroine-not-typical-disney-princess/. Williams, Mike P. "Chris Buck Reveals True Inspiration Behind Disney's Frozen (exclusive)." Yahoo! Movies (2014). https://uk.movies.yahoo.com/chris-buck-reveals-true-inspiration-behind-disneys-frozen-135800980.html

[152] Stewart, Andrew. "Thanksgiving Box Office: 'Catching Fire,' 'Frozen' Serve Up Holiday Records." Variety (2013). http://variety.com/2013/film/box-office/thanksgiving-box-office-catching-fire-frozen-serve-up-holiday-records-1200906315/

[153] Chmielewski, "Closing the Book on Fairy Tales". "Tangled (2010)." Box Office Mojo (2011). http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=rapunzel.htm

[153] Scott, A.O. "Back to the Castle, Where It's All About the Hair." The New York Times (2010).

[154] Scott, A.O. "Back to the Castle, Where It's All About the Hair." The New York Times (2010). http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/24/movies/24tangled.html. "Academy Awards nomination list." TheState.com (2011). http://www.thestate.com/latest-news/article14391014.html. "Tangled (2010): Financial Information." The-Numbers.com (2011). http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Tangled#tab=summary

[155] Peterson, Jeff. "'Frozen' makes history two times over on Oscar weekend." Deseret News (2014). http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865597825/6Frozen7-makes-history-two-times-over-on-Oscar-weekend.html?pg=all. "Frozen (2013)." Box Office Mojo (2014). http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=frozen2013.htm. Schuster, Dana. "'Frozen' Merch is Making Parents do Crazy Things." New York Post (2014). http://nypost.com/2014/04/14/parents-fight-and-connive-for-sold-out-frozen-merch/

also credited with beginning a sort of 'neo-renaissance' by several analysts.[156] And it seemed to show, along with its predecessor, that the traditional fairy tale formula of the Disney hey-day could still be successful, as long as it was presented in the right light. Of course, that light is still reflective of the fundamental conservatism that is often present in Disney's work. The content and themes in both movies are intended to be palatable to everyone, with some of the depth and complexity lost in an attempt to reach too many different demographics at once. In particular, the attempt to appeal to both children and adults results in a watering down of any content that might seem too mature, with depictions of mature realities like depression being downplayed. This effect is repeated in most Disney films of this period, as the studio endeavors to reach audiences with fundamentally competing ideas of what they want.

Although Disney's internal animation studio remains relevant in the 21st century, it is really Pixar— whose stunning success had been kicked off by *Toy Story* in 1995—which became the king of feature film animation. Although nearly all of their films have been successful, both critically and commercially, there are a couple that are emblematic of the shift in audience and content present in animated film in the 21st century. Following the tradition of *Toy Story* and other Disney Renaissance films, Pixar is well known for its ability to deftly make create films that appeal to different viewers on multiple levels, creating complex stories that work for everyone, with the best not diluting the power of the content. This is best seen in *The Incredibles* (2004) and *Wall-E* (2008), both films that have remained enduringly popular with all demographics while making cultural waves at the time of their release. These two films stand as those most significant when discussing Pixar's flirtation with the adult market and the maturation of the medium.

The Incredibles, made by Pixar along with members of director Brad Bird's production team, is perhaps the studio's most serious exploration of adult themes and bridging of the gap between different age groups. Although undoubtedly a film meant to be enjoyed by children, with a number of significant child characters, a strong humorous and action-oriented element, and a bright and expressive animation style, the film also strongly reflects a number of adult themes and ties itself to concepts and ideas familiar only to adults. In particular, the film's 'golden age of superheroes' setting, its focus on the journeys of the adult characters, and the importance placed on family and the challenges and joys it can bring all speak primarily to an adult audience. The film does an excellent job of balancing the two demographics, with the central theme of family neatly tying things together and allowing the film to pivot easily from one to the other. The film would widen the possibilities of animation, particularly computer animation, while proving more fully than ever before that animated film could get at the heart of issues central to the lives of adults.

From a production standpoint, *The Incredibles* was the most ambitious film Pixar or any computer animation studio had produced, pushing the envelope on the animation of human characters and opening

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[156] Fritz, Ben. "A Charmed Life for Disney's 'Frozen'." Wall Street Journal (2014). http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303819704579316722023392130

the way for further 'human stories' in the future. This in and of itself is worthy of note, as stories focused on human characters tend to be more adult in nature, but it is the film's commitment to mature and thoughtful theming and storytelling that truly sets it apart.

The film's narrative and characters facilitate the exploration of a number of themes relevant to adult American life. Following the lives of a family termed 'the Incredibles', the film explores themes of growing up, resisting mediocrity, unfaithfulness, frustration with the status quo, family, and finding one's authentic self through a story involving doomsday robots, volcanic islands, and superheroes. Among the titular family of five (representing the stereotypical nuclear American family), each character is assigned a set of powers, and each power-set is coded to the personality and challenges of that character. According to Brad Bird, director and writer of the film, the characters are framed thus because: "The dad is always expected in the family to be strong, so I made him strong. The moms are always pulled in a million different directions, so I made her stretch like taffy. Teenagers, particularly teenage girls, are insecure and defensive, so I made her turn invisible and turn on shields. And ten-year-old boys are hyperactive energy balls. Babies are unrealized potential."[157] Throughout the film, each of the characters display their respective characteristics, often to a stereotypical extreme—but then are pulled back from that extreme as their characters are shown to be multidimensional and dynamic. This careful affirmation and subversion of family stereotypes lies at the heart of the film, and archetypical nature speaks clearly and effectively to an adult audience, and to parents in particular. The fact that the essential plot point of the film is the mid-life crisis of the father lends the film even more to an adult audience. Dissatisfaction with a boring white collar job, a setting predicated on the suing of superheroes for their actions, suspicions of infidelity, longing for the glory days, and trying to fit into a world you don't quite understand are all essential parts of the film which also directly reflect middle-class American life in a real and immediate way. Even the setting itself—the transition from the 'golden age of heroes' in the sixties to a modern, bureaucracy laden present—is something far more accessible to adults than it is to children, simultaneously poking fun at modernity and looking fondly at the 'good old days' while quietly acknowledging the inevitability of change and the goodness that can still be found in the present.[158]

Additionally, the film is presented in a way that acknowledges the darkness of the villains in a very real and explicit ways, with the mother explaining: "Remember the bad guys on the shows you used to watch on Saturday mornings? Well, these guys aren't like those guys. They won't exercise restraint because you are children. They *will* kill you if they get the chance. Do *not* give them that chance."[159] This line, and the general attitude found in the film, comes out of Bird's general frustration with the attitude towards

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[157] Barrier, Michael. "Brad Bird – Interview." MichaelBarrier.com (2005). http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Interviews/Bird/Bird_Interview.htm

[158] Patrizio, Andy. "An Interview with Brad Bird." IGN (2005). Archived from the original on January 20, 2013

[159] Bird, Brad. "The Incredibles (2004)." Dir. Brad Bird. Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios (2004)

violence and villainy in superhero stories, particularly in children's TV shows, noting "There's expectations for animation, and, you know, you make this connection with animation and superheroes, you think, 'Saturday morning,' and Saturday morning they have these very strange shows, completely designed around conflict and yet no one ever dies or gets really injured, or there's no consequence to it. I think that came out of, you know, a team of psychologists determined that it is bad for children, and I think just the opposite. I think that it's better if kids realize there's a cost and that if the hero gets injured and still has to fight, it's more dramatic, and it's closer to life."[160] This effort to make the film both more accessible and relevant to adults, and more realistic and constructive towards children, represents a move towards thematic maturity that had been rarely seen in animation. The fact that the film was supposed to reflect those themes, and that it inspired so much debate and thought, sets it apart. Bird put it succinctly, commenting, "The fact that it was written about in the op/ed section of *The New York Times* several times was really gratifying to me. Look, it's a mainstream animated movie, and how often are those considered thought provoking?"[161] The fact is, that despite decades of development and a recent decade of flourishing from Disney and other creators, the medium was still not taken seriously from a thematic or storytelling point of view. And, in fairness, the exploration of themes pertaining specifically to adults and their needs and desires is something that was fairly uncommon among animated films up to this point. However, *The Incredibles* showed indisputably that exploration of that kind *could* occur in animation, so long as the creators were willing and interested, and that it could even be successful—the film would go on to earn upwards of $600 million and receive critical acclaim, including from *The Rolling Stone*'s Peter Travers, who commented that the film "doesn't ring cartoonish, it rings true."[162] It also won several Oscars, was nominated for more, and has remained one of Pixar's most popular films more than ten years later.[163] The film stands as a pivotal success for the development of animation as a medium, paving the way for ever more and more adult films in the mainstream. *The Incredibles* may not be an explicitly adult film, but it nonetheless represents significant progress for the medium.

  WALL-E (2008) is also notable, for a number of reasons. It stands as one of Pixar's most significant films—it was named by *TIME Magazine* as "the best movie of the decade"— not just because of its charm or its technical achievements, but because of its explicit and complex exploration of a wide range of themes,

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[160] Pratt, Douglas. "The Incredibles DVD Review." Movie City News (2005). http://moviecitynews.com/archived/columnists/pratt/2005/incredibles.html

[161] Patrizio, "Interview with Brad Bird"

[162] "The Incredibles (2004)." Box Office Mojo (2005). http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=incredibles.htm. Travers, Peter. "The Incredibles." Rolling Stone (2004). http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/the-incredibles-20041103

[163] "The 77th Academy Awards (2005) Nominees and Winners." Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (2005). https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/2005. Pirrello, Phil, Goldman, Eric, Fowler, Matt, Collura, Scott, White, Cindy, and Schedeen, Jesse. "Top 25 Animated Movies of All-Time." IGN (2010). http://www.ign.com/articles/2010/06/25/top-25-animated-movies-of-all-time

from consumerism to environmentalism. Though for younger viewers, the story about two robots falling in love and humanity reclaiming life upon Earth can be appealing in itself, the overarching ideas in the film are very much slanted towards adult viewers. Though some viewers would reject the movie as too preachy and too explicitly political, many would hail it as a nuanced and intriguing look at complex issues facing the people of today, and the template set by the film would give an example for other more explicitly political tales later on, although, as was often the case, few were forthcoming.

Released a couple years after Disney's 2006 acquisition of Pixar, *WALL-E* follows the story of the titular character, a trash cleaning robot whose responsibility it is the cleaning up an Earth that has essentially become one giant trash heap. Humanity is long gone, as is pretty much all other biological life, and the price of humanity's greed and unchecked consumption is shown in the endless piles of rubbish. The story is predicated on this; though the proximate narrative would seem to be between WALL-E and EVE, the shiny new robot who returns to Earth to determine its habitability, the true tale is one of the destruction wrought by human greed and the resilience of life, as well as the beauties and dangers of rampant technology. The robot protagonists serve as a mirrors for humanity, reflecting emotions through actions instead of words and helping to guide humanity back to life despite their own lack of biological functions. WALL-E's fascination with life, even that of a cockroach or a single, tiny plant, is the center on which the rest of the film rests. *WALL-E* shows us how caring for each other and for our surroundings is an important, yet oft forgotten, part of our fundamental nature. Tellingly, Andrew Stanton, the film's director and co-writer, characterizes the central theme of the film as "irrational love defeats life's programming."[164] The film also is the first Pixar film to include segments with live action characters, and the photorealistic nature of the animation led some to question just how separate animation and live action really were, with Stanton commenting that "The line [between live-action and animation] is just getting so blurry that I think with each proceeding year, it's going to be tougher and tougher to say what's an animated movie and what's not an animated movie", a statement that reflects the changing of the times in a very real way.[165] Fundamentally, it is obvious to anyone watching the film that it has an explicit agenda embedded in its narrative. This is not a terribly common phenomenon in animation—very, very few films before or since have taken such a clear stance on such a specific issue. That alone makes it significant.

Thus, *WALL-E* is perhaps Pixar's most discussed and polarizing film, drawing admiration from many for its frank exploration of important and relevant themes and criticism for others for what is seen as

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[164] Fritz, Steve. "How Andrew Stanton & Pixar Created WALL*E – Part II." Newsarama (2008). http://www.newsarama.com/358-how-andrew-stanton-pixar-created-wall-e-part-ii.html
[165] Ball, Sarah. "Mr. Oscar, Tear Down This Wall! Andrew Stanton on How Animated Films are Pigeonholed – and How Wall-E is Every Man." Newsweek (2009). http://www.newsweek.com/mr-oscar-tear-down-wall-andrew-stanton-how-animated-films-are-pigeonholed-and-how-wall-e-every-man

slanted, overly-politicized settings and themes. The American Film Institute puts it best, describing the film from a positive point of view:

> "WALL•E proves to this generation and beyond that the film medium's only true boundaries are the human imagination. Writer/director Andrew Stanton and his team have created a classic screen character from a metal trash compactor who rides to the rescue of a planet buried in the debris that embodies the broken promise of American life. Not since Chaplin's "Little Tramp" has so much story — so much emotion — been conveyed without words. When hope arrives in the form of a seedling, the film blossoms into one of the great screen romances as two robots remind audiences of the beating heart in all of us that yearns for humanity — and love — in the darkest of landscapes."[166]

Many conservative critics dismissed the film as 'too preachy' and too hard on consumerism and corporations, although not all agreed.[167] The film also earned nods at various award shows, including, somewhat shockingly, the 'best picture' category, although the film was not nominated for the Oscar despite pressure from Disney and much of the critical community (Pixar's next two films, *Up* and *Toy Story 3*, would both receive nods for best picture, though neither would win).[168] Despite any snubs, in 2008, few films were as discussed or lauded as *WALL-E*, and the very fact that people were considering the film for a best picture nod speaks to growth of both medium and audience.

Ultimately, although few have followed *WALL-E*'s example in inserting such direct political and ideological thematic commentary into their animated stories, *WALL-E* does stand as a testament to the possibilities of the medium. It demonstrates the ways in which animated stories can successfully get at issues that animate the discussions of adult society. Though the film can be viewed by children, *WALL-E* ultimately speaks far more to the adults in the room. By exploring complex themes, *WALL-E* demonstrates that a film can be adult without relying on darkness or edginess. Animated film has as much potential as any other medium to discuss difficult issues, and *WALL-E* shows how effective it can be.

There are multiple ways to play to the adult audience, however. Dreamworks Animation Studios makes this clear, pioneering into film a method of appealing to adults that would make its mark well into the 21st century. A brief bit of history is required before jumping into Dreamworks and its attempts to conquer the market of animated film during this period. Unlike Disney, which had been around for the better part of a century before the year 2000, Dreamworks is a relatively new creation. Although the studio

[166] "AFI Awards 2008." American Film Institute (2008). http://www.afi.com/afiawards/AFIAwards08.aspx

[167] Treiman, Daniel. "Thumbs Up for "Wall-E"? Ed Koch Dissents." The Jewish Daily Forward (2008). http://forward.com/news/israel/13740/thumbs-up-for-wall-e-ed-koch-weighs-in-02160/. Ford, Patrick J. "WALL-E's Conservative Critics." The American Conservative (2008). Archived from the original on May 14, 2011

[168] Bandyk, Matthew. "Academy Awards Controversy: Wall-E Gets Snubbed For Best Picture Oscar." U.S. News & World Report 2009. http://money.usnews.com/money/blogs/risky-business/2009/01/22/academy-awards-controversy-wall-e-gets-snubbed-for-best-picture-oscar

was founded in 1994 by several veterans of the medium and outside of it (including Jeffrey Katzenberg and Steven Spielberg) and released several films before the turn of the century, the studio didn't truly hit its stride till the 2000s and the rise of computer animation.[169]. 2001's *Shrek* made quite an impression, immediately putting the studio on the map and creating a template for the rest of the studio's films to follow. This template would have great effect on Dreamworks filmography afterwards, and it wasn't until the 2010s that the studio began to branch out and create films outside of that initial, successful mold.

And that mold, like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* before it, was adult-oriented satire. Till *Shrek*, animated film had largely stayed within the family-friendly mold Disney had created decades before, with a few relatively little-known exceptions. With *The Simpsons* and its ilk, television quickly found its feet with adult animation, but it took much longer with film, which had a much longer and more successful history. However, even with *Shrek* and the type of film it spawned, the medium still remained accessible to children, even if it was intended to be more slanted towards adults—it never could seem to go quite as far as *Family Guy* and other animated television. *Shrek* demonstrates a change, and a significant one, but mainstream animation aimed exclusively towards adults is still exceedingly rare. That does not diminish *Shrek*'s importance, however: The film created a new mold, one that would allow the medium to at least begin breaking away from decades of animated tradition.

Shrek is fundamentally a very different beast from previous animated films. The fact that the film explicitly parodies Disney films, playing with fairy-tale tropes and creating a world in which all the things taken for granted in Disney films are made absurd, says a fair amount about the tone and intention behind the film. The stereotypes so common in Disney films, stereotypes that had over the decades been written in the DNA of American popular culture, were parodied mercilessly: Instead of a handsome prince, we have a cantankerous and ugly ogre, instead of a noble steed, we're given an annoying donkey who refuses to stop talking, and instead of a beautiful wallflower of a princess, we're given a woman who appears beautiful at first, but turns out to transform into an ogre as well (and also knows *Matrix* style martial arts). The plot, appropriately, involves saving that princess from a dragon-guarded tower—not that she needs it—on behalf of a diminutive lord. This lord turns out to be more unpleasant than the dragon guarding said tower, and ultimately it is the ogre who ends up with the princess, not him. Constantly making fun of Disney and the absurdity of the modern state of fairy tales, the film inserts a large amount of the kind of irreverent, iconoclastic, absurdist humor that kids simply do not understand. Shrek, the titular ogre, seeing a ridiculously tall building and mentioning that the owner must be compensating for something is only a small slice of the kind of blatant adult humor that litters the film—just under the noses of the children who are kept entertained by fairy tale locales, action, and potty humor. The film toes the line between adult's

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[169] Sito, Tom. "The Late, Great, 2D Animation Renaissance — Part 2." Animation World Network (2006). http://www.awn.com/animationworld/late-great-2d-animation-renaissance-part-2

and kid's animation more than any other film to that point—something that would be important to the later development of the medium.

The degree of 'adultness' that should be present in the film was by no means universally agreed upon by those creating it. Jeffrey Katzenberg, one of the founders of the studio, wanted to appeal to adults but wasn't comfortable with some of the inclusions pushed by the film's director, which included "sexual jokes and adding Guns' n Roses to the soundtrack", which he felt were going too far in the adult direction.[170] Ironically, however, it was the focus on the adult audience that ended up making the film successful, allowing Dreamworks to go public a short time later and setting them up as Pixar's major competitor.[171] The film, similar to its counterparts in television, also includes a large amount of modern cultural references in addition to its mockery of fairy tales, another element that would both be important to its success and that it would pass down to its successors. From "that'll do Donkey, that'll do" (referencing *Babe*) to Fiona's Matrix-reminiscent fighting style, the film constantly references outside properties and unrelated characters and incidents as a means frame the film as culturally contemporary and give the audience the pleasure of picking out little details for themselves—something, once again, that children aren't hugely prone towards. *Shrek* also began a trend of pairing popular mainstream songs appropriate to the plot and characters as an additional method of making the film feel culturally up to date. This decision not only made the soundtrack itself hugely popular, but also began a trend that would grow in both animation and outside of it.[172] Although the songs are fun enough to appeal to younger viewers, the irreverence and incongruity of modern popular music showing up in a story about ogres and princesses was mainly there for the adults. All in all, though the film certainly does aim itself towards children as well, the humor of *Shrek* exists primarily in a place accessible only by older viewers. The story, which espouses virtues of accepting and loving yourself for what you are and rejecting traditional expectations for what people should be, also speaks to modern sensibilities. The story, more than the humor, makes the film accessible for all ages, and provides an emotional and narrative core for the film that would ultimately add greatly to its appeal, graduating it from a cynical parody film to something more.

This adult-oriented sensibility served the film well, and it carried its ideas into future films. Though the film was only a modest financial success by blockbuster standards, it received critical praise, and much of that praise arose from its satirical tone and flippant adult humor. Roger Ebert commented that "This is not your average family cartoon. "Shrek" is jolly and wicked, filled with sly in-jokes and yet somehow

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[170] Thompson, Anne. "DreamWorks Tell-All Exposes Katzenberg Shrek Bail-Out." IndieWire (2010). http://www.indiewire.com/2010/04/dreamworks-tell-all-exposes-katzenberg-shrek-bail-out-238761/
[171] Ibid
[172] Neuwirth, Allan. *Makin' Toons: Inside the Most Popular Animated TV Shows and Movies.* New York City: Skyhorse Publishing Inc, 2003, 32

possessing a heart."[173] Numerous other reviewers commented on the quality of the humor, the animation, the parody, and even the story and the characters, and the film would later go on to win the first ever award for 'Best Animated Feature' from the Academy.[174] And this success would influence even Disney, as incorporation of popular culture and more 'adult' humor became more and more expected from animated film as time went on.[175] Even the very fact that Disney had finally been faced with a serious competitor in animated film is significant, and this relationship would continue to shape animated film throughout the decade and into the next.

Shrek is not the only significant film Dreamworks has created. However, for the purposes of examining their effect on the development of the medium and the significance of their films with respect to the maturity of the audience, there is little purpose in specifically examining their further works. However, the corpus of their works are significant in helping us track broader trends within the medium, and their tendency to stick with a particular type of film/franchise until its popularity wanes is instructive, indicating which kinds of films were popular with which audiences at which time and the conservatism embedded in the creative processes of the industry. In particular, Dreamworks' focus on parody films following the success of *Shrek*, and then the subsequent waning of the popularity of that type of film, is significant. *Shrek* would not only be followed by sequels following its example, but would also give birth to a whole spate of films following the same formula. These would range from *Megamind*, which spoofed the superhero genre, to *Shark Tale*, which parodied the Italian mafia and *The Godfather* in particular. Each of these were chock full of pop culture references, jokes about the genres they were satirizing, and varying levels of narrative complexity and quality. The notable fact is the satirizing itself: Each film explicitly and knowingly takes a particular genre or film and plays with it, highlighting the absurdity of the tropes and making consistent in-references that would go over the head of younger viewers. Although these films are nominally for children, it is the adults who understand the fullness of what the films are trying to accomplish, the adults who can actually appreciate all the little references and bizarre little touches.

However, this is frequently juxtaposed against plots and characters that have little complexity and serve only as vehicles to move the film forward. Some of the films manage to walk the line, successfully balancing the conflicting focuses and making films that work for both audiences, as was the intention. However, others were simply not able to keep up the balancing act, and failed both commercially, as stories, and as art.[176] This would eventually lead to a fundamental restructuring of the way Dreamworks made their

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[173] Ebert, Roger. "Shrek." Chicago Sun-Times (2001). http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/shrek-2001
[174] Lawson, Terry. ""Shrek" sustains creative dynasty." The Denver Post (2007). Sarris, Andrew. "Shrek and Dreck? Well, Not Quite." The New York Observer (2001).
[175] Poniewozik, James. "Is Shrek Bad for Kids?" TIME (2007).
http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1619573,00.html
[176] Ebert, Roger. "Shark Tale." Chicago Sun-Times (2004). http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/shark-tale-2004

animated productions, and it took less than a decade before Dreamworks decided, with *How to Train Your Dragon* in 2010, that the studio would be more successful mimicking the simpler and less parodic method long used by Disney. And though that did not spell the end of animated satirical film, it did bring an end to a general trend in the medium that had tried to skew the films more towards adults in that way. In the end, the attempt to have it both ways by the studio, to create animated films that were both appealing to children and enjoyable by adults by making fun of other properties, was just not a success. While the idea certainly has some merit, without committing the kind of universalized stories Disney often produces or to the kind of purely adult content made by the likes of *The Simpsons*, it just wasn't to last. Audiences could only take so many spoofs of varying quality before turning towards something with a bit more certainty about its identity.

Independent animated films have certainly had their place in the medium over its seventy year history. However, few have had significant impact upon the way the medium is perceived, and because of the lack of funds and support, few have made significant contributions to the medium itself. Pre-2000, there simply wasn't much room for or interest in animation unless it came from a big, well-known studio with the resources to make it into a worthwhile spectacle. Even after 2000, the difficulties in making animated feature films persisted, even as smaller and less well-known studios began to gather the resources to make animated television and short films. However, the 21st century, with the advent of the internet, crowd-funding, and other innovations, has allowed some of these smaller productions to gain a foothold. Although foreign films like *Persepolis*, *The Secret of Kells*, and *Spirited Away* often take the spotlight when looking at animated films not made by Disney or Dreamworks, the 21st century nonetheless does provide a number of interesting offerings. And they carve out a unique space in the medium, one that Disney and its ilk would never even consider.

Foremost among these is *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, released in 2012. The film is quite different from standard American animation, taking the medium to uncharted places in both content and style. Drawn neither in the colorful hand-drawn style traditional American animation nor in the rounded 3D of modern computer-animated films, *It's Such a Beautiful Day* is presented in a deceptively, strikingly simple stick figure format, primarily in black and white. Though only running for just over sixty minutes, the film manages to fit a story about mental illness, the absurdity and mundanity of normal life, and the inevitability of death into that brief runtime, and does it with a surprising deftness and thoughtfulness. Though some might consider it a short, the segments of *It's Such a Beautiful Day* are intended to be viewed together and received a theatrical run, so it is categorized here as a film.

As mentioned, *It's Such a Beautiful Day*'s primary claims to fame are its complex, adult-themed story and unusual and evocative animation style. The dark humor and philosophical musings present in the film are a far cry from the kind of content in typical animated fare; contemplation and then acceptance of

death not being the most family-friendly of central themes. The primary character, Bill, deals with mental illness with dark wit and a questioning of the absurdity of life—that oh-so adult problem of metaphysical dread combined with the physical failings of imperfect biology.

> "Most of It's Such a Beautiful Day takes place in Bill's mind, as it slowly falls apart. What exactly is happening to Bill? For most of the movie we're as confused about that as he is. Bill imagines a monstrous fish head feeding on his skull, and soon the guy at the bus stop next to him has the head of a cow. But the effect is a harrowing and darkly comic portrait of the unraveling of a mind, whether through psychosis, or, as others will relate to it, senile dementia: As the story winds down, every last moment of Bill's life, both mundane and magical, slips away from him, and it becomes not unlike the ticking down of our own lives."[177]

This is not the subject material of a children's film. No effort is made to hide the nature of the content. No attempts are made to mitigate the chilling effect of what's occurring. And despite being a niche production, it nonetheless garnered considerable praise for its mature tone, arresting visuals, and nuanced philosophical treatment of difficult issues.[178] Commenting on the film, *The Chicagoist*'s Steven Pate points out the wonder in the film, amazed by what stick figures can do, asking "are stick figures supposed to make me feel this way?" while contemplating the role the animation plays in the effectiveness of the film.[179] In fact, the fact that the film uses stick figures, and hand-drawings of bizarre images, is ultimately what lends the film much of its potency. It reaches past the mundanities of our own perception into a world of representation and bizarreness that conveys the absurdity of human existence in a way that no 'real' image truly could. This speaks powerfully to the capability of animation to deal with issues and portray stories and ideas of all kinds effectively, using the stylization and explicitly representational elements of the medium to get at something that photorealism can't quite access in the same way. The fact that the film was made largely by one man, independent director and animator Don Hertzfelt, that its primary release was over the internet, and that a blu-ray version of the film was later made because of overwhelming crowd-funding support speaks to opportunities the modern era creates for those willing and able to take advantage of them, as well.[180] This circumvention of the traditional studio system, and its ability to take animation to

[177] Wickman, Forrest. "The Best Animated Film of the Year." Slate.com (2012). http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2012/12/10/don_hertzfeldt_s_it_s_such_a_beautiful_day_the_best_animated_movie_of_the.html

[178] Pate, Steven. "Don Hertzfeldt at the Music Box." Chicagoist (2012). http://chicagoist.com/2012/02/28/cult_animator_don_hertzfeldt_at_the.php. DeFore, John. "It's Such a Beautiful Day: Film Review." The Hollywood Reporter (2012). http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/its-such-a-beautiful-day-film-review-376725

[179] Pate, Chicagoist, *Music Box*.

[180] Merry, Stephanie. "Watch online: 'The Girl,' 'Amor Cronico' and 'It's Such a Beautiful Day'." The Washington Post (2014). https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/going-out-guide/wp/2014/11/14/watch-online-the-girl-amor-

places it had rarely been before, indicates both how versatile the medium can truly be, and how limiting a well-established system with set avenues for success can be. *It's a Beautiful Day* may not have grossed millions at the box office or earned any Oscars, but it does stand as a testament of what is possible in our era.

The animated short may have declined in prominence, but it still has its place in modern era. During the period between the fifties and the present, both theatrical shorts and other animated short films were in short supply. However, the 21st century has slowly brought about the return of the animated short film. In particular, Pixar Animation has produced animated short films to go along with their feature films since *Toy Story* in 1995.[181] Though Disney-Pixar account for the majority of modern theatrical animated shorts, Warner Bros has also occasionally produced new shorts to accompany their films as well as drawing on their sizable library of older short films.[182] Outside of theatrical short films, however, the ubiquity of animation tools and internet distribution in the 21st century has allowed independent film makers, often amateurs, to create their own content without dealing with the larger studios and a complicated production process. The length and relative lack of complexity have served the independent animators of the 21st century well, without the restrictions that the massive amount of time and money required for longer projects present, although some independent creators have managed to leverage themselves into the creation of longer works. Independent short-work like this includes *Red vs. Blue*, *RWBY*, and *Bravest Warriors*, along with many others. Demographically, these independent animated works tend to go all over the place. Some are clearly for children, some are clearly for adults, and many bridge the gap in between. Overall, they serve an important and interesting role in the new paradigm the information age has created for animation.

One of the most notable theatrical shorts of the 21st century, both for its technical impact on the medium and for the nature of its content, is Disney's 2012 short, *Paperman*. The story is about a young man working at a boring desk job, staring out the window and wishing for more. Out of the blue, he makes an inexplicable connection with a stranger leading to an attempt to contact her and, finally, a culminating meeting. *Paperman* is an "urban fairytale" that speaks to the connections humans make with people and the beauty that can be found in life, even amidst drudgery.[183] The film is created in an unusual mixture of traditional and computer animation termed 'final line advection' which allows for the easy drawing of soft

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cronico-and-its-such-a-beautiful-day/. Chavez, Danette. "Get Involved, Internet: Fund a Blu-ray release of Don Hertzfeldt's World Of Tomorrow." AVClub (2015). http://www.avclub.com/article/get-involved-internet-fund-blu-ray-release-don-her-222556

[181] Pixar Short Films Web Site. http://www.pixar.com/short_films/home

[182] "More 3D Looney Tunes Shorts On The Way." ComingSoon.net (2011). http://www.comingsoon.net/movies/news/78492-more-3d-looney-tunes-shorts-on-the-way

[183] Valdez, Eva. "Compilation of Backstage Interviews with Oscar-winning Director of the Short PAPERMAN, John Kahrs." Screenslam.com (2013)

curves never before possible with computer animation, and mixes a combination of those soft lines with black and white coloration and the "expressiveness of 2D drawing immersed with the stability and dimensionality of CG."[184] This results in a beautiful, expressive, and visually arresting art style that mixes the best elements of computer animation with the best of traditional animation, leading to the development of a still in-progress feature film.[185] Performed largely without voicing, save for some reactive noises on the parts of the protagonists, the film represents a move forward both for animation as whole and for short films in particular; it was also the first Disney short film to win the Academy Award for the subject since 1969.[186] However, the film is most significant for its subject matter: A love story between adults. Although the content isn't 'mature' in the sense that children should be kept from watching it, it does depict two adult characters pursuing love, rather than focusing on younger characters. Of course, many Disney films focus primarily on adults despite their intended younger audience, but many of these films focus on younger adults, and none are contextualized in a modern world primarily relatable to adults. The drudgery of office work, the intangible connection made between strangers, the symbolism present in the use of paper in the film, even the black and white city environs are not suited primarily for a younger audience. Although the short is certainly watchable by children, its primary level of appreciation is for an older audience. The style, technical achievements, and content of the short would influence Disney's later work, continuing the momentum of the resurgence of theatrical shorts by major studios.

Animated television has played the most dynamic role in American animation in the 21st century. Though some might say the heyday of 'cartoons' is the nineties, the explosion of adult-themed television shows exploring a variety of settings says otherwise. There has been considerable proliferation of animated television, although the networks with the largest proportions of popular animated creations have remained Carton Network and Nickelodeon. And each provides us with several offerings giving us a new view into the shape animated television in the 21st century.

Cartoon Network's first offering to be listed here is *Adventure Time*, a children's show with an unusual tone and a penchant for the utterly bizarre which skirts the edge of the adult viewership while still remaining consistently enjoyable to younger viewers. The show also deals with a variety of complex and controversial subjects with a light and careful touch, allowing older viewers to appreciate and think about

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[184] "Trying to Woo Animators, Disney Accidentally Invents 'The Paperman Method'." The Fast Company (2013). http://www.fastcompany.com/3006276/open-company/trying-woo-animators-disney-accidentally-invents-paperman-method. Sarto, Dan. "Inside Disney's New Animated Short Paperman." Animation World Network (2012) http://www.awn.com/animationworld/inside-disney-s-new-animated-short-paperman

[185] Taylor, Drew. "Disney CEO Bob Iger Says There Are No Current Plans For Hand Drawn Animation – But What Does He Really Mean?." IndieWire (2013). http://www.indiewire.com/2013/03/disney-ceo-bob-iger-says-there-are-no-current-plans-for-hand-drawn-animation-but-what-does-he-really-mean-101024/

[186] "42nd Academy Awards Winners - Oscar Legacy - Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences." Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (1970). https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1970

the ideas being portrayed. Alternately utterly ridiculous and absurd and thoughtful on the roles of friendship, imagination, love, loss, gender roles, and recreation, *Adventure Time* is emblematic of an important shift in 'children's' animation in the 21st century.

       Adventure Time is part of a notable return on television to the use of traditional animation, after animation as a whole had transitioned largely to CGI during the early 2000s. Though animation in film would continue to remain largely computer animated, *Adventure Time* precipitated a shift in television back to traditional animation. This was made possible by an increasing tendency to rely on studios outside the United States, often in South Korea, to produce the animation more cheaply.[187] *Adventure Time* has been especially successful with teens and young adults, as well as with the intended audience of younger kids. This popularity has allowed the show to have an effect on similar stories, from animation to comic books, in terms of the tone, aesthetic, and themes.[188] Specifically, *Adventure Time*, deemed to have a 'comic book' feel and heavily influenced by various science fiction and fantasy sources, has led to an outgrowth of "fantasy epics with colorful characters and…worlds heavy on the talking animals."[189] *Adventure Time* is one of the first major examples of a trend in modern television animation: A children's show that brings in and maintains an older audience because of a complex overarching plot, and a world far deeper and darker than it seems at first blush. With *Adventure Time*, the setting is 'the continent of Ooo', a setting that exists a thousand years after 'The Great Mushroom War', a cataclysmic event that is heavily implied to have been a nuclear apocalypse.[190] The show is described as "candyland on the surface and dark underneath", and that idea, of having a big secret that fundamentally changes the way the world is perceived has become much more prevalent in recent years.[191] However, the show never beats you over the head with this reality, and it fundamentally portrays a message of hope, and a world in which things have become better through the efforts of its inhabitants. Outside of the metanarrative and world-building, the show also examines gender and other thorny topics in a unique and subversive way. This includes an atypically even mix of male and female characters in all roles, gender-fluid characters and an atypical use of gendered design elements, as well as homoerotic subtext between major characters.[192] These elements are not usually incorporated in

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[187] Goldstein, Rich. "This Is How an Episode of Cartoon Network's 'Adventure Time' Is Made." The Daily Beast (2013). http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/12/19/this-is-how-an-episode-of-cartoon-network-s-adventure-time-is-made.html

[188] MacDonald, Heidi. "The Indie Comics Animation Gold Rush." Slate (2015). http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/11/indie_cartoonists_find_paychecks_at_adventure_time_regular_show_and_bojack.html

[189] McDonnell, Chris. *Adventure Time: The Art of Ooo*, New York City: Abrams Books, 2014, 32. MacDonald, *Indie Comics*

[190] Clark, Noelene. "'Adventure Time': Post-Apocalyptic 'Candyland' Attracts Adult Fans." Los Angeles Times (2012). http://herocomplex.latimes.com/tv/adventure-time-post-apocalyptic-candyland-attracts-adult-fans/

[191] Ibid

[192] Jane, Emma. "'Gunter's a Woman?!'— Doing and Undoing Gender in Cartoon Network's Adventure Time." Children and Media 9 (2): 231–247

children's television, seen as 'too adult' for the consumption of young impressionable individuals. Thus, the fact of their inclusion marks the show as noteworthy for adults, as well as normalizes things for kids in ways that are not typically expected or permitted. The combination of all these elements—the unusual world and concept, the innovative art-style and production method, and the inclusion of various elements unusual for children's media serve to make *Adventure Time* more than 'just a cartoon'. The creators set out to make a show that feels "natural" and not "cartoony and shrill," and they succeeded.[193] However, the show does air on Cartoon Network as a children's series. It also undoubtedly includes children's humor and storylines. Though it does lean towards the dark and subversive from time to time, it undoubtedly remains a kid's show. It demonstrates that with each step the medium takes, the true length of the path is only illuminated further.

Cartoon Network manages to get another show on this final list, this time with its explicitly adult-oriented 'Adult Swim' program. Adult Swim in and of itself is worthy of note, as it represents an explicit attempt by the network to screen animated programming for adults. However, *The Boondocks* in particular demonstrates an alternative to both standard adult animated programming and standard children's programming. Though technically it could still be designated as a 'comedy', the show is a far sharper and more pointed satire than any other animated television show before or since, and the humor tends to be cynical and dark. It's also from less of an 'everyman' perspective than most analogous television shows such as *Family Guy, The Simpsons, American Dad,* or even *South Park*, coming from the perspective young black kids in the *midst* of the kind of typical 'American suburban paradise' that many of those shows depict. This leads to a far stronger dramatic and emotional element than is often present in other similar shows, and the racial tension and sharp criticism of the 'American way' has led to considerable controversy. *The Boondocks* is intended to push the envelope on what's acceptable in American animated programming, and largely succeeds.

The initial conceit—black family moves from the inner city into an 'idyllic' suburban area, inhabited mostly by privileged white people—drives most of the drama and action in the show. The characters' struggle in that context is underwritten by a mature subtext of racism, social justice, income inequality, and other difficult issues many adults themselves would rather avoid. The show intentionally makes waves: "Fans and critics of "The Boondocks" loved and hated [The Boondocks] for the same reasons: its cutting-edge humor and unapologetic, sometimes unpopular, views on various issues, including race, politics, the war on terrorism and the Sept. 11 attacks."[194] Some of this drama and thematic subtext is shown in the fights that break out in the show, with different characters from different contexts showing

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[193] Bustillos, Maria. "It's Adventure Time." The Awl (2014). http://theholenearthecenteroftheworld.com/
[194] Robinson, Bryan. "The Boondocks: Not the N&#@$%a Show." ABC News (2005). http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=1270410

their various influences in their fighting, often with an anime-inspired choreography.[195] This is reflected in Huey, a ten year old boy who has been forced to grow up too fast and who has dedicated himself to radical social justice movements. Constantly mocked and degraded for his seriousness and intense focus upon larger issues, he stands as the audiences' main proxy into the show. Huey's younger brother, Riley, furthers the conscious thematic reflection, as he is portrayed rebelling against expectations and needs placed upon him, trying to emulate heroes from within the tradition of 'Gangster Rap'. These two alternate interpretations of black culture, mirrored against a stereotypical white middle-class lifestyle, slice incisively into a wide array of issues, especially into the place of African-American people and culture within the United States. To add weight to the themes and more accurately reflect the situation, the characters use numerous profanities, including racial slurs often seen as taboo.[196] All in all, the show cannot possibly be considered something intended for kids: Few parents would accept the amount of profanity, biting satire of well-respected figures, and exposition of cultural assumptions that *The Boondocks* engages in. During its airtime, it was one of the most adult American animated shows on television.

However, fundamentally, *The Boondocks*, despite its ambition and many differences from typical adult programming, still falls into the same broad categories as the majority of American adult animation. Even if the humor is darker, even if the satire is more biting and more incisive, even if it's from a not often explored perspective, *The Boondocks* still falls into the same category of 'satirical humorous social commentary', even with some drama and action. The complete lack of dramatic adult animation, televised or otherwise, continues with *Boondocks*, even if the glimmers of something new are there.

The last show on our list, unfortunately, also fails to meet the criteria of 'purely dramatic adult animation'. However, it comes closer than anything else. *The Legend of Korra* succeeds where many others have failed, creating an adult-themed show that does not rely on satire or pure humor for its value. Although the show ran on Nickelodeon, and was ostensibly for younger viewers, it quickly distinguished itself with mature philosophical themes, dynamic and complex character development, a nuanced tone cognizant of its audience and accepting of their intelligence. This newness and adultness was actually quite difficult for the network to deal with, leading to an incredibly mired and complicated release.[197] Though *The Legend of Korra* has numerous flaws, it remains one of the most daring explorations of uncharted territory yet, and will hopefully provide the template for future works.

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[195] McGruder, Aaron. Interview with Bill Hutchens. The News Tribune (2005). Archived from the original on 2007-03-01

[196] "Boondocks Cartoon Stirs Controversy." Fox News (2005). http://www.foxnews.com/story/2005/07/18/boondocks-cartoon-stirs-controversy.html

[197] Konietzko, Bryan (20 November, 2014). http://bryankonietzko.tumblr.com/post/103173899927/a-few-preemptive-words-about-episode-408

The Legend of Korra (2012), set in the world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, an acclaimed but more kid-focused show which aired on Nickelodeon several years prior, represents a major shift in animated television. With a title character who breaks numerous boundaries, a diverse cast of characters, a complex world, and complex plotting, *The Legend of Korra* has all the ingredients of an excellent dramatic, action-oriented series.

Though the show also benefits from beautiful animation, multi-cultural influences, and variety of other things, most important are the themes, the characters, and the narratives that contextualize them. The show demonstrates its maturity through the nuanced exploration of character everything from personal conflicts to ideological underpinnings. There are numerous examples: The title character experiences explicit PTSD and is revealed as bisexual, a character is killed by having the air visibly sucked from their lungs, people are put into concentration camps, and so on. The most obvious examples are the villains, with each one taking their particular ideology to a dangerously unreasonable extreme. Equality is essential, but sameness is not. Balance and faith are important, but they cannot overcome the needs of human beings. Freedom is necessary, but not at the cost of all concepts of society, reciprocity, or decency. And order is important: But it cannot be justify quashing all those standing in the way. Ultimately, the show trusts the viewer to resolve the dissonance between understanding someone's view and disagreeing with their methods, both humanizing them and showing how they came to cause so much pain and destruction.[198] These are simplifications, and each ideology and individual representing it is explored with a care and nuance that accounts for their personhood as well as their beliefs. Through this, it has also explored various social issues—from racial and class tensions to human sexuality—in a way highly uncommon for 'children's' television. And in all that, the characters react organically, growing and changing according to their circumstances in ways cartoon characters rarely do.

All of this has led to a massively positive reception, as well as a sizeable viewership.[199] *The Legend of Korra* has been compared to *Game of Thrones*, the iconic works of Hayao Miyazaki, and other famous works as representative of something new and powerful in the medium.[200] The show has been described as "delivering loads of character development, world building, socio-political commentary, and heart-racing action, all presented with beautifully smooth animation and impeccable voice acting", and has been

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[198] Hoffman, Mike. "Four Ways The Legend of Korra Respected Its Younger Viewers." The Escapist (2015). http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/moviesandtv/12836-Legend-of-Korra-Wasn-t-Subversive-It-Was-Respectful

[199] Kondolojy, Amanda. "Debut of Nickelodeon's 'The Legend of Korra' Draws 4.5 Million Viewers." TVbytheNumbers (2012). http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2012/04/17/debut-of-nickelodeons-the-legend-of-korra-draws-4-5-million-viewers/129568/

[200] Bernardin, Marc. "Legend of Korra, Season 3: TV Review." The Hollywood Reporter (2014). http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/legend-korra-season-3-tv-715519

characterized as "the smartest cartoon on TV."[201] Forbes even called the show "the world's first animated television drama", a comment that obviously holds considerable weight for this thesis.[202] The show is seen as subversive, well-written, and first and foremost, surprisingly adult. Not a kid's superhero story, but including action and heroism, not a comedy, but including comedy, the show demonstrates the potential for stories outside of the existing paradigm for animation. Enjoyable by adults and by kids, thought provoking and funny and entertaining at the same time, *The Legend of Korra* is a new breed.

However, the show still fails to completely leave its roots behind. It still aired on Nickelodeon, a children's network. It still includes humor clearly intended for younger viewers. It still pulls back from some of the violence and true human darkness that many adult series depict, despite presenting similar situations. It was still marketed primarily towards children and teenagers. And it still leaves many of its truly adult moments behind the scenes, to be picked out by the adults and glazed over by the kids. Despite being as close to an influential adult animated dramatic production as the medium has, it still is fundamentally presented as a cartoon. The medium is still searching for the ambitious success that will take the medium over that final step into adult animation not relegated to the humorous and satirical.[203] Animation has not yet superseded cartoons.

A Conclusion: The Past and the Future

And overall, it is clear why that is. Though there were certainly limiting factors facing the medium that come from its nature—the need for artistic stylization due to limited budgeting and time being the most significant—the majority of factors playing into the perception attached to animation in the United States are contextual. These are wide ranging and complex. They include origins in vaudeville and other lowbrow humor, as well as the prominence of Walt Disney and the success of *Snow White*, all shaping the growth of the medium from the beginning. These realities would be cemented by a continued focus on children from major studios, particularly Disney, which quickly grew powerful enough to set trends in the medium. Even in television and animated shorts, the family focus often remained, though with a more satirical tone. These factors were contingent—no one could have known that Disney's particular brand of storytelling would appeal to so many for so long, and that it would have such far-reaching effects upon the medium. This trajectory was maintained through a combination of momentum and conscious choice, with both the

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[201] Sava, Oliver. "Review: The Legend Of Korra: 'Into The Void'/'Venom Of The Red Lotus'." The A.V. Club (2014). http://www.avclub.com/tvclub/legend-korra-voidvenom-red-lotus-208466. Thill, Scott. "Why Legend of Korra Is the Smartest Cartoon on TV." Wired (2012). http://www.wired.com/2012/06/legend-of-korra-finale/

[202] Barr, Merrill. "Has 'The Legend Of Korra' Created A New Television Genre?" Forbes (2013). http://www.forbes.com/sites/merrillbarr/2013/11/23/has-the-legend-of-korra-created-a-new-television-genre/#2df464a62311

[203] Robinson, Joanna. "How a Nickelodeon Cartoon Became One of the Most Powerful, Subversive Shows of 2014." Vanity Fair (2014). http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/12/korra-series-finale-recap-gay-asami

overwhelming weight of decades of success pressuring a maintenance of the status quo and a profits-focused studio culture discouraging experimentation. And even when change did occur, as it did in television, it was not complete: The limitation of adult television to satirical humor demonstrates the strictures still in place. Film has grown even less, with the net for individual films simply broadening as studios try to draw in all audiences simultaneously—a strategy that can lead to dilution. Compared to the content diversity offered in Japan, American animation seems barely to have grown.

But American animation still represents an opportunity. Although animation certainly does have its idiosyncrasies because of its unique place between visual art and film, that does not preclude mature storytelling suitable for adults. Simply doing what is easy, what is traditional, is not enough: No art has ever benefitted from people only doing the same as those before them. Other mediums, from live action film to the now universally touted novel, have gone from being seen as 'inferior' mediums for certain audiences to being something appreciated by all—film was 'inferior to books', novels were a 'female thing', and so on.[204] Animation can do the same. Although its history, and the stigma of being a 'children's thing', have prevented it from truly breaking out of its shell, it has demonstrated its potential. Shows like *The Legend of Korra* and *The Boondocks*, films like *The Incredibles* and *WALL-E*, have shown that the medium can function as serious storytelling and art. Public preconceptions about its nature and artistic worthiness and unambitious corporate complacency have encouraged stagnation; but with the advent of new technology and new methods of distribution, that can change. Despite the obstructions, some productions— *It's Such a Beautiful Day*, *Adventure Time*, *Paperman*—have pushed boundaries and shown the medium's promise. The journey has not been simple; it has not been straightforward. Maturity and circumspection in one place does not necessarily translate to another, and great achievements are sometimes left by the wayside. The medium has been 'just for children' for too many years for change to be easy.

But the journey is not done. Animation has untapped potential to use the stylization, the expressiveness and color, the freedom of movement and action and absurdity, to do so many things. It has the potential to tell stories that are dramatic and dark, salacious and romantic. It has not yet had that opportunity, but someday, it will. Animation has changed greatly over the past century and a half, and it will only continue to grow and mature as the 21st century continues. By its end, it will look quite different. And perhaps it will become commonplace to use the word 'animation', rather than 'cartoons.'

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[204] Poague, Leland. "Literature vs. Cinema: The Politics of Aesthetic Definition." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* (1976) 75-76. Donovan, Josephine. "Women and the Rise of the Novel: A Feminist-Marxist Theory", *Signs* (1991) Vol. 16 No. 3 p. 441

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