Animation is a Medium, Not a Genre:

A Chronicled Exploration of the Changing Perceptions Towards Western Animation

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There is a stigma amongst Western audiences towards the nature of cartoons in the entertainment industry of Hollywood. To many, animations are solely for children, believing that it is a **genre** made for infants and that there is nothing to gain from them apart from mindless distraction - but that isn't the case. Particularly, the use of word **genre** is misleading here – which is something that will be discussed towards the end of the paper. The following essay will attempt to examine and challenge this mindset, delving into the lows and highs of the animated industry in Hollywood, starting from its mainstream inception in the early 1900's, right up until today. Split into four distinct chapters, the essay will dissect three different time periods of the last century – early 20th century, mid-to-late 20th century and modern day – and will end with a short closing chapter to tie it all together. Each of these periods encapsulates a defining turn in the evolution of Western animation, resulting in new standards and practices that left lasting impressions on the entirety Hollywood. Through examining the politics and happenings that played out over the past hundred years, one might gain insight as to why the capabilities for mature animated features are still in question today.

"Are You Ready, Kids?" – The famous opening line heard in every episode of the long running cartoon series, "SpongeBob SquarePants" (1999-Present)

Chapter 01 – Hollywood & The Hays Code

To begin the discussion of this era in animation and cinema, it is necessary to first establish the political happenings that were occurring in and around Hollywood during the early 1900's. Particularly, it is important to first delve into what was known as the Motion Picture Production Code, more commonly called as the Hays Code. This was a series of industry guidelines self-imposed upon Hollywood in the early 20th century. The term Hays Code was taken from a man named Will H. Hays, who was the president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)[1]. Under his leadership the company adopted the Code in 1930 and began rigorously enforcing it in 1934 all the way through to its dismissal in 1968. The code banned the showing of anything and everything that could be considered undignified; including, but not limited to, sex, drugs, profanity, realistic violence, and even mocking or badmouthing the clergy. It also heavily discouraged the broadcasting of certain images such as active surgery or a married couple in bed. The alternative would have been government involvement and state guidelines, which could have led to a downpour of messy laws that could be changed, altered, or proven contradictory to each other. Ultimately, for sake of ease and control, Hollywood chose self-regulation. (Abreu, 2021)

The purpose of the code was to re-establish Hollywood's image. During prior years, the industry was riddled with scandal, including the Roscoe Arbuckle trials and the murder of actor William Desmond Taylor. As such, the MPAA hired journalist Joseph Breen as Hollywood's chief film censor and it was with his hiring that the Hays Code was truly solidified. He strictly enforced the rules of the code, with no film of the time being allowed to screen without his stamp of approval, and hefty fines being dished out to those who disobeyed. It quickly became public knowledge that Breen was in fact, an incredibly biased person, which can in most part be attributed to his tough Catholic upbringing. He was often accused of anti-Semitism (Doherty, 2007), and this bias is prominently shown in his censorship of Warner Bros producing a film on Nazi concentration camps. They would eventually go on to create anti-Nazi propaganda films, entirely due to and inspired by real world events that preceded WWII - in this case the film *"Confessions of a Nazi Spy"* (1939) was inspired by the FBI's prosecution of a hidden Nazi spy syndicate (Holden, 2008). Breen's opinion would have him go so far as to warn filmmakers to avoid the topic completely, claiming:

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[1] Now called the Motion Picture Association

"[t]here is a strong pro-German and anti-Semitic feeling in this country…and while those who are likely to approve of an anti-Hitler picture may think well of such enterprise, they should keep in mind that millions of Americans might think otherwise." (Kirle, 2005).

Obviously, many filmmakers were negatively impacted by Breen's rule, even big names in the industry had their scripts altered, including Alfred Hitchcock when he attempted to adapt Daphne du Maurier's novel *"Rebecca"* (1938). Hitchcock would have to alter details of the plot for it to be up to code[2] (Varnam, 2018). In an interview for the Australian Centre for Moving Image (ACMI), curator Chelsey O'Brien highlights such creators (Lewis, 2021). She names Dorothy Arzner, an openly LGBTQ+ director and the only working female in Hollywood at the time. Many of her films engaged with topics such as the male gaze and sexuality, but due to Breen's position of power, she found herself being pushed out of the industry into early retirement due to her films being deemed too radical and unappealing under the conservative Hays Code rulings. O'Brien states:

"I think that with the Hays Code, one of the things the film industry just assumed was that its audience was white and the straight and only white, straight males… They would do anything that appealed to that audience base, really…" (Lewis, 2021)

The PCA seal that was shown before every picture they approved (Saunders, 2015)

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[2] However, the plot would become fully realised in the 2020 adaptation with the same name
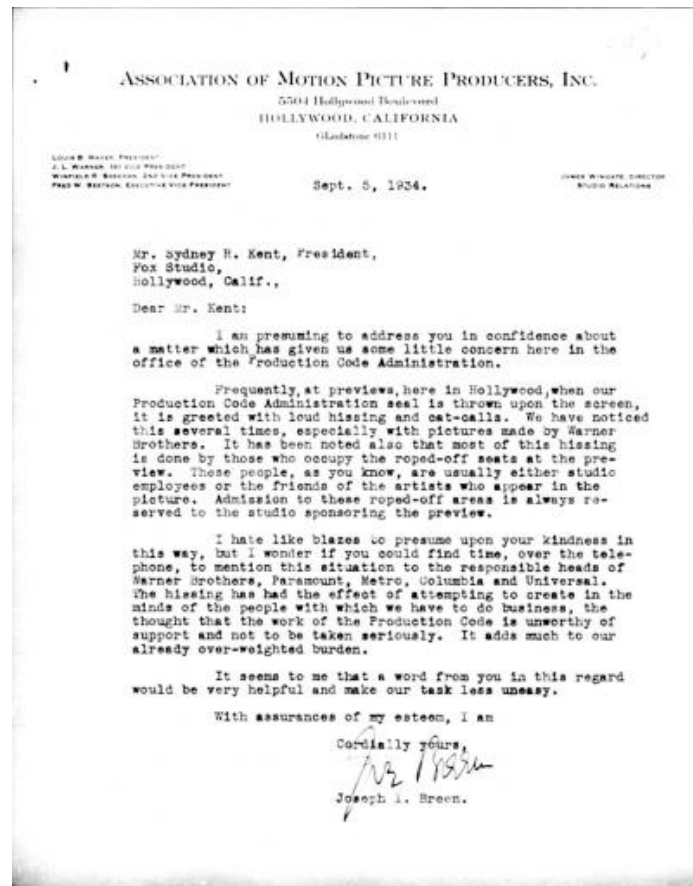
Letter to Fox president Sidney Kent, signed by Joseph Breen, pertaining to the fact that the PCA logo was being hissed at during movie previews (Flinders University, 1934)

The purpose of beginning with the highlighting of the Hays Code is to give a frame of reference as to just how radical an impact it had on the industry. It influenced all of Hollywood, meaning it wasn't just live action pictures that were affected. Any form of film written within the walls of Hollywood was at risk of a Breen re-draft, which includes the animated antics of cartoon cinema. Animations rose in prominence during the early 1930's, making their mainstream debut as nothing more than five-minute appetisers before the main course that was the live action picture; equivalent to the space that movie trailers take up in the modern cinema experience. Many of these cartoons revolved around a comedic gag of some sort, typically anthropomorphic animals getting drunk and/or naked, such as the classic *"Woos Whoopee"* (1930) – which is an interestingly odd choice of subject matter given the prudence of the early 20th century. This era of cinema is often referred to as the Pre-Code era; being anything made before Breen's inauguration in 1934, all the way back to roughly 1929 when sound was first introduced to film. As previously noted, this era was notorious for its

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explicit subject matter and its lack of any real regulation; all of which is to say that interestingly, cartoons were originally, and solely, marketed to adults.

As a part of the kingdom that is Hollywood, animations would change drastically under Hays Code rule, and an excellent showcase of this is through the changing representation of the iconic animated character Betty Boop. Max Fleischer first brought the character to life in 1930, appearing in several animated series over her on screen tenure, the first of which was *"Talkartoons"* (1930-1939), a series of 42 cartoons produced by Fleischer Studios in its early years. In tandem with everything else produced at the time, Betty Boop was portrayed as a highly promiscuous character, with animations featuring her being stripped of clothing, getting high on laughing gas and even having sexual relations with an anthropomorphic dog[3]. The point being, Betty Boop became a reoccurring symbol for the Pre-Code Era of Hollywood and her prominence has slowly revitalised itself over the past few years, though not to the same level it once was. For a long period of time however, her entire characterisation was lost; this time obviously being the established Hays Code era. She became the exact opposite of what she once was; gone were the boundary pushing depravities and in came the submissive and docile housewife figure (Gurney, 2020). The change in tone can be recognised in her changed character design and even in the production titles she appeared in, with her Pre-Code era appearances harbouring names such as the famous *"Minnie the Moocher"* (1932), only for her to later star in animated shorts such as *"House Cleaning Blues"* (1937). At one point she even had to introduce her replacement "Sally Swing", who would steal the spotlight from Betty, but would never reach the same levels of fame or appeal (Gurney, 2020). What ultimately arose from this was an era of enforced traditionalism. Conservatism crushed character, and this lasted a further three decades before any form of change occurred.

Chelsey O'Brien once again makes comment of this, lamenting:

> *"When you think about characters like Betty Boop, who started out as this incredible flapper who was sexually unrestricted and incredibly interesting, but later due to the Code goes on to become this sort of conservative house wife figure and basically writes herself out of production… On one hand it changes the industry in a negative way because it means it's less progressive. But then on the other hand it's interesting because it pushes writers and directors to really challenge it."* (Lewis, 2021)

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[3] She was, in fairness, originally designed as being an anthropomorphic dog herself, but that was later changed over the course of several productions (Fleischer Studios, n.d.)

Comparison of Betty Boop's clothing design changes between eras (Gurney, 2020).

New Betty Boop model sheet with more conservative styling & proportions (Gurney, 2020)

Fleischer had an immense impact on the animation world, and as such it is sad to see the Code having such negative repercussions for him. He was the inventor of a technique called rotoscoping; a method/device that had animators create frames from live-action film footage, and to then use them as guides for the movements of their own cartoon characters. This allowed for much more fluid motion in their animations, which in turn allowed for them to be more engaging and to prosper even during Hollywood's silent period. The rotoscoping patent was approved in 1917, and in the times before cartoons were stiff and unlifelike, but Fleischer's invention led him, and many others, to create much more lively and dynamic pictures (Vox, 2019) such as *"Gulliver's Travels"* (1939). The reason for bringing this up is to highlight the fact that animators have been adapting to and reinventing the industry for decades, with the Hays Code now forcing filmmakers to creatively circumvent the new limitations set upon the industry. Going forward into this new era, animation will again change entirely with the rise of Walt Disney and his biggest challenger, Ralph Bakshi.

Chapter 02 – Disney V.S. Bakshi

Walt Disney, in line with the Hays Code, would go on to revolutionise the industry with his own rules for animation. He would trailblaze what many consider to be the Golden Age of animation, but in doing so would for decades damage the idea that cartoons can be marketed for adults and solely adults. Before delving into the following decades of animation, it would be foolish to not call attention to the strange paradox occurring at this time. The animation sector of Hollywood, in utilising creative thinking to side-step the Hays Code, would become so homogenous that it almost seems like creativity and newfound thinking had been entirely lost – just something to keep in mind. Additionally, having already established the conservative reality of the industry at this time, the following chapter will primarily focus on Ralph Bakshi, and his efforts to revitalise and challenge the status quo of the time.

Bakshi is a Palestinian-born American animator, director and producer. His family immigrated to the United States in 1939, where they made a home for themselves in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Bakshi claims to have fond memories of the place; much of who he is was shaped by it. He states:

> *"There was a vitality to Brownsville when I was growing up. My family was very poor, but we never felt poor. The community was very strong, especially the Jewish community. It was a very big neighbourhood. We got along with everyone. There were never any problems. There were Italians, Jews, Blacks, and eventually, Puerto Ricans all living together. The kids got to be free in the streets. I went to an all-boys school. The girls had their own separate high school. You couldn't mix us. The guys were too crazy."* (Smulewicz-Zucker, 2013)

Bakshi would create his own toys from broken wood crates, or search through rubbish bins for old and discarded comic books. The broken wood, chipped nails and faded colours would all go on to have a lasting impression on Bakshi and would prove to be a catalyst for the new breed of animations Bakshi would go on to create. In particular, the film *"Hey Good Lookin"* (1982) is a direct response to his experience with Brooklyn, with some of the characters, mainly Vinnie and Crazy Shapiro, being based on his childhood friends. His family would eventually move up to Washington D.C., where Bakshi now found himself in an entirely Black community. Though accepted into the community, the racial tensions of the time, in part, forced Bakshi and his family back to Brownsville, as there were those who feared that pro-segregation believers would riot should they discover that a white Jewish boy was attending a Black school. (Gibson & McDonnell, 2008)

While Bakshi has his fair share of real-world exposure, during an interview with YouTubers Cartoonist Kayfabe (2020), he also acknowledges to have been impacted by the stories and experiences of his college art teacher, Charles Allen. Charles was a Black cartoonist, who, during the WWII period, would ghost for several artists who were drafted at the time. Bakshi recalled how Charles would speak of his struggles as a Black man in America, which registered with him. These stories would go on to inspire the films *"Heavy Traffic"* (1973) and *"Coonskin"* (1975), two of Bakshi's best and most controversial creations in his filmography – which will later be explored.

Ralph Bakshi on the set of *"Cool World"* (1992)

Acknowledging Bakshi's history and upbringing is important when understanding how the man views the animation and cartooning industries of America, both then and now. Bakshi's moral rival is and has been Disney. He despised the man and the company; for the work they produced and the expectations they set. He found their work at the time to be tremendously *"tiring and boring and nothing new"* (Bakshi, 2008). The Disney style was formulaic, safe; a product of post-war America that craved magical escapism. The worlds were pristine fantasies, the characters were anthropomorphic ideals who never suffered real harm, the tone was PG and there was always a happy ending. This goes all the way back to 1937, with Disney's first mainstream release of *"Snow White and the Seven Dwarves"* (1937). And this

wasn't just Disney: *"Looney Tunes", "Tom & Jerry", "Mr.Magoo"* – A blueprint had been established across the entire industry at this time; and who could blame others for wanting to emulate Disney's success. Hollywood at the time was hazardous. The increasing commonality of the household television meant movie-goers were a dying breed. The only way to coerce them back to theatres were with giant visual spectacles that only the big screen could accommodate - think *"Cleopatra"* (1963) or *"2001: A Space Odyssey"* (1968). As a result, animation was forced to adapt to the small screen, and given the new rising fight for time slots and airtime, the formulaic approach to cartooning only increased as companies now had to produce content on a quick and competitive turnaround.

Frame from *"Snow White and the Seven Dwarves"* (1937)

This change in direction also cemented the notion that cartoons are strictly for children, or more accurately they must always be kid friendly. In large part due to the Hays Code disallowing anything provocative, cartoons were limited in what they could portray. Resigned to the conservative PG rating, animators turned their focus to creating stories that were little more than childish antics. It was a stigma that the medium could never seem to lose, and even today it remains prevalent. This is of course also owing to how Disney had ingrained itself into the psychology of American culture at the time. The incredible impact that Disney has had on young children is obvious and important and by no means unimpressive (Hailey, 2017),[4] but given how much of an overwhelming force he was, anyone who went against his

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[4] See also Paul wells' primary research in (1998, p.231-233) that provides an interesting deeper commentary.

rulings was automatically cast aside. The greatest divergences from this formula were the far in between family-orientated animations that would occasionally be released, and even they still played by Disney's rules. The biggest example of this at the time was the Hannah-Barbera produced *"The Flintstones"* (1960-1966), which often pushed boundaries for what was allowed in children's PG-rated television. Much like the cartoons of the Pre-Code era, the show was very much still a gag orientated comedy[5], such as using prehistoric animals as everyday household appliances, only this time around with a hard PG rating. These family-orientated cartoons borrowed attributes from more mature television genres, the primary of these being domestic sitcoms such as *"The Honeymooners"* (1955-1956). This structure allowed for storytelling that was familiar enough to adults that it could capture their intrigue, but also keeping it so that they didn't isolate themselves from child audiences. They enamoured themselves towards parents with witty jokes that went over children's heads but kept to the Disney child-centric formula by having all the episode's problems happily wrapped up in a neat bow before the end credits rolled – a perfect harmony. On paper, this approach could have vanguarded a return of adult animation, but the eventual and gradual decline of the show's popularity crushed any hope of this for the time being. Film scholar M. Keith Booker described it as:

"A widespread perception in the television industry that animated programs could succeed only as children's fares on Saturday mornings." (Booker, 2006)

A pregnant Wilma in *"The Flintstones"* (1960-1966), something that pushed the boundaries of children's television during the Hays Code era.

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[5] To its credit, the show did occasionally delve into heavier subject matter, such as an episode revolving around Betty and Barney's fertility issues.

This attempt at diverging from the norm quite confidently showcases that while animators of the time continued to create under Disney's umbrella, they would have to abide by the Disney structure. Even with the discontinuation of the Hays Code in 1968, Disney had heavily cemented itself into the minds of audiences and creators alike. Although the in-writing restrictions had been lifted, what remained were strongly rooted perceptions; principally that cartoons were almost exclusively for children. Furthermore, the demand for more content combined with decreasing budgets meant that animation quality rapidly declined. The industry felt stale, with ideas and even frame samples being reused to achieve rapid deadlines. What paralyzed many creators at this time was the belief that there was a need and requirement for money; the idea that you needed the best sound design, the best voice actors, the best marketing, or else ideas wouldn't sell. This fear was what stopped them from jumping ship and starting their own companies, where creativity, not money, was the principal aim. But Bakshi – he felt no such fear.

"So I started thinking about everything I hated about the cartoons I was looking at and why the studios should close down… There's no reason to keep stuff open that's boring… So unless you're doing something else, it has to go" (Bakshi, 2008)

Having worked for over a decade at Terrytoons, a New York based animation studio who produced cartoons for television and cinema, Bakshi was all too familiar with how the industry operated and yet he showed no hesitance when it came to doing what he wanted to do, the system be damned. In one fell swoop, Bakshi challenged everything the industry understood, and he began this revolt with the release of his first mainstream feature *"Fritz the Cat"* (1972). The film was based on an underground comic series of the same name by creator Robert R. Crumb. It was gritty and violent, but most importantly, it was an adult movie, showcasing adult themes, made to be shown to an adult audience. This was only made possible due to the dissolvement of the Hays Code in 1968, as by this point in time, very few filmmakers were following its rulings and with Breen's resignation in 1954, no one was willing to enforce the rules to the level that he once did. The film portrayed acts of violence, drug use, racism and sex and did so in a manner that was respectful to both the reality of the subject matter[6] and to the mature audience's sensibilities – which is to say that there was no sugar-coating or playing down the actualities of the film. The decision to not only depict

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[6] Controversial, depending on who you ask.

these topics, but to also branch out into independent filmmaking is derived from the experiences that lasted with Bakshi from his earlier years in Brooklyn:

> *"It was a very wonderful, wonderful, place to grow up. Because of the different ethnic qualities to it that I enjoyed very much. The freedom of the ghetto meaning that really there was nothing we had to live up to, and we found that very important. In other words, nobody was chasing me to be a lawyer, or a doctor or anything. You have that kind of freedom, you can afford to fail, and if you could afford to fail, you never worried. Too many people are worried about losing today, what people think of them; political correctness, that'll kill an artist."* (filmSCHOOLarchive, 2017)

When a viewer of Bakshi's work sees the animation style of *"Fritz the Cat"*, they may relate the quality of work to that of the Ashcan school of practice; paintings depicting the daily lives of New Yorkers from the more run-down areas of the city, portrayed in an unpolished impressionist style that reflected the subject matter (Any-Mation, 2019). An ode to the working-class people - very real, very earthly, very American – it harked back to images of the wooden crates Bakshi would salvage around Brooklyn. Style and real-world experience collide, accumulating in animation that goes completely against the grain of anything else created at the time, meaning no magic carriages and no fairy Godmothers, just brutal anthropology.

It's interesting then to see how he expands upon this style in a moving image based medium. The sound design alone could have a whole essay dedicated to itself; the voice acting was recorded out on the streets to add to the atmosphere of the film and the lack of reliance on a studio space and professional actors allowed Bakshi to circumvent the perceived issue of financial obstruction that caused creative impotence in so many other filmmakers. Budget restraints resulted in character lighting being non-existent, only incorporating line art and flat colours. This was balanced, however, with fantastic cinematography, including dramatic perspective shots, with fisheye lenses and very real, lived in and active environments. All this accumulated into a very gritty and worldly feel that perfectly suited the story being told. The film was an emancipation from the establishment; made that much sweeter by the fact that when credited, it was Ralph Bakshi himself who was named as creator of the film, not a studio and not a corporation. The revolution had begun!

Frame from *"Fritz the Cat"* (1972)

It is interesting then to acknowledge Bakshi's career after the success of *"Fritz the Cat"*, particularly focusing on the more vexing side of Bakshi's filmography. He took it upon himself to continue down the line of gritty R-rated films, and as previously stated towards the beginning of the chapter, most were controversially released to a polarising reception. One such example is the aforementioned *"Coonskin"* (1975), which even by the title alone causes one to question the boldness of the white Ralph Bakshi. It is important to note that the original names that Bakshi wanted for the film were *"Harlem Nights"* or *"Coonskin No More…"*, but those were shot down by a producer of the film for what was, and is presumed, to have been cash-grabbing, ticket-selling, contention-fuelling purposes. That being said, Bakshi has stated he still considers this film to be the best piece of work in his filmography (Gibson & McDonnell, 2008). The waves that Bakshi created tsunamied across not just the animation industry, but also upon the American political landscape. On the surface it may seem that Bakshi is nothing but another white man normalising, or even fetishising offensive content, but upon deeper inspection there may be more to it. It is important to touch upon this topic as going forward, the dissentions around his content might provoke an ideation that the Bakshi revolution did nothing but inspire creators to make rich off their phobic and insensitive world views, which was never Bakshi's intention. It is just as important to acknowledge the changes that go beyond what is shown on the screen, as further behind-the-scenes politics began to occur in response to Bakshi's creations; because to make waves, is to make enemies.

"Coonskin" (1975) is a crime film focusing on a group of anthropomorphic Black men as they take leadership of and radicalise a Black revolutionary group into becoming an organised crime racket. Just by looking at the name and character designs, the film outwardly looks to be a typical blaxploitation film, but the argument here is that these designs were used to make America aware of the stereotypical lens through which they view Black people. The character designs were ripped straight from other movies at that era, most principally the crows from Disney's *"Dumbo"* (1941)[7]. And Bakshi did his research - he hired multiple Black animators, songwriters and graffiti artists to work alongside him, he used actual footage from Harlem to create the world and backdrops of the film, and even did field research by interviewing people in Harlem (Cohen, 1997), resulting in him combining their stories into periodically occurring scenes where the viewer is taken away from the main plot to hear smaller story segments from characters uninvolved from the main narrative.

It was released to criticisms from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) over the content being nothing but racially offensive stereotyping, and given that Bakshi had begun writing this story while another of his boat-rocking films *"Heavy Traffic"* (1973) was still in production, CORE already had their sights on him. It is important to note that almost, if not all the CORE members who condemned Bakshi had not yet seen *"Coonskin"* and were basing it solely on its outward appearance. However, it was Eddie Smith, a member of the National Association for the Advancements of Coloured People (NAACP) who disagreed with CORE's charges, rebutting their claims, which resulted in a screening of the film to both parties ending in a (non-unanimous) consensus that yes, *"we thought the movie was very good, it is not a putdown of blacks. It is very positive."* (Farber, 1975).

Eddie saw *"Coonskin"* for what it was intended to be – a satire. It's important to understand that unlike a parody which pokes holes in the comedic idiocies of a chosen content, a satire uses humour, irony and exaggeration to **condemn** the subject matter that it portrays. The biggest example of this is the personification of America that takes the exaggerated shape of a beautiful and floozy, yet STD-riddled "Miss America", who would open her legs with intentions to seduce Black men, only for them to instead be kill them off with the bang of a gunshot and the whimpered final words of *"she got the clap…"* – an obvious metaphor of beautiful on the outside yet deadly on the inside; the Black experience of America.

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[7] Also noting that Pre-Code era features, including Betty Boop, were just as complicit in this type of stereotypical representation

Frame from *"Coonskin"* (1975) of Miss America, before killing the character in front of her

It begins to become clearer that Bakshi's intentions were not hate-fuelled, but rather a desire to highlight the injustices perpetrated by society (including Black-on-Black crime) towards the people that he has been surrounded by all his life and that are closest to him. The controversy of it being produced by a white man remains a relevant topic today; the mindset being something akin to *"is it my place to tell this story?"* or *"do I have the right to speak on their behalf?"*. It is worth noting that hiring people of colour in the industry at all was unheard of at the time, as such Bakshi could be considered a pioneer of sorts when hiring animators of colour, such as Brenda Lee Banks (who would later work on many big named shows such as *"The Simpsons"* (1989) and multiple Warner Bros titles)[8], to aid in creating *"Coonskin"*. While being wary of cultivating a white saviour narrative, it is fair to raise the question: if Bakshi hadn't used his position of privilege to open these doors, who else could or would have?

Carol Cooper, journalist of "The Village Voice" states:

> *"For me, "Coonskin" was the first time I had ever seen anyone with access to Hollywood's resources talk about racial hypocrisy in America in as clear and as unhypocritical a way as this film did."* (Cartoons Kick Ass - A History of Subversive Animation, 2000)

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[8] It was difficult to find an example for this as many animators of colour were not credited on the movie given the time of production, and many animators who were credited have no photos or descriptions that are easily available. Though from searching online, evidence does point to Brenda Lee Banks as having worked on the movie while remaining uncredited (Hurler, 2021).

It is the allowance for diversity that set the stage for what adult animation would become in later years. Bakshi would return to working with Terrytoons, who were now absorbed into the TV network CBS. Here he was given immense freedom in hiring and creating, resulting in the hit two season run of *"Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures"* (1987-1989). The team that created the show consisted of some of the most influential animators that have ever worked in the industry, including Bruce Timm, Andrew Stanton and Vicky Jensen, all of whom would go on to create landmark content such as *"Shrek"* (2001) and *"Batman: The Animated Series"* (1992-1995). They were given complete freedom to try and test ideas, and what stemmed from this was a collection of creators who could produce fresh and unique content. They created tongue and cheek comedies, satires and parodies, often taking jabs at the industry they work in. For example, an episode of *"Mighty Mouse"* ended with the phrase; *"But enough of this lying and hypocrisy, time for what television is really about"*. The show then cut to black and proceeded to roll the advertisements. This kind of meta, fourth-wall-breaking writing would set the stage for the kind of content produced in the modern era of animation, only with an even more heightened sense of maturity.

"I let the guys perform. And you know what, they perform above. They can't believe they're free and perform well. That's the major Bakshi secret. You hire talented guys and you tell'em not what to do. A lot of studios hire talented guys and tell'em how to do it. It's mindless!" (Bakshi, 2010)

Frame of Mighty Mouse in his hero costume (1987-1989)

Chapter 03 – Modernity & Cathartic Storytelling

The popularity of Mainstream adult animation for television was a slow build up over the next few decades, and cinematic animation was in its own ballpark. Cinemas began to regain popularity and have since been flooded with franchises and remakes of nostalgic movies, mostly from Disney as they continue to buyout and amalgamate all rival studios. It was the small screen where change truly took place, with the 80's and 90's seeing to the production of long-lasting adult animations like *"The Simpsons"* (1989-present) and *"Family Guy"* (1999-Present). While being allowed to break away from Hays Code mandates, the ever-familiar tropes remained present; from the sitcom blueprint to the laugh-out-loud antics of characters surviving what would be fatal injuries. There was still an attachment to what came before, though to their credit, the shows' success and longevity speak loudly. It was during the early 2000's that the concept of adult animations would begin to change to being what is known today. The network Adult Swim was created as being the adult equivalent to Cartoon Network, both being divisions of Warner Bros. Entertainment. The people behind Cartoon Network noticed how many adults were tuning into the channel and proposed the radical idea of Adult Swim to executives, which became a success, eventually growing its own cult following. Then came the 2010's when adult animation became much more mainstream, mostly due to the launch of streaming services like Netflix. These services became very popular with audiences, who now had access to hundreds of titles all in the one place, and they became popular with creators as they now didn't have to answer to advertisers who could complain about content or timeslots. From here, experimentation and budget beautifully collided, resulting in massive successes, and what is currently considered to be the definition of modern animated television. (Time, 2019)

Cartoons and animation, for both younger and older audiences, grew immensely in maturity and sensibility. Adult audiences in particular were treated to shows like *"Rick and Morty"* (2013-present) and *"BoJack Horseman"* (2014-2020). While outwardly brash and crude, these shows tapped into very mature and adult themes such as depression, alcoholism and substance abuse. It is interesting then to note the fact that these kinds of shows are almost universally made and marketed as comedies, and what is also interesting is how this contrasts with the animations made for younger teenage audiences. Adult cartoons tend to be dark, episodic and humour based with a plethora of pop culture references, whereas teenage cartoons tend to have long story threads, and often use their platforms to make respectful and

relatable commentary on the struggles of its audience – such as how *"Steven Universe"* (2013-2019) deals with themes surrounding anxiety, sexuality and gender identity. It's odd to think that shows made for younger, more adolescent audiences would give more reverence to their messages, however there are arguments to be made as for why. The dark comedy approach lightens the heavy themes, making them much more approachable to the casual audience. The thinking that cartoons are solely for kids, even if thought subconsciously, lends to this approachability as the human brain would often associate animated imagery as infantile – a safe space where nothing can hurt you, which is a remnant idea institutionalised from the Disneyesque movies of that adult generation's childhood. What this does is act as a "trojan horse" of sorts until the darker undertones reveal themselves, while simultaneously allowing for a deceptively safe form of projection from the audience onto the characters. Professor of animation Paul Wells describes this phenomenon as:

> *"...creating a fictionalised notion of consciousness, which, if imagined 'real', both recalls the playful and liberal apparatus of childhood and makes concrete the irony and contradiction of the adult sensibility"* (Wells, 1997, p.15)

It's cathartic in some cases, providing a comfortable platform for conversations surrounding these less openly discussed themes and topics to play out. It resulted in fantastically creative shows like the limited series[9] *"The Midnight Gospel"* (2020), with each episode animated over a series of edited podcast recordings with different interviewees. The show skirts around Buddhist concepts, delving into themes of death, meaning, closure and escapism. The final episode had real-life parallels with the death of the main character's mother, deriving itself from the death of Deneen Fendig, the mother of creator and lead voice recorder Duncan Trussell, who died of cancer in 2013. Trussell went on to use old interview recordings of her from shortly before her death to create her character in the show. It proved very emotional for Trussell, as once editing began he had to step away, for fear of his attachment to certain story threads compromising the cutting process. He was very pleased with the final outcome, and in an interview with Deadline, he stated:

> *"Somehow, these animators had captured my mom's spirit in it, just from her voice. It's one of the most astounding things, and it really shines a light on how powerful the medium of animation is, in the sense that, that* is *my mom... The whole time I spent working on Midnight Gospel, I was gradually realizing what an incredible medium animation was.*

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[9] The series is currently considered limited as it ended neatly and Netflix have yet to renew it for a season 2, but the possibility of renewal is still there (Opie, 2021)

But that hit it home, when I realized that there's a resurrective quality to it that I don't think exists in any other form I'm aware of." (Grobar, 2020)

What is seen here is proof that cartoons and animations have depth, and utility, and notions surrounding budget, or the idea that "cartoons are for kids" are no longer applicable. Animation can do so much that live-action film can't, such as Trussell's description of his mother's "resurrection", and it is disheartening that so many people dismiss this fact. The hope is that as animation and cartooning continue to evolve and grow, and so too will audiences' perception of them.

"The new animation ranges from cartoon to anti-cartoon, "naïve" fantasy to self-conscious examination of form and process… It is the task of the new animation whether it addresses a limited art audience or a more general entertainment audience, to stretch and redefine its form through experimentation while realising the medium's potential for expressing a personal vision." (Griffin, 1980, p.197-198)

Screenshot from *"The Midnight Gospel"* of the main character Clancy talking to his mother in the final episode of the first season

Chapter 04 – In Conclusion

To finalise, and in committing to the promise made at the beginning of the essay, this chapter will clarify the question; why shouldn't animation be classified as a genre, and why is it wrong and limiting to label it as such? A genre is defined as "*a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content*" (2022). In other words, this means that a genre claims ownership to a collection of tropes or signifiers that become a singular "identity". Any piece of work that utilises such an "identity", can then be labelled as being a part of that genre. For example, Martin Scorsese's *"Good Fellas"* (1990) and *"Mean Streets"* (1973) are both apart of the crime fiction genre, characterised by its themes of justice and its morally shady characters. However, those same parameters could be applied to Bakshi's *"Coonskin"*; but if cartoons are a genre in of themselves, how can it be considered a crime fiction movie? Filmmaker Guillermo Del Torro, who has produced both animated and live film work, summarises it perfectly, stating;

"*Animation is a medium not a genre – nor an interest for kids and families only.*" (2018)

A medium. That is what animation is, defined as being *"the materials or methods used by an artist"* (2022). Animation is a tool, used to tell and portray a story, any story, no matter its content. As established, animation is accessible to and can be targeted to anyone of any age group. However, genres differ in this sense, with some being made exclusively for audiences of certain demographics. Slasher movies, like Hitchcock's *"Psycho"* (1960), could never be shown young children, as it would presumably traumatise them for life, however many adult audiences relish in the thrill of it. As discussed throughout the entirety of this essay, the animation industry has produced cartoons that wildly differ in target demographics, from the family friendly "everyman" cartoon that is *"The Flintstones",* right through to the NSFW drug abuse that occurs in Netflix's *"BoJack Horseman"*. So to limit animation as being a genre, is to force rules, stereotypes and expectations upon it, which then manifest in widespread misconceptions, such as the ridiculous belief that animations are solely for children.

In conclusion, animation is a medium, not a genre. It has no limitations, whether that be politics, budget, audience or subject matter - and with it any story can be told.

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