

OUROBOROS: THE EVOLUTION FROM INDUSTRIALIZED MASS PRODUCTION TO
AUTEURISM IN AMERICAN ANIMATION

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the School of Visual Arts and Design
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2020

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of animation in the United States and its resulting classification varies significantly from its global counterparts. Through a convergence of complex cultural, regulatory, and entrepreneurial influences, the medium's experimental artistic principals have remained firmly rooted in the mass-production style studio pipeline codified by Hollywood. Through the advent of academically centered animation education, the development of the internet, self-distribution, and the growing affordability of industry level hardware and software, the industry has expanded beyond the traditional narrow scope. This re-globalization of entertainment in the United States encourages an auteur approach to animated filmmaking that is challenging the strict association of animation as a children's medium.

For mom: the original storyteller.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must express my eternal gratitude for my thesis committee's support and encouragement in this three-year pursuit: Dr. Stella Sung, my committee chair; Michael Cabrera; and Darlene Hadrika. You gave me room to make my own mistakes and a better product emerged for it.

To my mentor and friend, Cheryl Briggs, many things in my life would never have come to fruition without your enthusiastic support. You encouraged me to dive off this academic bridge and I'm forever grateful.

To my fellow classmates in Cohort 1, the illustrious Green Bananas, this project owes a large portion of its successful completion to your companionship and tireless pursuit of animated discourse. We meandered, but, in those wanderings, discovered untold treasures.

To my family who continue to walk beside me on this crazy adventure, I wouldn't be where I am without your faith and encouragement, especially when I doubted everything.

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INTRODUCTION

Animation as an artistic medium varies in its application from country to country, though the medium itself is difficult to define due to its metamorphic nature. While its narrative language is intrinsically defined by the cultural mores present within its society of origin, the medium itself promotes an experimentalist perspective due to its adaptable materiality. Technically, animation is defined by Merriam-Webster multiple ways, but most applicably as “a way of making a movie by using a series of drawings, computer graphics, or photographs of objects (such as puppets or models) that are slightly different from one another and that when viewed quickly one after another create the appearance of movement” (Animation). While concise, this barely scratches the surface of an art form whose use is only limited by the creator's psychological and emotional association with the approach they choose to take.

Globally, animation has enjoyed a distinction as an artistic medium utilized by independent filmmakers, artists, and studios alike, whose metamorphic nature provides a perfect vehicle for explorations of philosophy and technique in equal measure. Given the same considerations as live-action film, visual arts, and performing arts, artists utilizing the animated medium are not culturally restricted in the choice of content or narrative by the categorization of the medium itself.

Contrastingly, the United States traditionally has not shared this view artistically or economically. Europe as a whole has retained their tradition of auteur filmmaking, while

animation in the United States is relegated to an adjunct of live action cinema or immersed within special effects (Wells, Animation: Genre and Authorship 2). Experimentation in animation has generally been limited to explorations of technology and technique rather than plot or subject matter due to its categorization primarily as a children's medium for the better part of our cinematic history. Overall, the narrative focus for animation produced in the United States post Great Depression stagnated in the land of the children's fable, educating young minds in the benefits of conformity and appropriately gendered behavior. Spearheaded and heavily influenced by the idyllic storytelling perspective of Walt Disney, the divergent path of our industry found its foundations in a time of social, economic, and spiritual upheaval. Centered around a concerted effort to guard against perceived moral decay, attempts to censor content was grounded in the concept of the preservation of national identity.

Only in recent years has a push towards artistic expression within the animated medium gained a foothold that harkens back to the early days of animation development. As animation education expanded beyond the apprenticeship structure within studios to an academic setting, young creators have experienced content and animation history produced outside of the country. Coupled with the widening access to information through the internet, the advent of self-distribution, and the declining cost of software and hardware, independent filmmakers are rapidly changing the narrative landscape. As a generation of storytellers exposed to an international catalog of content rises to leadership positions, they are at the forefront of redefining mainstream animation.

This transition defined my creative perspective, the advancements in the medium running concurrent to my growth as an artist, and in analyzing the subjective view, I inevitably delved deep into the external. The foundations of the animation industry and the traditional standards established decades before I was born still have a profound effect on fellow artists and me, influencing our decision making even in the face of rapid evolution. There exists a divide between past and present, a struggle between the historical perception of quintessential American animation and the growing expansion of its targeted demographic. To understand the changing attitudes that are allowing animators to express personal narratives in the modern-day, we must look back to the events that laid the foundation for this revolution in the medium. Only by studying why and how historically, politically, and artistically these processes came to define the medium in the United States can we as practitioners begin to make changes with purpose.

Through my research and my work creating an experimental animated short, my growth as an artist is intrinsically tied to a deeper understanding of the processes that defined my chosen medium. After all, an artist can't break the rules until they understand why they were put in place initially. Therefore, my goal in the proceeding pages is to outline events and advancements that laid the foundation for this divergent cultural perspective, illustrating its influence over artists like myself, and exploring my assertion that this perspective is changing through my creative expression.

CHAPTER ONE: ESTABLISHING TRADITION

In any art form, understanding its origins allows the artist to comprehend their relationship with the medium filtered through the cultural lens. The language we use to define the medium, the narrative structure and emotional associations at its core, is dictated by the dominant cultural values present as we develop, particularly in adolescence. As an American, the development of formalist mythology based in folklore that reinforced a nationalistic moral imperative has dictated my relationship with animation. Yet this structure didn't always exist, and the early period of development was indeed a globally experimental playground.

The history of the origin of animation within the United States runs concurrently with rapid developments in technology and industry occurring worldwide, especially during a period known as the Industrial Revolution. Though the medium's foundations can arguably be attributed to the first cave paintings in the Lascaux Caves from 15,000 BCE in which animals are depicted in a series of poses that imply motion, the first pseudo-projected animated pieces were developed as light tricks to amuse spectators in magic-lantern shows (Furniss 12-13).

Magic lantern shows were the early precursors to what would become cinema, combining projected images with live narration and sound effects. Credited to Dutch scientist Christian Huygens in the mid-seventeenth century, magic lanterns used transparent glass panes painted with pictures and strategically layered to give apparent movement to objects and scenes (Barber). From these humble, candle-driven beginnings, a relatively short but explosive period at the turn of the century built on these simple concepts, bringing together scientists,

inventors, and artists absorbed in their emerging technological breakthroughs to evolve the cinematic medium rapidly.

The technological milestones of the industrial revolution and the development of photography directly led to the introduction of cinema in 1895 and the eventual emergence of animated films (Furniss 20). This initial period from the late 1800s to the 1930s centered around individual content creators exploring the developing medium from their artistic perspectives, lending a performative, auteur approach that would fade with the growing dominance of the studio system. In many cases through the twenties, these proto-animators were closer to illusionists, performing a visual sleight of hand in the metamorphosis of the graphic line; the more fantastical the result, the more deceptive the illusion (Klein 23). Popular characters and storylines from print comic strips, the prevalent entertainment of the day, were roughly transitioned into moving images, laying the foundation for gag-based narratives that would be the hallmark of the medium during this period. Cartoonists and print moguls were propelled into the cinematic sphere, establishing a narrative structure for early animation and an initial studio model that would come to define the industry.

Characterized more by rapid technological advancement and less by a defined artistic perspective, storylines of this period were generally a series of simple visual gags rather than narratives of substance. Filmmakers and storytellers were initially primarily focused on the technological possibilities, evolving the mechanical capabilities of this new medium rather than developing the aesthetic related to a continuity in the length, style, or narrative approach (Wells, *Understanding Animation* 1). Story, in a sense, was an extension of the vaudeville

performance principals and graphic illustrations with which audiences from the early twentieth century were exceedingly familiar; the trick was in the combination of these principals in an inherently anarchistic form that defied the laws of nature. As the performances and technologies available developed in complexity, somewhat linear stories would emerge as the first animated characters took their first breaths on screen.

2D animation as a vehicle for storytelling began in earnest with the explorations of Windsor McCay and his eventual integration of personality infused characters into simple narratives. Unique to this period, he combined his superior draftsmanship as a cartoonist with the conceptual exploration of a master storyteller (Maltin 3). He was fascinated by the emerging medium and threw himself into the development of a comic strip that moved, though his first attempt lacked much of the complexity that would become his hallmark. In his first film *Little Nemo*, which debuted in April 1911, the 4,000 laboriously drawn, hand-colored images achieved a striking visual effect but included no allusions to an adequately constructed narrative (Maltin 3). Like his contemporaries, McCay's primary concern at this point was technical, developing techniques for proper perspective and convincing movement by experimenting with the newest available equipment and procedures at the time. It wasn't until his next two films, *How a Mosquito Operates* (1914) and *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), that he focused on the animated character as a dimensional being, giving them unique personalities and achieving the first demonstrations of this artistic consideration (Furniss 42).

While the silent era enjoyed an explosion of content, the medium was chaotic at best. Held back by economic pressure to copy the comic strip format that informed the narrative and

visual approach of animation, the imperative to produce content in a similar time frame left artists with little opportunity for experimentation or critical analysis (Maltin 1). Forgoing a developmental narrative in favor of the quick laugh, creators chose stories centered around gags illustrated in comparatively crude drawings. Additionally, collaboration was limited to short bursts, precluding an atmosphere beneficial to more in-depth artistic exploration or consideration. Animators were relatively nomadic, moving from studio to studio, applying their styles while generally adhering to industry norms (Furniss 64).

Sound had a substantial effect on cinema as a whole, but entirely changed the trajectory and narrative dynamic of the animated medium. *The Jazz Singer*, released in 1927 by Warner Brothers, utilized a sound-on-disk technology developed with Western Electric called Vitaphone that truly ushered in the beginning of the sound era (Furniss 131). Sound gave animated characters life and developed an auditory language unique to animation, expanding the storytelling capabilities. Additionally, sound applied a rhythm to the films, making them more appealing by giving the creators a sense of timing that followed natural patterns.

Studios began using sound in contrasting ways, developing their representations to associate specifically with their divergent styles and narrative focus. Initial shorts from the Fleisher's and Warner Brothers were essentially early precursors to the music video, where the narrative events are taken from and accompanied by the song (Wells, *Understanding Animation* 98). Disney also took advantage of the new developments, though he eventually morphed its application to reinforce a hyper-realistic approach that promoted naturalism rather than opposed it.

The Rise of the Animation Studio

One of the most significant developments that directly affected the trajectory of independent artists was the proliferation of the animation studio and its organizational structure. Codified by a hierarchy developed in conjunction with the industrial revolution and Henry Ford's development of the assembly line, this compartmentalization of the industry would spearhead a rapid growth in content and technique but would limit the career trajectory of artists to prescribed categories within the studio pipeline. Even well into the mid-2010s, employment opportunities within the animated field was dominated primarily by positions created through the motion picture industry and its studio system (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).

The animation industry in the United States owes its growth and worldwide acclaim to the major Hollywood film studios that controlled the film industry. The major studios known as the Big Five and Little Three contracted smaller independent studios or developed in-house animation departments during the 1930s to fill theatrical billings, creating a symbiotic relationship that exposed American animation to a worldwide audience and elevated the prestige of the studio through animation's popularity (Furniss 110). This budding relationship established studio brands, harnessing collective artistic forces to produce singular, original content, and led to the development of independent animation studios.

The growth of the industry, initially supported by small-scale hand-crafted methods, required a shift to assembly-line practices to meet the demands, applying principals of scientific management to efficiently structure the workforce into a hierarchy of many skilled workers

operating under a few top managers (Furniss 39). Early leaders in the industry began organizing, and the first studios started to emerge. Established in 1914 by reporter and cartoonist John Randolph Bray, Bray Studios was the first and most crucial studio of the early years, improving studio methods and providing training for most of the artists who would later become studio entrepreneurs (Furniss 39). Bray's industrialized approach and dictator style of leadership established a hierarchy that would be employed in many studios, laying the foundation for the assembly line methodology common to animation produced in the United States. Interestingly, while the studio made significant contributions to the development of a cohesive production process – cel animation through Earl Hurd, rotoscoping through Max Fleischer, and color through the two-step Brewster Process –, narrative experimentation and artistic creativity was sadly lacking (Furniss 46-47).

As these studios developed their independent style and artistic approach, distinct identities emerged among them. Fleischer cartoons were contextually different than Disney's, reliant on technical ingenuity and comic invention rather than artistic expertise to achieve their own brand of visual magic (Maltin 84). MGM produced a comparatively limited amount of intellectual property in the time that it operated; however, the content had a wide range of narrative approaches from direct Disney mimicry to adult-centric narratives. Most notably, Tex Avery's directing tenure from 1942 and 1955 produced content that was highly stylized and narratively dynamic, showing, as Maureen Furniss stated, that "animation could break every law of reality in terms of movement" as he "catered to adult sensibility, subverting expectations and taking an irreverent look at contemporary culture" (Furniss 138-39). Warner Brothers

established an identity that revolved around satire and the advanced use of dialogue. With a hands-off management style that contrasted Disney or Fleisher, animators were permitted a certain freedom to experiment, giving Warner Brother's animated shorts of the 1930s and 1940s a distinctive flair: highly energetic, gag-filled, zany romps that regularly exposed the cinematic space or referenced popular figures of the day (Furniss 127). UPA, potentially the most experimental visually out of them all, was founded in the wake of the Disney animator's strike of 1941, and became the center of the independent animated movement post World War II with John Hubley, a former Disney animator, spearheading the limited, anti-naturalism movement (Silver). Leaders and artists working for the studio sought an avenue of artistic freedom that broke free of cinematic realism, displaying an experimental directive that would come to define the medium during the 60s and 70s visually.

The rise of animations studios does not indicate the total disappearance of independent animators, as is evidenced by the work of abstract animators like Oskar Fischinger and Mary Ellen Bute. However, the studio's industrial structure proved more profitable, and by the end of World War II, the studio structure was firmly entrenched in the American animation industry. They began to control most elements of the pipeline, from establishing apprenticeship structures to train artists in their style and to managing the distribution of content. Eventually, distinct industry leaders emerged, but none would be as influential on the social consciousness as Walt Disney.

Walt Disney

Walt Disney and his brother, Roy, had humble beginnings, but the name “Disney” would become synonymous with the animated art form and the American animation industry. His focus on naturalistic, hyper-realistic animation style would re-define the visual language of animation while the simplified fable-based narrative would revolutionize the medium’s storytelling. His imperative was to challenge work produced by the larger studios by making commercially viable films through “a technologically advanced, modern industrial context” that could also claim to be a distinctively different art form (Wells, *Animation: Genre and Authorship* 80). By recognizing the importance of organized, but constant innovation, personality coupled with a well-developed narrative became the central point of focus of anything produced by the studio to maintain artistic integrity. The invention and implementation of the multiplane camera directly impacted the development of these principals; by permitting the use of depth, the animated camera could realistically mimic its physical counterpart, replicating life rather than the flat surface (Klein 32). Disney’s *Snow White*, released in 1937 to critical and commercial triumph, was the first feature-length animated film to employ this newly developed technology, and it changed everything. Its success proved that an animated film could be both feature-length and a financial success, two seeming impossibilities at the time. By reinforcing this hyper-realism, content produced by the studio reflected an organized structure that directly contrasted the early vaudeville and graphic origins of the medium, transitioning the narrative and aesthetic focus of the medium through its popularity.

Disney also noticed a need for some type of formalized education to bring the artists working at the studio up to the level necessary to accomplish his aesthetic vision. Most artists working in animation at the time had little formal education, either training on the job or gaining rudimentary knowledge through art programs. Disney educated Animators in anatomy and life drawing more than any other studio, dictated by a need to produce characters that could bodily mimic lifelike movements bones, joints, and cartilage while expressing the most extensive range of facial emotions possible (Klein 97).

The popularity of the content from this period and the establishment of a language to categorize the process, known as the Twelve Principals of Animation, created an identity that other studios felt they needed to mimic; with the implementation of the illusion of life, the animated character was vaulted beyond the gag and given a soul. By pushing a hyper-realistic, simplified, idealized version of morality that was easily categorized and digestible for the masses, his vision aligned with the moralist, vaguely puritanical, cultural swing post-Great Depression that exploded across the social consciousness. This moral clampdown doesn't preclude the notion that artistry existed in the content produced; however, narrative explorations of individualism and the human condition were simplified in favor of easily digested bites that promoted American Nationalism. The aim, it seems, was to focus on the technical evolution of the craft while adhering narratively to a strict fairy-tale structure.

Most importantly, Disney was a shrewd businessman willing to take risks and exert total control over his domain that focused the collective creative energy into one cohesive viewpoint. Through an important relocation to the West Coast, the development of

infrastructure, the establishment of the hyper-realistic aesthetic, key staff turnover, and a greater control exerted by Walt Disney on the studio's processes during the 1930s, Walt Disney Studios became the uncontested powerhouse in the industry (Furniss 92). The decision to exert total control over the entire filmmaking process, from development to production, distribution to merchandising had the largest impact, making Disney a globally recognized brand. By saturating the market through film, merchandising, and eventually television, the Disney style became the benchmark that defined animation produced in the United States. Crucially, by successfully implementing this style of content control, they established a framework for distribution that would remain unchallenged until the advent of the internet.

CHAPTER TWO: THE MORALITY PARADIGM

While the formation of studios and the domination of the Disney style contributed significantly to the development of the medium, public reaction to excesses displayed by the entertainment industry had just as much influence on its evolution, if not more. Key to the formation of entertainment in the United States and its relationship with the populace is the idea that content creators possess responsibility for the effects their content has on the audience. This censorship would further limit the type of content permitted and, therefore, the association artists would have with the medium as an expressionistic art form, as I've experienced in my evolution as an independent creator.

Entertainment is no stranger to censorship from special interest groups, and these early days of cinema are no exception. Suppression efforts began years before the animation industry even existed, the first censorship board established in Chicago in 1907 as part of an early wave of local and state boards that sprang up in response to some of the racier films (K. F. Cohen 11). This clampdown on expression occurred during the critical incubation period of many animation studios, forcing them to change visual and narrative styles to remain financially viable while solidifying the idea of appropriate content for a particular medium. While techniques, technology, and visual theory of storytelling advanced in leaps and bounds, the narrative focus rarely stepped beyond the family-friendly sphere. Intense reactions to the perceived impropriety of content produced in the early 20th century stifled the ability for artists to explore adult themes through animation. Its use as an artistic medium was relegated

to the commercial sphere where morality codes and Disney dominance dictated its primary purpose as a children's entertainment.

Through continued censorship and monopolization of distribution, artists were discouraged or outright blacklisted from the industry for stepping outside of what was considered quintessentially American.

Hays Office

The widespread consensus was that the Great Depression was direct, if not Divine, punishment for the excess of the 1910s and 1920s. After several scandals involving prominent individuals in Hollywood, the threat of government censorship and the taint of negative publicity forced the industry to recognize a need to form an organization (Hays Office). The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), commonly known as the Hays Office for its creator Will Hays, regulated the motion picture industry through voluntary compliance with a strict moral code initially structured around a list of “Don’t and Be Carefuls”. Hays’ primary objective wasn’t censorship but was instead focused on self-regulation to promote an avoidance of controversies to prevent states and local governments from pursuing extremely repressive legislation (K. F. Cohen 11).

While these codes were more guidelines than edicts, they “initiated a blacklist, inserted morals clauses into actors’ contracts, and in 1930 developed the Production Code, which detailed what was morally acceptable on the screen” (Hays Office). Aside from a prohibition on nudity, suggestive dances, discussions of sexual perversity, superfluous use of liquor, ridicule of

religion, miscegenation, lustful kissing, and scenes of passion, the three major governing principals were:

- No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
- Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
- Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

Eventually, the lack of participation, or at least the appearance of it, led to an even more significant outcry from conservative and religious groups around the country. There was some contention that Hays, a prominent Presbyterian elder, secretly helped make the calls for censorship so overwhelming that filmmakers had no choice but to obey the Production Code he would help institute (Mondello). Even with a revision written by Father Daniel Lord and Martin Quigley, both prominent individuals with deep religious attachments, compliance with the code was voluntary and lacked any enforceability. The National League of Decency, established by the Catholic Church in 1934, with support from Jewish and Protestant groups, called for a mobilization against the immorality of Hollywood, threatening to boycott any film they deemed objectionable. Hays responded by implementing the Production Code Administration (PCA), an

office that would review the content of a film and assign it the MPPDA seal of approval if it met the code's standards (K. F. Cohen 18-19).

Animation studios felt the effects of the code in varying degrees, but many had followed the Disney example by this point and focused on family-friendly content. Fleisher Studios, however, would bear the brunt of this moralist directive. Their main star, Betty Boop, was the biggest cartoon victim, transforming from the free-spirited flapper to a model 50's housewife that was a shadow of her former self. Created by Max Fleischer in 1930, she was the first hyper-sexualized animated female character whose scantily clad appearance was targeted by censorship laws, resulting in a massively toned down version produced in the later 1930s (Collington 185). Notably, she became a bit player in her show, transitioning from a richly complex three-dimensional character to a two-dimensional symbolic representation of the censorship that had neutered her.

Changing cultural tastes in entertainment and an influx of foreign films led to a demand for more in-depth narrative content and a decline in the code through the 1950s and 1960s. Coupled with an anti-trust ruling by the Supreme Court in 1948 that eliminated block booking and a 1952 ruling affirming that motion pictures were entitled to protection under the First Amendment, the Production Code was eventually dropped all together in favor for the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system that is used today.

Additionally, the advent of television and its expansion began to threaten the stranglehold the film industry had on cinema. Americans no longer had to leave their home to find entertainment, and the offerings managed to maintain some autonomy outside of the

MPPC approval scheme as television required a different approach. A set of ethical standards to self-regulate and satisfy morality concerns called the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters was established in 1952 and remained in effect until 1983. Like the original Hays Code, its creation aimed to avoid Federal level censorship and to address concerns, particularly from parents, over issues of violence and content considered indecent or inappropriate. However, as the number of networks expanded, their varied offerings necessitated a new approach that made each station responsible for managing the level of compliance of their content.

In the arrangement under which we currently operate, each network has its own office known as Standards & Practices (S&P) that regulates the content produced by their parent network to make sure it's conforming the code. The structure of the system is akin to the content of the Production Code, restricting things like foul language, sexual situations, and slander against religion. However, the most damning part of the code is the definition of broadcaster responsibility when it comes to children. Reinforced by a ruling in the Supreme Court in 1978, broadcasters assumed legal responsibility for policing and managing objectionable material during certain hours that children might be listening or watching (K. F. Cohen 123-124). What resulted from this ruling was a stratification of content with demographically categorized time slots. This compartmentalization further reinforced what was considered appropriate animated content as it's morning time slot was intended for younger audiences.

Interestingly, cartoon violence itself wasn't much of a factor in its censorship, possibly due to the nature of the medium. Studios, notably Warner Brothers, took advantage of this loophole, producing animated shows that pushed the boundaries in ways that feature films could or would not. However, content created for adult-oriented audiences would challenge the establishment within S&P and force studios to take risks as tastes continued to evolve.

Anti-Communism

Compounding the effect of the Hays Code and its various iterations, the rise of nationalism and fevered anti-communist leanings changed the trajectory of narratives and studios alike. These ideologies would form deep roots that would drastically affect the public's reaction to content for decades and would lay a foundation for conservative arguments made today. Armchair commentators bombard creators currently posting their political cartoons to social media platforms with comments accusing them of pushing Communist propaganda, calling them snowflakes, or accusing them of promoting fake news, echoing the sentiment of the fiercely nationalistic witch-hunt that emerged during World War II.

Many of the early anti-Communist instigations were rooted in the unionization efforts of the 1930s. As workers sought to strengthen their bargaining positions, their actions were viewed as directly undermining the power of the business leadership and Communist association followed with the discovery that select union leaders had party affiliations (Furniss 163). Known as the Red Scare, this period during the late 1940s and 1950s had such a widespread impact on American society and its relationship with entertainment that its effects would last well into the

late twentieth century. Led by Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, federal governing bodies implemented a series of investigations and hearings to expose supposed communist infiltration in all aspects of the U.S. government (Achter). The result was widespread suspicion of anything that appeared to be anti-American or threatening to the notion of the American way of life. Hollywood, with its melting pot demographic, liberal political leanings, and access to the national consciousness through entertainment, was a prime target.

The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), established in 1938 under Martin Dies, investigated artists and entertainers during the same period as the McCarthy trials and asserted in a bill passed by the House to define the specific activities perpetrated by the Communist Party and control them:

Ten years of investigation by the Committee on Un-American Activities and by its predecessors have established: (1) that the Communist movement in the United States is foreign-controlled; (2) that its ultimate objective with respect to the United States is to overthrow our free American institutions in favor of a Communist totalitarian dictatorship to be controlled from abroad; (3) that its activities are carried on by secret and conspiratorial methods; and (4) that its activities, both because of the alarming march of Communist forces abroad and because of the scope and nature of Communist activities here in the United States, constitute an immediate and powerful threat to the security of the United States and to the American way of life. (House Un-American Activities Committee)

Content viewed as inherently un-American was vilified and persecuted, resulting in fear of experimentation lest the creator risk branding as Communist and dangerous to the American way of life. Any opinion was met with suspicion or outright hostility if it was deemed morally ambiguous or contradictory to the perceived proper nationalist perspective. Individuals were called before the Committee and forced to name suspicious persons or face persecution

themselves, often sacrificing their integrity to do so. Known as the Blacklist, entertainers and artists who either refused to testify or to name names lost their livelihood, as no studio would touch an individual on the list for fear of financial reprisals, and some even faced jail time. Even those only rumored to have affiliations with the Communist Party recognized the threat they posed, and many of these individuals left their studios to protect the company from the character assassination by HUAC.

UPA was inordinately affected when some of their artist's affiliations with the Communist Party were exposed, and many of those individuals, John Hubley, Bill Scott, Bill Melendez, Phil Eastman, among them, left in the hopes of keeping the studio alive (Furniss 214). Many of them either left the country entirely after work offers dried up or started studios with varying levels of success. David Hilberman, who also resigned from UPA, formed Tempo Production with ex-Disney animator Bill Pomerance, but that shuttered after the exposure of their Communist Party affiliations and clients fled (Furniss 214).

Disney himself gladly testified before the HUAC, naming union leaders and artists involved in the 1941 union strike of his studio, justifying the actions of the artists who betrayed him as a communist influence. His zeal went so far as to inspire him to co-found the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPA) in 1944, an organization with the express purpose of organizing the patriotic contingent of the industry to combat the communist threat collectively. In 1947 they published a guide for producers that served as a model for avoiding communistic touches, with the main points being:

- Don't take politics lightly.

- Don't smear the free-enterprise system, industrialists, wealth, the profit motive, or success.
- Don't glorify failure, depravity, or the collective.
- Don't deify "the common man". (K. F. Cohen 169-170)

Additionally, Hollywood and particularly animation studios were reliant on government contracts to keep them financially solvent during and after World War II. As McCarthyism gained a foothold, government contracts began to dry up as Washington distanced themselves from the political minefield represented by Hollywood. The message was clear: toe the anti-Communist line or lose everything.

The result of this relatively short period in American politics was the clampdown on any form of free expression deemed dangerous to the homogeneous nationalistic principals exalted as the American way of life. Continued heavy censorship stagnated creative expression, and it wasn't until the late 1960s and early 1970s that attitudes towards popular entertainment began to change.

CHAPTER THREE: EDUCATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

The opportunities afforded to me that have enabled the in-depth exploration of animation from an academic and artistic perspective found their start in the counter-culture revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. Post-World War II saw the general rise of solitary, independently focused creators, coinciding with the departure of Disney artists following labor troubles and a desire for free expression that led to a diffusion of talent and styles in the industry (Silver). As the avenues for expression expanded, the first commercially produced television sets would eventually change the scope and impact entertainment had on the American consciousness. Information was suddenly widely available and timely, especially as the national networks and homes with television sets increased.

Concurrently, the Vietnam War was raging with film crews capturing the horrors on film, broadcasting moving images of war into American households for the first time. A robust social agent of the time, television engaged large audiences simultaneously and presented a series of horrors – the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr – and the international protests of the Vietnam War that galvanized a generation to unify into a movement for social change (Furniss 259). Tastes began to change, especially with an influx of European artistic influences, and a rejection of traditional values was well underway. Youths sought out experiences that reinforced a counter-culture perspective that directly rejected the traditionalist ideals of the generation before, changing the focus of many artistically based movements. There were also independent creators, lacking a clear path to publicize their work

as content that didn't align with mainstream standards struggled to find distribution, that began to develop outside means to content distribution.

During this transitory period, the first animated film to receive an X rating from the MPAA, *Fritz the Cat* by Ralph Bakshi, was released in 1972 and went on to become the highest-grossing independent animated film of all time. A controversial figure in the animation world, Bakshi developed a style that pushed the boundaries of appropriate animated content for the time long before Parker and Stone had family-friendly organizations clutching their pearls. As he noted in a 1972 interview with Mike Barrier for *Funnyworld*:

At that point, I was embarrassed or intellectually snowballed by other people, because I was drawing queers and lesbians and Mafia leaders at home, and I thought, goddam, I must be a sick guy. It wasn't done then. The image of UPA was still in everybody's minds. So I would put this stuff aside. I didn't realize it could have been turned into animated cartoons, but of course, who would have let me then? (Barrier)

Additionally, the animated sphere began opening up to alternative content as the rise of educational programs at universities and film festivals became prevalent. As I've experienced in my academic career, young creators are exposed to different approaches to storytelling, offering divergent approaches to the medium that often challenge conventions presented through mainstream media.

The establishment of schools focusing on cinema studies, some offering degrees in animation, began in earnest during the 1960s and 1970s (Furniss 318). These programs took training out of the hands of studios and applied academic principals to the process, introducing young creators to the history of the medium beyond the American perspective. This theoretical

approach encouraged much-needed analysis by using academic principals to the essential elements of the animation process; from color theory to narrative structure, technical approach to materiality, the individual components were broken down to apply aesthetic theory to their use and implementation.

They also exposed students to content created outside of the confines of the American studio system, with a varying cultural, artistic, and political perspective. In an interview for Vice, Abby Terkuhle, founder and president of MTV Animation, made an important observation about how his educational exposure to internationally produced animation affected his approach to content production:

I had a professor in college who exposed me to animation from Eastern Europe, as well as animation that was used to communicate political and social issues—which you didn't always see in Disney, or America. I saw the possibility of animation that could be targeted to an older audience, [rather] than just kids. (Conti)

Additionally, the nature of the educational program, mainly in the application of theoretical principals, created a wellspring of original content. Graduation requirements generally involved creating short films, resulting in an influx of creator-driven productions fully controlled by the creator's artistic perspective entered the animation industry, diversifying the content (Furniss 318). This content needed somewhere to go, and, before the advent of the internet and YouTube, the most logical place was at film festivals.

The Rise of Festivals

From the first established film festival in 1932 in Venice, Italy, film festivals have contributed to the global development of national motion picture industries through the exposure of their content to an international audience (Film Festivals). As a need for distribution outside of the studio control rose, organizers established independent festivals to showcase the widening range of narrative content, techniques, and perspectives. Arguably the most important for the animation industry, the “Tournée of Animation” established in 1965 by Les Goldman, Bill Littlejohn, and others was compiled and distributed for 16 years by Prescott Wright with the express purpose of exposing members of ASIFA-Hollywood to animation from around the world (K. F. Cohen 102). Wright, having worked as a distributor in the past, was able to access international films through his travels in conjunction with work being produced within the United States, resulting in a diverse offering representative of a globalizing medium.

An eventual offshoot of the festival, “Outrageous Animation” sought to highlight adult-only content, with varied success. While the reception was lukewarm critically, the financial success publicly proved that a new kind of film packaging devoted to adult animated content was viable and opened new avenues to theatrical distribution (K. F. Cohen 104). It also helped experimental animators showcase their work on a public stage that could bring mainstream work through popularity rather than industry connections. Bill Plympton, whose shorts are festival favorites marked by dry humor coupled with violent physical comedy, gained notoriety

among advertisers wanting to use his popular visual style to sell their wares (Furniss 319). His use of simple materials and a loose style allowed him to create a large volume of work without the need for a team, keeping complete creative control in his hands and a unique, if somewhat grotesque, narrative perspective.

In conjunction with the establishment of educational institutions offering academic programs related to film and animation, film festivals that catered towards or included student work began popping up in the late 1960s, accelerating change in the industry. Some festivals, in particular, were at the epicenter of this new artistic movement in animation, and two festivals produced by Craig “Spike” Decker and Mike Gribble could potentially be considered ground zero. In the 1970s, the duo premiered “Spike and Mike’s Festival of Animation,” and subsequent screenings have featured shorts from the likes of Tim Burton, John Lasseter, Pete Doctor, Andrew Stanton, Peter Lord, and Nick Park, all giants in the animation industry now (Furniss 317).

Their second festival, “Spike & Mike’s Sick and Twisted Animation Festival,” premiered in 1990, was developed with the idea to premiere works that were violent or particularly offensive as compared to mainstream media (Furniss 318). The most notable individual to find notoriety at this festival was Mike Judge, and his short that featured two teenage degenerates named Beavis and Butt-Head would go on to premier as a series on MTV. This series would change the relationship teenagers and young adults had with animation, opening up new narrative avenues for content creators like me.

Both festivals are significant for their promotion of content and creators that would later become leaders in what is being considered a golden age of modern animation during the late 20th and early 21st century. Still operating, they continue to promote “animated short film collections with the highest standards of artistic and subversive excellence and distribute the Festival and its animations through traditional & new media platforms” (@spikeandmikes).

As the number of animation festivals rose, as educational programs evolved and expanded, as evolving technology introduced young content creators to globally produced content, the nature of our industry began to change, especially within the television sphere. The wasteland that marked the content of my childhood gave way to a veritable cornucopia of perspectives, encouraging an explosion of personal expression and marginalized representation.

CHAPER FOUR: A SECOND RENAISSANCE

Animated features saw a decline during the '70s and '80s as Disney, the primary purveyor of feature-length films in the medium, focused their attention on expanding the brand to live-action, television, and theme parks. Other studios involved in animation had also switched their focus to television, and a sharp decline was evident in feature-length content. I distinctly remember the VHS collections of Disney classics that circulated among my friends existing as the primary feature-length animated content consumed at the time. As the decades progressed, the introduction of new animation studios and the expansion of television networks diversified the industry, expanding storytelling perspectives that initially didn't reach beyond the family-friendly sphere.

Considered the second golden age of 2D animation, the 1990s produced some of the most iconic animated films in the United States' entertainment lexicon. This 10-year period marked a return to the excitement and prestige of the early Disney films, once again distinguishing the animated feature as a blockbuster success. Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) proved once again that the animated feature could be a blockbuster force like their earlier success decades before, but the directive wasn't in a narrative revolution. Instead, the film owed its success to a return to classic storytelling, experiencing a rebirth through the revitalization of the original principles outlined by Walt in the 1930s. The animated films of the 90s tapped into the power of nostalgia, a reflection of a bygone era, rebirthing techniques that had been subsumed by direct-to-video expedience to recapture the glory of the classics.

The evolution of 3D animation changed the technical landscape, introducing a variation of the medium that appealed to a wider audience demographic. While studios focused heavily on the rapidly advancing technical pipeline, the narrative structure continued to mimic the practices established by Disney. In 1986, Steve Jobs purchased the Graphics Group from George Lucas, renaming it Pixar and giving the exiting leadership team – John Lasseter, Ed Catmull, and Alvy Ray Smith – the freedom to develop short animated films that would propel the company to the world-leader of computer generated animated features (Furniss 373-74). In making the most significant contribution to the 3D animation niche, specifically in the tools and technological pipeline utilized, Pixar, like Disney with *Snow White* (1937), defined the direction of the medium visually and narratively.

DreamWorks, one of the first competitors to Disney dominance of the period, was established in 1994 by Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and David Geffen. They focused on unconventional heroes that appealed to cross-generational audiences. Their earlier films, particularly *Shrek*, poked fun at competitors while weaving political and social justice undertones throughout the story with tongue-in-cheek jokes that entertained adults while going over the children's heads.

Founded in 2002 as a division of the Sony Pictures Motion Pictures Group, Sony Pictures Animation produces a variety of animated and family-friendly entertainment for a global audience (About/Overview). Branded as the outsider more willing to take chances with varying levels of success, they attempt to promote a global perspective that integrates different methods of storytelling.

Additionally, stop-motion experienced the beginning of a revival with the release of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* in 1993 by Touchstone, a subsidiary of Disney. The film, revolving around a misfit band of character from a place called Halloweentown, was an unusual outlier that would mark interest in alternative animated filmmaking. Developed initially by Tim Burton as a long-form poem while working at Disney as an animator, the idea transitioned into a feature-length film with Henry Selick at the helm. Utilizing Burton's horrifically inspired designs and his expressionistic style, the unusual story told a tale of acceptance rather than conformity, introducing an alternative perspective to the hero's journey that exalted oddness.

Yet this period rang hollow to many growing up at the time, myself included. Rather than comforting, these offerings disenfranchised a growing generation of young people that watched the medium most accessible to them fail to address the harsh realities apparent around them. Recessions, racism, sexism, wars, mass shootings; these topics were still taboo in the animated world. The disconnect between the idealized narratives presented and the reality of everyday life made the content feel disingenuously condescending. Even as the growing list of studios made rapid technological advancements, content still followed closely to the narrative concepts defined by Disney, specifically targeting the family-friendly market, and a growing contingent of consumers wanted something closer to reality. As the nature of the medium and changing cultural paradigms relating to age-appropriate entertainment expanded the demographic range of the audience, content evolved to follow suit.

Revolutionary Television

TV historically has had greater freedom to push the boundaries due in part to the way that cartoon violence was regulated differently than a feature, and it was the most accessible form of entertainment. Warner Brothers, Hannah Barbera, and UPA consciously made stylistic and narrative choices to set themselves apart from the Disney model intentionally, but they still focused primarily on family-friendly content. Warner Brother's *Looney Toons*, the most experimental of the offerings, regularly explored topics related to gender roles, philosophy, and social stereotypes through anthropomorphized characters and a style that embraced the burgeoning Modernist movement. Additionally, they ventured into the absurd or surreal, breaking the 4th wall, poking fun at authority figures, and exploring the depths of identity. Artists deliberately brought attention to the inherent unreality of the medium through self-aware characters and the exposure of the Hand of God: the animator. However, they still employed the standard foundational elements defined by orthodox animation. In essence, a studio still controlled the directive and perspective, even with the apparent artistic freedom artists enjoyed.

By this point, broadcasters relegated the cartoon to a concentrated block aired Saturday morning between the hours of 8am to 12pm that became known as the Saturday Morning Phenomenon. The foundations for the style of shows that would be a central part of my experience growing up in the 1980s and early 1990s, these cartoons heavily employed limited animation to fulfill the intense content demand that comprised the multiple-hour block. This

planned animation, as William Hanna once coined it, was a polite way of describing what was an economically appealing, i.e. cheap, approach to animation in the 1960s, solidifying the early perception of Saturday morning cartoons as the “ghetto for cut-rate schlock” (Burk and Burk 19-21). However, there was an argument for the experimental nature of the growing form led by titans in the industry such as Chuck Jones that explored wild and weird action focused characters. Unfortunately, it didn’t last long.

After the temporary death of the superhero genre in the wake of political and social pressure to limit violence in animation in the late 1960s, parental pressure to enforce the moral responsibility of content creators would have a drastic effect on the type of subject matter produced. Questions arose around the suitability of the content directly targeting a younger, malleable demographic and the impact it was having on the most venerable members of the populace. Mainly, debates by activist groups like Action for Children’s Television (ACT) over the developmental implications of targeted advertisements to children during these programs kept the narrative content relatively separate from commercialistic imperatives until the 1980s (Burk and Burk 27-32).

During the 1980s, a partnership developed between toy advertisers and entertainment producers that intentionally produced content based on existing popular toys or newly developed ones (Budd, Craig and Steinman 68). From a subjective point of view, these cartoons felt like nonsense, encouraging me to convince my parents to buy a never-ending stream of toys based on the series rather than address deep narrative standpoints. In general, they felt

overly simplified in their do-gooder message, reinforcing “the good guy always wins” holdover from the Hays days to encourage the consumption of licensed products.

However, the expansion of the target audience began in earnest late in the 20th century as cable took off. In the growing burst of channel offerings, each network was able to form its own identity, catering to a specific viewer and their entertainment tastes. These shows found advocates during the initial explosion in the 1990s through these newly formed networks who were willing to take more significant risks to attract the early adopters. During this period in the late 1980s and 1990s, animated tv shows began appearing that intentionally targeted a mature audience, challenging the association as a strictly family-friendly medium. The reputation of the programming gradually improved as an influx of original content creators flocked to the various new networks, relegating the Saturday-morning cartoon phenomena a thing of the past as broadcasters made animation offerings available around the clock (Furniss 364). These shows would begin to influence a young cadre of budding content creators, myself included, and would herald the expansion of the medium far beyond the family-friendly sphere.

Spearheading this movement was Fox, and the network began taking risks with their animated content that pushed the boundaries of previously distributed content. With sitcoms like *King of the Hill* (1997) and *Family Guy* (1999), they generated large audiences drawn to the foul-mouthed, sarcastic, genre-defining late-night content that proved, as Nick Kroll, the co-creator of *Big Mouth* (2017), tells TIME, “if you weren’t right for Fox Sunday night, then you weren’t on the air,” (Chow).

The show that started it all, inspiring the television revolution that would later influence remarkable creators to continue to push the narrative boundaries, was a dysfunctional, somewhat absurd family of loons called *The Simpsons*.

The Simpsons

The Simpsons premiered in January 1990 and represented the first prime-time animated series that allowed their writers to challenge the status quo through an irreverent tone akin to *All in the Family* (1971 - 83) (K. F. Cohen 143-44). The show delved into subjects like marital affairs, murder, addiction, sexuality, religion, and authority, challenging S&P conservative standpoints with bawdy humor and a cheeky dive into the taboo. The success of the series could be attributed to the postmodern style, blending complex and simple cultural references addressing contemporary issues delivered through witty writing (Furniss 354). Simply, it required the audience to be an active participant, regularly employing long-standing in-jokes and subtle nods to historical events, and it was mindblowing at the time. We devoured the series with a zeal usually reserved for live-action shows up to that point, and the clever use of subversive symbolic references with low-brow, adult-oriented humor began to change how many of us viewed animation.

Only after the show's success proved that there was an adult audience interested in this type of content did cartoons made explicitly for adults come to mainstream prominence (Chow). What followed was a plethora of animated shows on Fox that picked up *The Simpsons* formula and created several popular mimics: *King of the Hill* in 1997,

Futurama and *Family Guy* in 1999, *American Dad!* in 2005, *The Cleveland Show* in 2009, and *Bob's Burgers* in 2011. Additionally, Cable networks, with their 24-hour programming and greater freedom to challenge the censors, jumped on the bandwagon, and MTV was the first to go full throttle.

Launched in 1981, Music Television, or MTV, wanted to capitalize on the success of the animated music video, establishing MTV Animation in the late 1980s to produce original animated content (Furniss 357-359). After the initial success of "Liquid Television" and "Cartoon Sushi," both programs that showcased independently created animation from outside of mainstream media, they introduced their first animated series that was born in the experimental playground of the film festival scene.

Beavis and Butt-Head

Introduced in *Frog Baseball* (1992) at "Spike and Mike's Sick and Twisted Animation Festival," Mike Judge's titular characters, Beavis and Butt-Head, were launched on the world (Furniss 318). Following the exploits of two adolescent boys obsessed with finding "chicks" (with non-existent success), listening to rock and roll, and avoiding responsibility at all costs, the show was unapologetically crass and incredibly popular. It represented the feckless nature of teenagerhood and resounded with a broad, mostly male, mostly white demographic that identified with the numbskull duo. However, it was Judge's unique, outsider perspective, represented by the image of a rundown, trash-filled middle America that lent the series credence and set it apart from the overly sanitized, overly romanticized contemporaries on

other networks (Sommerlad). It was a hit because of the unique perspective of the creator and the willingness of the network to let that creator construct his content uninhibited.

The series even transitioned into feature film with *Beavis and Butt-Head Do America* in 1996, bringing the characters full circle from early independent film festival to blockbuster box office hit. The series would also set the tone for a style of animated comedy that was unapologetic in its critique of popular culture and political correctness buried deep inside a shell of dick jokes and categorical dumbassery. For many budding animators, the shock of a cartoon show displaying this level of irreverence for the establishment would lead to a new breed of independently minded content creators. In a sense, it proved that narrative taken from a personal rather than commercial perspective had an audience and it encouraged more industry leaders to take risks.

Daria

MTV recognized that they needed a show for girls to bring in a female audience, and *Daria*, developed in 1997 by Glenn Eichler and Susie Lewis on a bit character in *Beavis and Butt-Head*, became the longest-running animated series for the network (Conti). The deadpanned, sardonic animated series was a topical, intelligently written foray into the inner workings of high school girls. It was a girl show led by a non-traditional depiction of teenaged outsiders whose weirdness was celebrated rather than ridiculed, which was a novelty at the time. The female characters actually looked like real teenagers rather than the idealized version of Hollywood and, most crucially, the show didn't follow the typical soap-opera format of the

budding teen drama genre that was taking over mainstream: they were given authenticity through the approach of what it was actually like to be a teenager that had no interest in conforming (Plitt). There were a few love interests over the run of the series. Still, they never took precedent, and the fundamental identity of Daria and Jane was never intrinsically linked to their worth as a romantic partner, which was a revelation to a gothic nerd looking for representation in media.

Additionally, while the show wasn't overtly political, it didn't shy away from topics like racism, eating disorders, capitalism, or the monetization of youth culture. However, the writers never handled these topics in an overtly exploitative fashion and the lack of over-dramatization related to teenagers who were similarly dealing with comparable issues. For young women, this approach both narratively and symbolically provided a role model of sorts that represented their actual state of being and the animated medium provided a safer avenue to explore through an increased ability to suspend disbelief. For the first time, we were represented by some form other than the perfect princess, the doting daughter, or the obedient wife.

However, some shows pushed the boundaries with the expressed intention of shining a light on the absurdities of modern American culture. The biting, often raunchy or disgusting commentary challenged even the most liberal viewer.

South Park

Debuting as a TV series in 1997 on Comedy Central with a TV-MA rating, *South Park* was the brainchild of Trey Parker and Matt Stone centered around a group of foul-mouthed

adolescent boys getting into trouble depicted in a paper cut-out animated style (Furniss 363). Divisive and irreverent from its inception as "The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Frosty," a violent Christmassy themed stop-motion short done in film school, South Park pushed the boundaries of free speech in a time of ever-increasing censorship and conservative influence. After receiving \$1200 from then Fox executive Brian Graden to remake the short as a digital Christmas card, it quickly went viral (possibly the first to do so), coming to the attention of Doug Herzog from Comedy Central who asked the pair to develop it into a show (Leonard). Wildly popular from the pilot, the show has the dubious honor of premiering with a TV-MA rating and an instant dislike from conservative groups.

Now 23 years later, the show is still going strong, having tackled everything from consumerism, the nature of censorship, identity, sexuality, popular culture and 9-11, to Oprah's talking vagina and porn-addicted Jesus. Its gained mainstream recognition, winning five Primetime Emmys, an Annie Award, a Peabody, and four Online Film & Television Association Awards, while branching into feature film in 1999 with *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*. The pair have continued to push the narrative boundaries of what's considered off-limits, reflecting an ethos Parker shared during their acceptance speech at the Peabody Awards in 2006, "When Matt and I first started making 'South Park', we asked ourselves two questions: What is socially responsible broadcasting, and how can artists provoke a call to change?" (Leonard).

Other shows have picked up the mantle, expanding the range of narrative content and representation that is available to viewers. While some have channeled the adult sitcom

narrative focus of *The Simpsons*, others have addressed complex cultural and philosophical conundrums like *Rick and Morty* (2013) and *The Boondocks* (2005).

Developed by Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland for Cartoon Network's late-night programming block called "Adult Swim", *Rick and Morty* originated from an animated short parodying *Back to the Future* that premiered at Channel 101, a monthly short film festival in Los Angeles that was co-founded by Harmon (I. Cohen). Tackling extraordinarily deep existential and scientific subject matter, the show did so in a way that blatantly rejected complex emotional or politically correct imperatives. With a directive that plausibility is unimportant to the premise, episodes tackle complicated subject matter like theoretical physics, ethics in science, and the nature of reality through the mad-cap adventures of Rick, the crazy scientist, and his grandson Morty (Schwartz).

Conversely, *The Boondocks* delved into the complex issues of Black culture, politics, and the moral implications of historical events in the United States. Also airing during Cartoon Network's "Adult Swim," *The Boondocks* was developed in 2005 by Aaron McGruder into an animated series based on his controversial comic strip of the same name. The show, banned in some publications for its biting and often controversial stances on issues like race and war, follows the politically dense musings of Huey Freeman, a 10-year-old "afro-wearing, self-styled African-American radical" and Riley, his "foul-mouthed, 8-year-old gangsta wannabe brother" after they move into a mainly white Chicago suburb with their grandfather (Robinson). Divisive and unapologetic, McGruder tackled content that was directly related to his experiences growing up black in America by aiming to be intentionally provocative. Using humor as a

conveyance of ideas and as a weapon, the narrative content is both thought-provokingly uncomfortable and wonderfully entertaining. He intended to expand the dialogue on race relations in this country and to evolve it by challenging the way of thinking through a change in perspective (Robinson).

In many ways, he was successful, as conversations amongst friends that started about specific amusing narrative points changed to the depth of meaning they symbolically represented. As a non-person of color, it forced me to look at the events depicted from outside my perspective and comfort zone, and the animated medium became a vehicle for change.

None of this content could have been possible without the development of the internet and the introduction of a globalist perspective on storytelling. Many of the most popular television shows recently or currently airing owe their existence to creators who utilized internet resources early on to introduce their brand of narrative, to hone their craft, or both.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE INTERNET

Not since the development of film itself has a more significant impact on the evolution of cinematic entertainment taken place than the advent of the internet. Animation, in particular, has witnessed a period of exponential growth that continues to alter the course of its evolution as the means to contribute as a practitioner has become easier to access. Over its evolution, improvements in bandwidth, content posting tools, digitization and capture technology, connectivity, social media, and advertising commercialization coupled with increased penetration contributed to a user-generated content frenzy in the early 2000s (Bell). Through the globalist nature of the technology, emergent independent filmmakers utilizing this resource have affected changes within the structure and definition of animation as a medium, and mainstream media is paying attention.

Additionally, studio level software and hardware steadily decreased in price as advancements were made in manufacturing, hosting, and distribution. The rapid advancement of the internet and development of sites like YouTube and Vimeo enabled artists to mass disseminate their work without the high costs of professional distribution. Increased access to the web also led to the formation of online social groups dedicated to their particular niche, sharing detailed information on complex processes through written or recorded tutorials. While professional training through technical programs or accredited universities is still the norm, any individual with an interest in a branch of the animation industry can find the resources necessary to self-educate. Coupled with a lack of censorship in content or traffic until recent

years, the internet has promoted a space of uninhibited exploration reminiscent of the early days of entertainment and animation in particular.

The content I create has benefited as a direct result. I can access knowledge pooled from communities of enthusiasts accessible via a computer and a stable wireless connection. In need of inspiration, I can find examples of different styles and narrative approaches from across the globe. If a new approach strikes my fancy, various tools created to achieve those results are readily downloadable and easy to integrate. With a finished product in hand, I can distribute to any number of online hosting services as quickly as my upload speeds will allow.

In essence, independent storytellers are challenging Hollywood's exclusivity by making content outside of the studio's classically structured framework and censorship organizations. Add to that a generation of rising content creators exposed to a vast array of globally produced entertainment that are taking leadership positions, the influence on cultural tastes and perspectives have evolved. As Andrew Chow stated, "the globalization of content has opened up American audiences to high-quality adult animation shows from Japan, France and elsewhere, raising the bar for everyone" (Chow).

Web Communities

The popularity, ease of use, and availability of Flash created the ideal animated tool for the budding internet. As data speeds increased and web coding evolved to handle complex content, sites devoted to user-generated content exploded. The key for many of these sites was the no-holds-barred approach to content, allowing the community to dictate its own culture.

Due to the global nature of the internet, communities formed from individuals of all backgrounds and cultures, contributing varying artistic expressions and perspectives based on an individual's preference rather than popularity.

New sites like Newgrounds, eBaum's World, and CollegeHumor became bastions for user-created content, typically with Flash animation, that evolved into proto versions of web series and comics. These sites offered a place for individuals to come together with similar interests, sharing content that tied to their perspective rather than a brand identity, encouraging the development of their chosen interest. Some were extremely specific in their niche, like brickfilms.com, established in 2000, and bricksinmotion.com, established in 2001, that specialized in LEGO animation, providing communities that shared techniques and well as a place to exhibit their work (Furniss 320). Others were simply a collection of tangentially related topics that generated discourse. The critical point, though, was in the uninhibited and unrestricted sharing of content and ideas, putting the direction of learning in the hands of the user. Here, the meme evolved, but so too did the protest short.

Independent content creators have gone so far as to create their own web series, gaining recognition through their experimental use of animation and storytelling, eventually transitioning their content into mainstream media channels.

WhirlGirl

Introduced at an internet trade show in March 1997, *Whirlgirl* initially debuted as an online webcomic with limited animation and music loops but would evolve to become the first

fully animated show on the web with the introduction of Flash 2.0 (Origins). Over the course of its 100 episodes, it would create a foundation for the legitimization of content created through the internet, garnering international attention and media coverage through a variety of industry firsts. The goal of Visionary Media, the creator of the series, was to create stories that weren't devoted to one specific media, as founder, Chairman and CEO David B. Williams explained that "the shows can go on the Internet and have a vibrant life there but can also go to television, film, video games, and print because why consider a great character and great stories as only being able to live in one 'box'?" (Dannacher). By taking an agnostic approach, character and story reigned supreme, and a devoted fanbase followed the cross-media transitions that would begin to blur the lines between the medias.

WhirlGirl also made a significant transition that would herald an industry-changing style of collaboration between content produced on the internet and material created for mainstream media. In January 1999, the show became the first independently-produced animated cartoon from the web to be licensed by a major network, and in February 1999, it was the first to simulcast on the internet and on-air (DeMott).

Homestar Runner

More than just a simple web series, the Brothers Chaps, as Mike and Matt credit themselves directorially, wanted to create a space for wholesome content that was entertaining but accessible. Creating the site HomestarRunner.com in 2000, a web series also premiered under the same name that would become viral by word of mouth alone (Goldstein).

Based on a picture book the duo created in 1996 as a joke called *The Homestar Runner Enters the Strongest Man in the World Contest*, the series focuses on the off-time between competition adventures of a cast of characters led by Homestar and Strong Bad.

They developed a level interactivity that was borderline science fiction at the time by creating clickable easter eggs and hidden messages, and the skyrocketing popularity caught the attention of major tv networks. Cartoon Network and Comedy Central both offered deals rejected by the brother's, citing a development process that would force their content to conform to the network's idea of narrative, changing the type of storytelling they could focus on (Goldstein). By self-publishing, they bypassed the biases present in the mainstream media pipeline and connected directly with their audience, laying the foundations that would innovate an entire industry.

The pair wanted to maintain their interactive relationship with the audience, and to do so, they determined early on that the site wouldn't utilize pop-up ads to generate revenue. Instead, they turned to merchandise, and by 2002 they were making enough off the sales to sustain the website and themselves (Meinheit). They were truly independent in a way that would prove that total creative control and self-distribution was financially viable.

Eventually they capitalized on their success, transitioning professionally into mainstream media at a time when that path wasn't common, making music videos with They Might Be Giants and Of Montreal, gaining a development deal with Disney, and directing and writing gigs (VanDerWerff, How Homestar Runner changed web series for the better).

Happy Tree Friends

Contrastingly, *Happy Tree Friends* stylistically mimicked a children's show, but narratively is shockingly crass and violent. Mondo Media makes no apologies about the level of violence depicted, and their series changed the game when it came to unrestricted content. With a style reminiscent of the *Care Bears*, the plot focuses on the unfortunate exploits of a group of cuddly forest animals that is anything but family-friendly. Animals repeatedly fall victim to horrible accidents, from decapitated limbs to impalement, that reveals themselves in gouts of blood and viscera to the tune of screams of agony. Something so outrageously violent shouldn't be appealing, but the ridiculous nature of the accidents and simplistic flash animation makes it surprisingly easy to digest as well as insanely funny. It taps into something primal that resulted from constant exposure to the overly sanitized offerings of the 1980s, as fan Matt Morgan noted in an interview for SFGATE, "I think the show represents a long-overdue backlash against the kinds of overly preachy, sugary cartoons of the 1980s. Deep down, I think everyone who endured the sugary fare really wanted to see the Care Bears and their ilk meet tragic ends" (Fost).

Most importantly, they proved that ad revenue could be a viable business model in the budding internet that could support artists financially while promoting creativity. Initially developed as a series to be sold to mainstream television or film studios, Mondo Media had to adjust that business model to a multipronged attack after no studio came knocking: the site features ads that generate revenue through traffic, the shorts are aired internationally through MTV International, and their merchandise sells in stores and online (Fost).

Eventually, the development of Vimeo in 2004 and YouTube in 2005 fulfilled the full concept of self-distribution, providing high-resolution video hosting that could categorize content, highlight popular work, and notify subscribers when new content was posted (Furniss 320). These sites, though their financial success, proved that content streamed online was the wave of the future that would change the narrative reach of animation and the type of content produced.

Rise of Streaming

The real change to the animated medium and the film industry as a whole was in the confluence of mainstream media and the internet. This new direct streaming distribution method has tapped into the global internet audience, and as the number of providers has expanded, so too has the willingness to experiment. Content from unique, often marginalized perspectives has gained traction, finding diverse audiences craving a kind of representation that's been historically sorely lacking and inspiring independent artists to be bold.

As broadband speeds increased to a level to support more significant levels of data and the participation rate increased among users, the advent of streaming led to a new type of content distribution that is directly challenging the traditional studio structure. Able to reach a wider audience, streaming distributors began by distributing unaired content and gradually expanded into creating original content. With a broad audience unfettered by geographical borders, streaming service found that by offering the broadest range of subject matter possible, they were able to allow the user to cater the experience to their particular tastes on their

schedule. The division between daytime and primetime disappeared, and the associations with those time slots to appropriate content also faded away. Not only was the user able to explore based on a list of genres, styles, and lengths, they were able to do so at their leisure, catering their consumption to their schedule.

This elimination of stratified time slots and gathering of internationally produced content also has a profound effect on animation: it broke free from the Saturday Morning cartoon mindset even further. Users were able to choose what type of animated content they wanted to watch, and, with a growing contingent of subscribers, the material didn't have to cater to a majority of the consumers to keep the company solvent. Streaming companies could take risks as they began challenging the mainstream studio content model by producing original content of their own. As *Gravity Falls* creator Alex Hirsch stated after signing a deal with Netflix, "Now that animated content has been freed from the need of appealing to everyone, I think we're going to see a fast evolution that's been long overdue" (Chow).

Netflix

We owe much of this relationship evolution to Netflix's development and its rapid expansion into the entertainment industry that has tapped into this individualistic approach to creativity. Before Netflix, consumers accessed most cinematic content in one of three ways: at the movie theater, on VHS, or eventually DVD, or via television. Consumers were tied to a prolonged schedule of release dictated by the distributors and studios, and the closest collection of entertainment was your local Blockbuster. Once Netflix gathered content in one

place and made it available on-demand, first through disk rentals, then through digital streaming, the way we interact with the media changed. This transition to convenient, personalized content marked the beginning of a mass exodus from traditional cable sources, a loss of about 33% by 2018, and a rise in original streaming content (Netflix spent a little over \$11 billion on the original content in 2018) (Morgan).

Key to this development is Netflix's willingness to take risks, insulated somewhat by the sheer amount of content available on their platform and the incredibly diverse range of their subscribers. Like a modern-day gold rush, a generation of creators raised on the early television trailblazers, global internet communities, and experimental filmmaking are flocking to the streaming provider, creating vibrant animated content like *BoJack Horseman* that reflects this new perspective in storytelling.

Emotionally ambitious and remarkably goofy, *BoJack Horseman* debuted on Netflix in 2014 and takes place in a surreal alternative universe that narratively merges the diametric concepts of bleakness and joy (Nussbaum). The first original animated show from the provider, it is comprised of a cast of complex characters with a wide range of perspectives – and neuroses – that follows the exploits of BoJack, a horse and former sitcom star trying to revitalize his decaying acting career. The show unapologetically tackles dark subjects, fearlessly delving into vividly accurate depictions of mental illness while invoking a wacky, overly indulgent approach to comedy that somehow merges seamlessly. It was refreshing in its honesty, striking a chord with viewers who had rarely witnessed their conditions addressed realistically by mainstream media while still managing to be massively entertaining. Speaking in

an interview with Kwame Opam of *The Verge*, creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg addresses the directives of the alternative narrative, saying, "I think to me, I wanted to tell a [story] that I felt was honest, and I think a lot of shows that I see are not honest about sadness. I wanted to talk about it, and how hard it is to not be sad for some people" (Opam).

Stylistically, there's a return to the graphic origins of the medium 100 years before with simple linework, block color, and simplified animation. The show isn't about visual realism, but instead harnesses the inherently chaotic nature of the medium and a surrealist approach to illustrate the depths of mental trauma. It is perhaps because of the child-like nature of bright, primary colors and implausible, anthropomorphized characters that the audience can enthusiastically interact with such depressing themes while still finding entertainment value. Therein lies the power of the animated cartoon, as Dana Schwartz surmised in her article "BoJack Horseman, Rick and Morty, and the new golden age of animation" for EW:

The only villains in BoJack Horsman are the inevitable tragedies of real life. It's dark, and oftentimes bleak, verging on nihilistic. And because we experience it through the story of a cartoon horse, it's palatable, balanced by a universe that also has room for "drone thrones" and a cat with a copy of Jonathan Franzen's *Purity*. (Schwartz)

Since then, Netflix has created a wide range of animated content. Some are focused on everyday issues like *Big Mouth* (2017), a coming of age romp through a group of middle schooler's struggles with puberty led by foul-mouthed, over-sexualized hormone monsters. Others invoke the experimental ethos of the festival culture like *Love, Death & Robots* (2019), a science fiction anthology whose episodes are each developed by a different crew of animators from around the globe. From mockumentaries to LGBTQ superheroes, Netflix has nurtured a

movement that is rapidly evolving both mainstream media and the way we define mediums within it.

While Netflix exists at the forefather of streaming, they are by no means the standalone provider anymore. Other companies have jumped into the streaming game, creating what is currently considered the Streaming Wars, but its effects have only expanded the content offerings. Most notably, Amazon's recent debut of their series *Undone* at the end of 2019 gained recognition for its use of rotoscoping to animate over live-action. Though it is animation, how the creators employ the medium to reinforce specific narrative symbolism makes it unique. In a series dealing with personal traumas, mental instability, and time travel, the use of rotoscoping has a twofold effect: it grounds the action in reality, lending the events credence, but bends the laws of nature and physics to create a science-fiction dreamscape (VanDerWerff, You've never seen anything quite like Amazon's *Undone*. We mean that literally.). The primary focus is on portraying struggles with mental health in a realistic way, even if the subject matter is cocooned in the fantastical notion of time travel and special abilities. It's a mature animated show with profound narrative influences that makes you forget it's animated at all, becoming a tool of the artist rather than a representation of a prescribed demographic.

That will be the legacy of the streaming movement: the expansion of content and the justification for content creators to continue evolving their personal message with whatever medium suits their message best. By wresting control from the original studio powerhouses, streaming has opened avenues for representation that didn't exist and has hopefully changed

the industry for the better. With the recent buying spree of Disney and the growing censorship of the internet, we'll have to see.

CHAPTER SIX: OUROBOROS

To say that this transition from traditional, family-focused animation to an unlimited expansion of animation across media had a profound effect on my work would be an understatement. This major transition in the narrative approach straddled the analog foundations of my early childhood and the digital revolution of my teens, placing my formative years at ground zero of what is considered the modern golden age of animation. Raised on the Disney classics and generally consumer-centric Saturday morning cartoons, I quickly rejected the available animated offerings as my interest in the arts grew. The animated offerings of this period were pushing a homogenized perspective centered around cultural conformity prevalent in mainstream media and held little interest for someone looking to express themselves alternatively. I was different, rejecting ideals considered traditionally or appropriately female, and the watered-down fairytales irritated rather than inspired me.

Through this experience, I did not have deep emotional ties to animation growing up. I wasn't inspired by it or interested in creating within it; it was never my goal as a kid to be an animator. I have always loved the arts, dabbling in one medium after another, but like most of the viewing public, I didn't consider animation to be an art form. There was undoubtedly artistry involved, but it didn't touch my soul the way a beautiful painting or a theatrical production did. It was only later in life, after becoming a practitioner in traditional art, dramatic arts, and digital arts, that my opinions on the animated medium began to change. I realized that animation, in all of its hybrid glory, combines the elements of all these art forms I enjoyed.

As I delved deeper into my history with the medium, I began to make connections to shows or films that did spark my interest after this dissociative period of my childhood, and they all pushed against the established pre-television narrative traditions and internet revolution. *The Simpsons* showed me that mainstream could be witty and well written in its animated offerings. *Beavis and Butt-Head* shocked me in its brutal irreverence. *Daria* gave me representation that made me feel less alone in my social awkwardness. *South Park* challenged me to defend a creator's right to make a controversial political or social statement no matter the form in which it's delivered. *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, while the most child-friendly of them all, challenged the standard heroic conventions by elevating the misfit to the forefront, championing oddness rather than conforming it.

I experienced groundbreaking technological advancements firsthand, and the internet specifically opened me up to a vast world of individuals seeking similar experiences, full of budding artists and consumers craving something different. EBaum's World became a staple amongst my social group, with hilariously presented social commentary that was engaging because it was animated. JibJab became a language in its own right shared amongst our group as our budding political activism grew as we graduated high school and entered college. I vividly recall laughing at JibJab's *This Land* political satire during the 2004 presidential election and sharing Jason Windsor's *The End of the World* with my friends.

Streaming and the ever-expanding content offerings evoke a sense of experimentalism akin to the festival circuit. *BoJack Horseman* made me think as it made me laugh, encouraging me to explore my own experiences with mental health creatively. *Undone* inspired a change in

my technical approach, encouraging me to embrace otherworldliness as a means of animated expression. Additionally, the expansion of individualism and the investment in original content from new voices is inspiring a hopeful outlook on the creative possibilities in this rapidly evolving medium.

My animated lexicon was plentiful and varied, but I never reconsidered my opinion until formal education challenged me to do so. Through my training, I was exposed to content from around the world and challenged to think critically about it. I was introduced to our history and began to develop an appreciation through an academic lens, learning for the first time about the amazing artists who contributed to this rich tapestry of content beyond the conventional sphere. In approaching the creation of my first independent animated short as a Graduate student, I discovered why the perception of animation within this country was so different from the rest of the world and how we got to this divergent point. In researching the history of my chosen medium from a globalist perspective, I noticed for the first time the extreme level of censorship we've operated under for nearly a century and how it affected our entertainment.

The preceding pages of this document outline my research into the history of animation, engendering a growing awareness of the effect its content has had on artists like me and the work defined in this chapter. Most importantly, it outlines how the recent evolutions in the industry mimic my experience growing up transitioning from an analog childhood to digital adulthood. What was significant about the analysis of this content, though, was the recognition of the effect political and social commentary had on a medium that I never associated with anything beyond fairytales and toy sales until I approached it from an academic standpoint. This

decade long exploration further opened the medium to me, illuminating my own evolved associative relationship that has traversed fully from abject dismissal to profound artistic appreciation. Through the ever-expanding content available online and the works introduced through formal education, I recognized the power inherent in the animated medium to tackle complicated subject matter in a way that would be powerful and palatable. The interconnectedness and globalization outlined directly contributed to the creation of my animated short, *Ouroboros*.

Synopsis

Ouroboros is a visual exploration of the journey through mental illness and identity reconciliation. Centering around the experiences of Dysphoria and her web-like cocoon of a world, the story traverses through the process of dissociation, dismantling of harmful coping mechanisms, mourning, and reconciliation of self into a unified identity. This experimental digital short draws influence from personal experience, German and Abstract Expressionism, philosophical identity politics, and scientific research. Its focus is to tap into the unique physical properties of animation that promote an elevated willingness to suspend disbelief as the laws of nature are bent or outright broken in order to portray the struggle with mental illness symbolically.

Development

From an early age, I have been fascinated with the evolving definition of self, questioning why individuals make the choices they do and what drives the force categorized as personality. Until recently, the media had portrayed issues of mental health as a punchline to further a comedic objective or as a cautionary tale about the dangers these individuals pose to society. That lack of accurate representation, especially in my childhood, skewed my perceptions of self and created a feedback loop in my seeming inability to be acceptably normal. It wasn't until films like *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), and television shows like *Daria* (1997) came along that I saw otherness represented as natural rather than dangerous or ridiculous. The homogeneity portrayed by popular media, especially Disney, was being challenged, and content that I was actively consuming began to change.

Considering that Tim Burton was one of my primary influences growing up, there's little surprise that German Expressionism is a common thread throughout my film. Two of his works, *Vincent* (1982), an animated short he produced at Disney, and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), produced for Touchstone and directed by Henry Selick, have stuck with me for their interpretation of otherness. Well known for his misfit characters, Burton's elevation of individuals usually relegated to second fiddle or plot devices helped redefine the hero's journey within cinema and my approach to storytelling. It was the first time in my experience that mental illness and otherness was represented in media, especially animation, without the

traditional clichéd biases, and it encouraged me to tell stories from an individualistic perspective.

I wanted to tell a truly personal story that utilized technology and narrative structure in ways that would benefit the symbolism rather than a specific stylistic imperative established by the medium. In constructing the story, I began looking into the less savory aspects of my personality, ones I categorized as outside my core identity and came to realize that identity is far too dynamic to be strictly binary: good vs. evil, male vs. female, able vs. disabled. The concept is grounded in the idea of internal conflict and the war between perception and expectation, between what society dictates as acceptable and how you contort yourself to fit that definition. Coupled with a depressive disorder, this can result in a fracturing of the idea of self, where negative thoughts and emotions are buried or denied to present a happy, well-adjusted front. The story, therefore, represents the moment an individual begins stripping away the negative coping mechanism locking them in a perpetual cycle of denial, explosion, and malaise.

Character

Gender, social status, cultural classification, and the subjective interpretation of the resulting expectations all play an essential role in the physical embodiment of my main character, Dysphoria. More biographical than fictitious, the evolution of character within *Ouroboros* mirrors the extraordinarily personal experience of reconciling my depressive persona with what I identify as my real personality. Dysphoria, therefore, is the embodiment of

my harmful coping mechanisms; the barely contained chaos confined within a self-destructive regimented ritual.

The overall approach to the character's aesthetic is one of exaggeration and simplification, where emotional symbology dictates the form rather than strict naturalistic representation. Guillermo del Toro and Tim Burton's approaches to character design provide primary influence, wherein the physical characteristics are informed both by the environment and the existential dilemma of their existence. I wanted to strip down the human form to better reflect elements of a psychological state through the inaccurate lens of self-perception.

I also took inspiration from the traditional arts, particularly sculpture utilizing alternative visual narratives. The texture and definition of form within sculpture exist in direct relation to the type of material used, and this mimicked how animation possesses the same properties. Social Media exposed me to many different alternative artists, but Emil Melmoth struck a chord. Defined by depictions of deconstructed anatomy metamorphically melding with other forms to construct gruesome visual pieces, his sculptures invoke a sense of horror elevated to religious iconography. His subjects are broken open literally and figuratively, yet they are serene in their expression, forever frozen in their vulnerability. His palette is a play of sepia and reds, giving the impression of aged ivory coupled with preserved medical experiments.

Texturally, Melmoth's gothically horrific sculptures and monochromatic color schemes influenced the feel of the doll and humanistic versions of the character. They needed to convey a sense of 'other' more so than the energy version of Dysphoria, and the synthetic/natural blend present in the Melmoth's work both intrigues and disturbs in turn.

Therefore, taking all of these factors and the narrative goals into consideration, Dysphoria is the embodiment of her environment and the emotional state of the overall personality broken into three visual representations that morph as her identity evolves. Initially, she was to remain as a humanoid character that transitioned from human to a being entirely comprised of energy. As the process developed, I realized that her opening persona should be doll-like to reflect better the dissociation related to constructing a standard façade to function with society.

The initial form is visualized as a doll, illustrated in Figure 1, representing the false self-created to protect the true vulnerable self at the core.

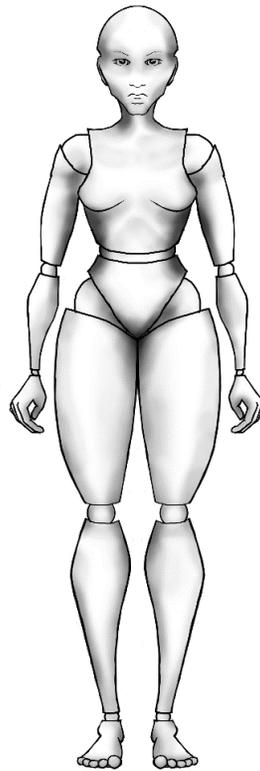


Figure 1: Dysphoria doll character concept drawing for *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

A mechanized mockery of the organic form, this doll version is the facade presented to the world and is the falsest in its representation. With a naturalistic textural foundation in woods and aged ceramics, reality is pushed intentionally towards the synthetic to emphasize the expressionistic nature of this existence. Her face does not animate in the conventional sense and is instead a painted-on facsimile of humanistic expression. In this state, she emotes entirely through her body language and movement, reducing her to a generalized metaphoric representation of human through a toy lens.

The next persona is that of humanistic Dysphoria, as shown in Figure 2.

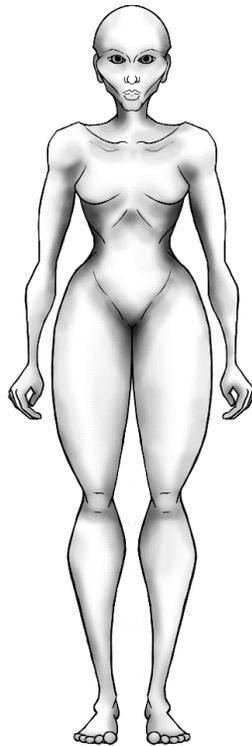


Figure 2: Dysphoria human character concept drawing for *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

Though more realistic and closest to human in her appearance, there still exists a distortion from reality. Her proportions are elongated and slightly off, with overly large eyes and exaggerated curves. Texturally she carries some of the doll properties, her skin more like malleable ivory rather than actual skin. This form represents the idea of self filtered through a socially defined perception of identity. She believes this to be her true self, and through this persona, we can witness a full range of emotions.

The final persona is her true self, energy Dysphoria, embodied by an energy core stripped of all pretense, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Dysphoria energy character concept drawing for *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

This energy form is the only version represented with vibrant, saturated color and whose glowing light masks or softens the defining human characteristics. This iteration is less about perceptible emotional or physical categorizations and more about simple existence. It is a version completely stripped of masks and coping mechanisms, representing the inner consciousness free from delusion.

In all these forms, the most obvious nod to her vulnerability is the absence of clothing, body hair, or detailed genitalia. Lending a timelessness to the narrative, the lack of these three vital identifying factors also permits the viewer to focus on the emotional impact of the events as they relate to their own experiences. Though she does possess some critical physical attributes that are female, such as breasts and wide hips, the elimination of physically accurate genital features permits a narrative from a female perspective that is readily accessible by all genders.

This omission also serves as a nod to the pervasiveness of the oversexualization of female characters within animation and entertainment media despite the rise in awareness, as Mark Collington notes:

Despite the rise of 'Girl Power' in the 1990s and feminist attempts to address female empowerment in animation and other media, submissive fairy tale princesses have somewhat paradoxically been superseded by increasingly sexualized characters in animated television series such as *Bratz*. This continues to send out a dangerous message that further engenders an unhealthy misunderstanding of 'normal' body image and identity foundations in girls, and in turn perception of the female individual in boys. (Collington 186)

She is utterly vulnerable to the male gaze, naked and exposed. She should be the epitome of a sexual object, but she possesses none of the typical accoutrement used to overemphasize her sex. Her female attributes are incidental to her mental anguish, aligning the visual narrative to the symbolic release of prescribed societal categorization.

Environment

Interestingly, my early influences in the animated medium were primarily stop-motion as the other animated offerings held little visual interest to me. The tangible tactility of the materials elicited a sense of memory, transforming the emotional impact of the work into something uniquely personal for each viewer. While I enjoyed the feeling that it elicited, stop-motion was artistically limiting in its ability to push the boundaries due to its materiality. Transitioning that feeling into 3D and the limitless potential it afforded became my goal.

There is a certain otherworldly feel to 3D animation that lends itself to the comfortable suspension of disbelief. Audiences are more willing to emotionally participate in the experience of a strange, vaguely horrific location because of the nature of the medium. In conceiving the design of my world, I employed a multi-pronged approach that combined the use of classic narrative film symbolism, scientific-technical models, and mathematically derived natural patterns. The intended goal is to create emotional associations by giving subjective, immaterial thought processes a physical embodiment through representations found in reality. The inspiration for this technique was Lillian Schwartz's use of scientific and psychological

approaches to her design, which created a visual language for experimental digital artists, and Mary Ellen Bute's pioneering exploratory visualization of sound.

In representing the mind, my approach was to reference physical structures found in the natural world to reflect metaphorical thought processes. The overall shape was based on the Voronoi fractal, a repeating pattern found throughout nature that is present in structures as vast as the universe and as minute as neural networks within the human brain. Its natural abundance would spark a familiarity in the viewer subconsciously, but the abstract chaos of its cocoon-like scale would intentionally rub against that familiarity, developing a visual tension.

This structure also worked quite well with my love-hate fascination with Abstract Expressionism and its potential for individualized interpretation. With an emphasis on the expression of thought, emotion, and spirit, Abstract Expressionist works like Lee Krasner's *Gothic Landscape* and Jay DeFeo's *The Rose* spark an emotional reaction that is heavily predicated on personal interpretation. With my focus on emotion as represented in shape and light, I designed a space that was a representation of duality, both expansive and claustrophobic, as illustrated in Figure 4.

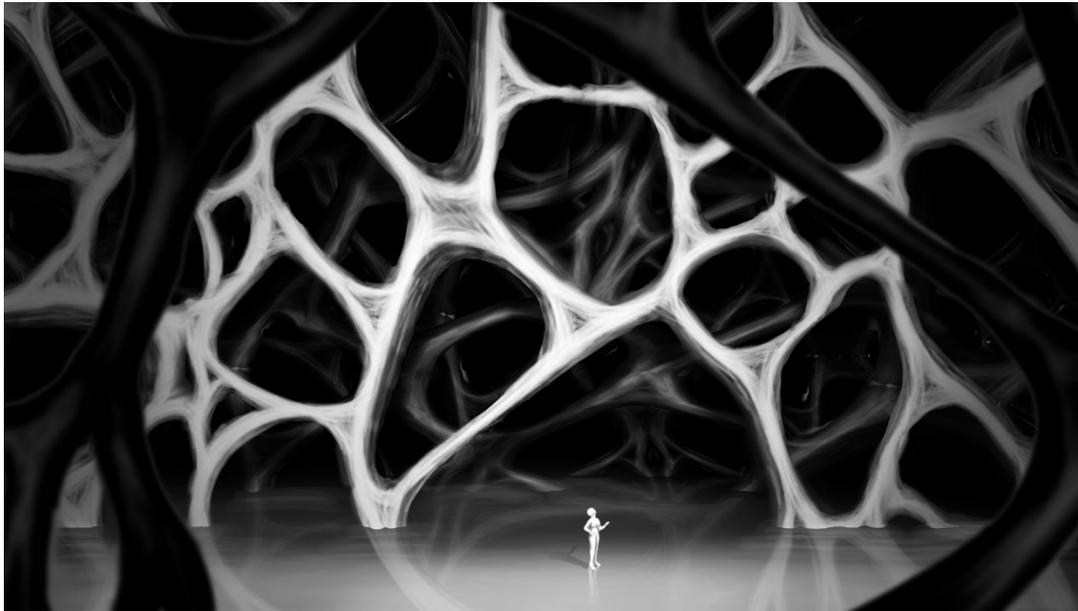


Figure 4: Environment concept illustration for *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

The color was also an essential factor in my set design that was heavily influenced by both German Expressionism and psychological studies. Choosing a primarily grey-scale approach allowed me to paint with shadows and light, prevalent in the Expressionist movement while affording me the ability to represent the perception of a depressive brain visually. Preliminary studies by a group of researchers from the University of Freiburg have found a correlation between the loss of contrast perception and the presence of a heavy depressive episode, lending credence to the idea that there is a physical basis for the feeling of color being drained from the world when you're sad (Constandi).

Plot Devices

The primary plot device revolves around light and the resulting transformations. Presented as both a destructive and constructive force, the presence of white light and its varying intensities is the visual embodiment of personal psychological growth. By accelerating the increasing intensity of the light, its presence evolves from a byproduct of Dysphoria's actions to an active force of change in this world. The crucial moment comes when the light eliminates Dysphoria's world and her alter-egos. The total absence of place and identity housed in a void of pure white light reflects the crossroads moment of realization within her: accept all parts of self that have been exposed or forever exist within limbo.

Additionally, my goal of converting the audience from passive viewer to active participant of the narrative gained inspiration from the use of the one-shot in cinema. Masterfully employed by directors like Alfonso Cuarón and David Lynch, they utilize this type of shot purposefully to advance the narrative and heighten the emotional impact by playing on the voyeuristic nature of the technique. Through this, they create a symbiotic relationship between the viewer and the story, pulling the audience deep into the tale by cracking that fourth wall and inviting them in.

Sound is itself a character that drove the plot within my film and has evolved significantly from the initial concept. Modeled initially after Danny Elfman's stylistic approach of playfully haunting orchestral compositions contrasted with whimsical bells, chimes, and harps, the score for *Ouroboros* evoked a sense of creepy horror and danger. While the tinkling, horrific

music box of the original concept worked, the emotive quality started too anxious and never gave the chance for emotions to evolve or build.

Through research into experimental sound design, the score evolved into a minimalistic approach that directly contrasts or enhances the chaotic visuals that are always in motion. By using sounds that focus on the emotional importance through sonic manipulation rather than adherence to proper melodic principles, the score better reflects the otherworldly nature of the mindscape.

Additionally, the use of morphing and overlapping voices reflects the nature of the internal monologue and how truly cruel we can be towards ourselves. I always described an oncoming depressive episode as the negative inner voices going from murmuring to screaming, and by representing this vocalization through narration, the process exposes the viewer to the relentlessness of this experience.

Technical Approach

Developing the short technically, I took advantage of any program or avenue of knowledge that was available to me. I considered each element of my film – character, environment, and special effects- as distinct entities. Whatever approach I took was focused on achieving the desired symbolic representation for which I was aiming rather than conforming to an established narrative technical approach. Knowing that they would have to integrate seamlessly and that the bulk of the pipeline would be built around Autodesk Maya, I made sure to plan whether the assets would be incorporated into the production as imported 3D assets or

in post-production as rendered images. In all this planning, access to online communities devoted to my chosen software was key.

The first element I tackled was the environment itself. I knew that I wanted to construct a web-like structure utilizing a Voronoi fractal at its core, but I didn't have time to model a complex object like this by hand. In researching different approaches that utilized automation, the information I found pointed to Houdini being the best avenue to achieve my goals. Having never touched the program, I relied on my previous knowledge of how 3D packages operated and online documentation to guide me. As with most software packages, the documentation provided by the company was informative for different elements present within the software but was extremely limited on workflow. I found plenty of information on how to implement a Voronoi fracture utilizing the appropriate node, however, the process of inverting the fracture to create volumes from the negative space was practically non-existent. This period of problem-solving is where web communities came into play.

Users have been experimenting with different uses for the Voronoi Fracture and, most importantly, explained why certain approaches worked or didn't. They illustrated how specific connections influenced the flow of data in simple language, and the discourse of question and response helped solidify certain thought processes many hadn't considered. By piecing together what affects individual nodes had on the structure through these discussion threads, I

was able to implement my version of experimentation, as shown in Figure 5, that resulted in the web illustrated in Figure 6 that was exported as mesh into Autodesk Maya.

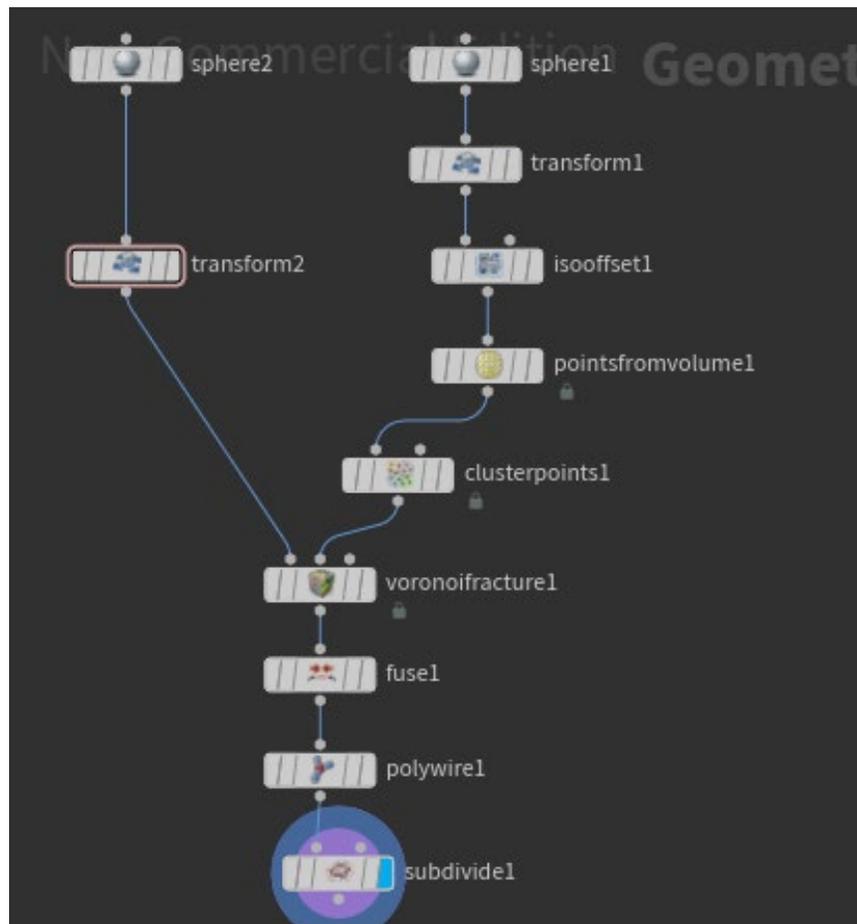


Figure 5: Houdini node tree created to produce the Web model for *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

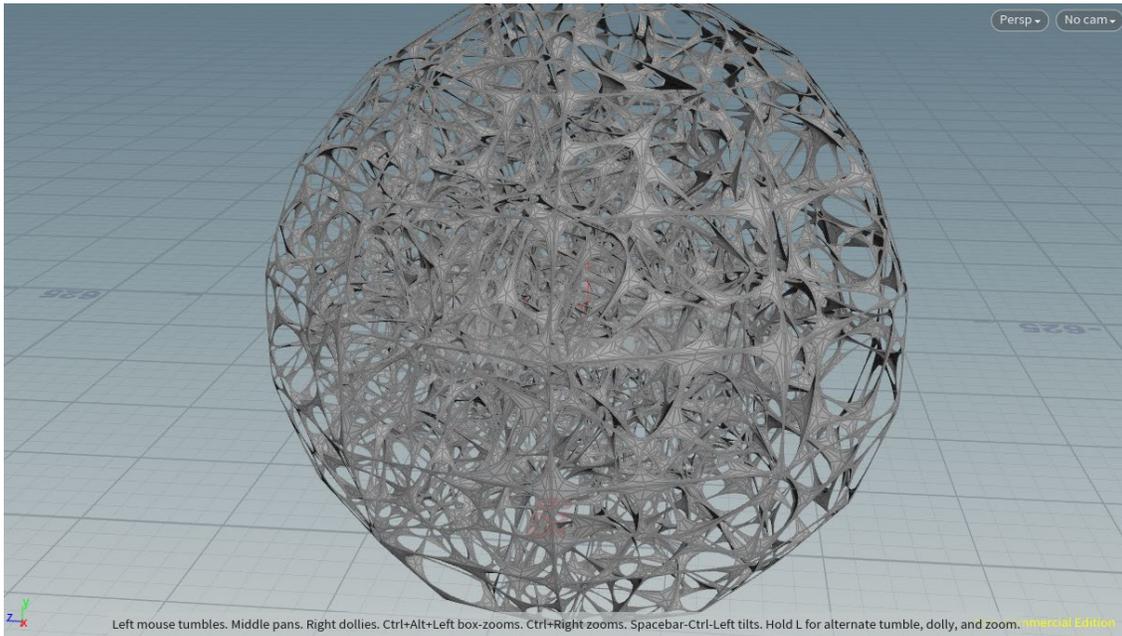


Figure 6: Houdini Web model for *Ouroboros*

Source: Heather Knott

In Maya, the geometry was reduced from over 18 million polys to two halves, each comprising a little over 1 million polys. The sheer size of the model and the complexity of the shape required a workflow that included Alembic caching just to make the rendering manageable. Once the size was reduced and UVs were properly constructed, the two halves were textured utilizing Renderman shaders.

Aesthetically, the objective of the look was to convey the duality of this fractured mind through opposing materials. The positive side of the web needed to evoke a sense of carefully constructed, forced positivity. The web shape is overly smooth but metallic, beautiful in its construction, but cold and unwelcoming in its extreme simplification. The shader was a straightforward Renderman PxrSurface shader that utilized a simple combination of a white

diffuse base, rough specular with lower contrast edge to face colors, and iridescence. The iridescent colors reinforce the human-made quality, making the structure feel imposing and offputting in its unnaturalness, as reflected in Figure 7.

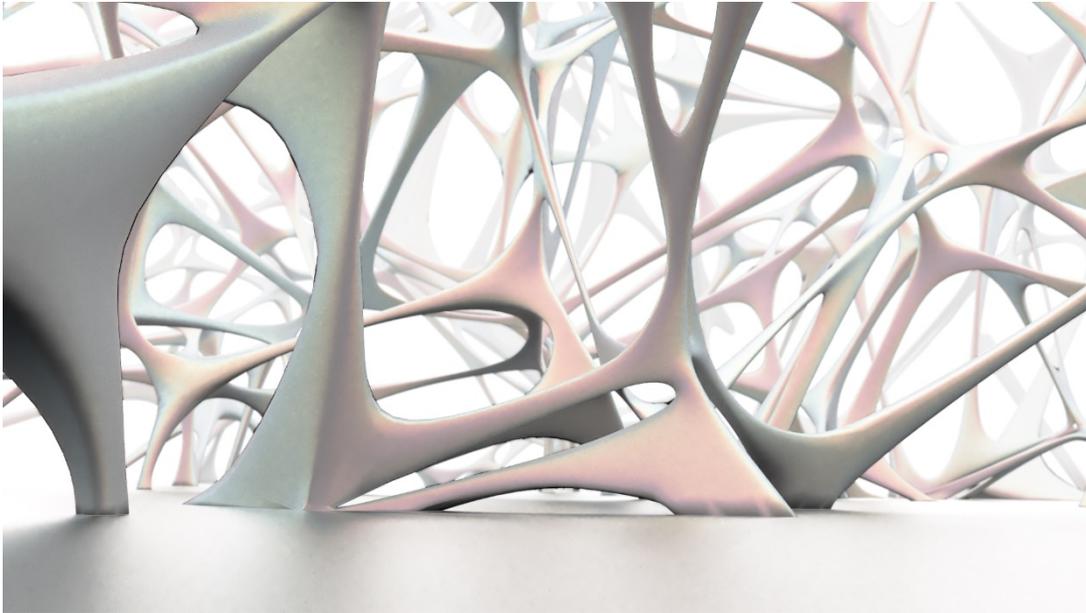


Figure 7: Still from *Ouroboros* illustrating the positive side of the mind
Source: Heather Knott

Conversely, the negative side needed to reflect organized chaos. It represented a mind under siege, weighed down by a cycle of repeated explosions of emotional outbursts, and the appearance necessitated a different approach. Taking the same web structure used on the positive side, I went in the opposite direction by adding displaced texture to the mesh to mimic more natural structures. Like stalactites and stalagmites, the concept of a structure built up slowly over time is reminiscent of the way negativity and disassociation develops, so the textural look of those structures worked well as visual analogs. Running a fractal and Worley

node controlled by 2D manifolds through a Scalar Displacement Layer node (Figure 8) coupled with a simple white diffuse shader with no specularity accomplished the desired look (Figure 9).

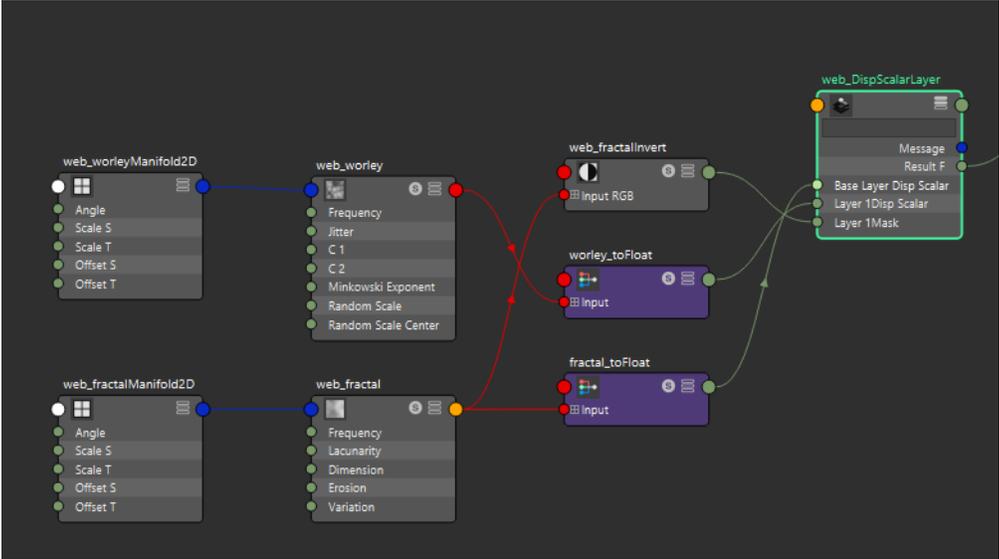


Figure 8: Node tree used for the negative web displacement for *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott



Figure 9: Still from *Ouroboros* illustrating the negative side of the mind
Source: Heather Knott

By combining this web-like design coupled with a simple floor shaded to look like glass, the environment achieved its minimalistic aesthetic.

The next object to tackle was the character, and her design would pose some interesting challenges. Without clothes or hair, there is nowhere to hide improper deformation as the human version animates, so I had to consider the structure and shape of muscle groups when constructing my edge flow, as seen in Figure 10. Additionally, her intentionally misproportioned design posed some unforeseen issues later in the pipeline, but the aesthetics of this approach was necessary.

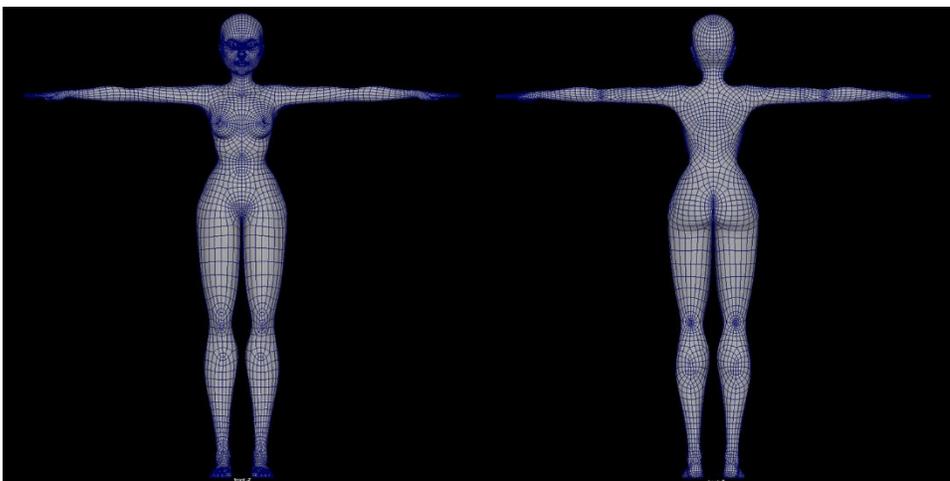


Figure 10: Dysphoria human model from *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

The doll version of her was based on the completed geometry of the human model. It was duplicated then simplified through a process of poly reduction to soften any sharp features built into the original model, especially the face. From there, the model was “dollified”, transitioning from soft to hard surface. Her facial features were all but eliminated; eyes and

inner mouth deleted; eye sockets and mouth sack sealed; and all former openings softened to give the impression of a bas relief type sculpture. Additionally, her body was sectioned to accommodate double ball joint sockets based on real-life dolls that possessed the most articulated movement. As illustrated in Figure 11, the result was a doll model that would look and behave like a child's toy.

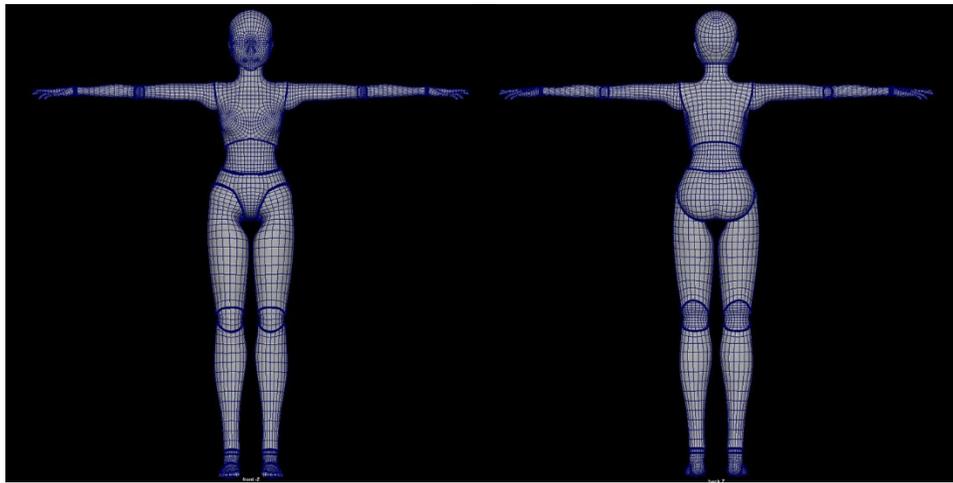


Figure 11: Dysphoria doll model from *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

Both models required a similar textural look so they could visually correlate, but also appear to be made from different materials. Created in Substance Painter, I utilized the web communities again to educate myself on the correct approach to working with the program and in the techniques needed to achieve my desired look. After learning about the multi-tile UV setup now built into both Maya and Substance, I altered my approach to include a UDIM workflow and proceeded to create the texture for each character.

The doll was the foundation this time, and her look was heavily influenced by porcelain dolls and Emil Melmoth's work, as I stated previously. Starting with a bone base, I layered a skin texture for color and a marble texture for cracks, painting out any areas that didn't appear to blend well. Once happy with the result, I painted a face onto the head and aged it by adding dirt and damage. The result, as can be seen in Figure 12, was quite successful.



Figure 12: Textured Dysphoria doll character for *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

Taking the textures from the doll model as a base, the human version was given a similar look but included some fundamental changes that reflect something more lifelike. The bone base was left in place, but its influence on the skin layer was toned down, and the colors altered slightly to warm up the overall look. The marble layer was increased and changed to a

warmer tone, giving her the appearance of having strange veins just under the surface, and the shininess was all but eliminated.

To preserve the otherworldliness, deeper color was painted in the crevasses and dirt was applied to low points to accentuate the shape of her figure in unusual ways, lending an exaggeration akin to theatrically applied makeup. This approach also served to hollow her out in places, especially in the eye sockets and below her sternum. The overall look is human but not, as can be seen in Figure 13.



Figure 13: Textured Dysphoria human character for *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

Adding another dimension to this texture, a shading network was developed in Maya to produce an opacity effect that dissolves her skin. By creating the base texture through a Worley and fractal node, ramps oriented through 3D texture nodes fed into 3D manifolds allowed the

texture to creep up her arms and legs selectively. Through this technique, the energy core beneath the surface.

The energy version of the character was textured entirely in Maya by a fellow graduate, Josh Cooper, using Renderman's rendering and shading package. He utilized a series of fractal nodes fed into blend and remap nodes to layer the different fractals in such a way as to mimic the aesthetic effect of plasma with a mix of large and small details. He enabled a system of customizable coloration through the addition of color mix nodes, and the scripting of the animation through a time expression allowed the plasma to flow at a consistent rate (Figure 14).

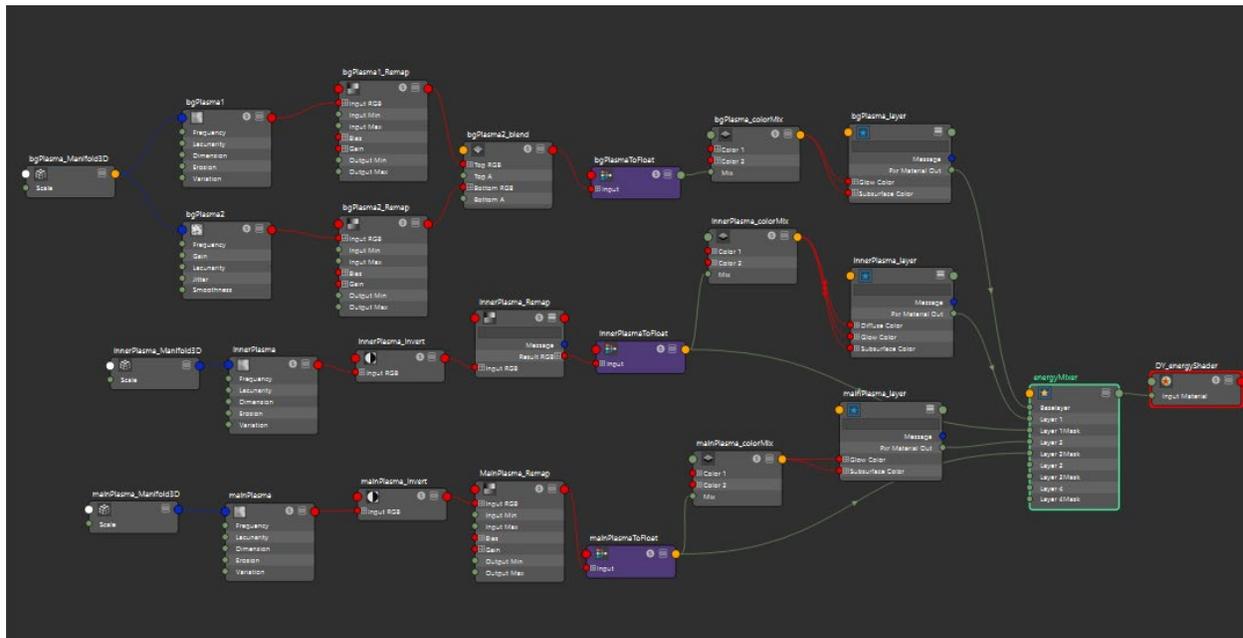


Figure 14: Energy texture node tree in Maya for *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

After plugging the mixer into a PxrLayerShader and manipulating the subsurface and glow properties, the shader's output worked seamlessly. The result was a model that acts as a container full of energy, as illustrated in Figure 15, which is revealed as her human texture is eaten away.



Figure 15: Still from *Ouroboros* illustrating the energy texture
Source: Heather Knott

After the assets were modeled, the animation was planned, and the opportunity to utilize motion capture data added a new dimension to the work. Needing a fluid look due to the use of the one-shot technique, animation needed to be as smooth as possible. Given access to the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy's (FIEA) motion capture studio, the film was broken down into 6 acts and was recorded with the assistance of Motion Capture Engineer

Cheryl Briggs. Kenna Hornibrook, one of the members of the University of Central Florida's undergraduate Character Animation class of 2020, volunteered to don the suit and act as my character, as illustrated in Figure 16.



Figure 16: Kenna performing for motion capture for *Ouroboros*
Source: Heather Knott

After the data was cleaned up, it was applied to a prepared version of the model that included a joint structure that matched the captured data. The motion capture engineer blended all 6 acts, bringing the resulting data into Maya for completion. I cleaned the sequence of any extraneous movement and counter animated to account for occlusion or to exaggerate the acting for specific emotional milestones. Upon completing the animation, it was cached and imported for final texture animation, lighting, and rendering.

The overall process has taken nearly three years from start to finish and could only have been accomplished by a community effort. Through collaboration with my cohort, education through my institution, self-guided learning through online communities, and access to a wide range of animated inspiration through the internet, an idea that's been percolating for ten years came to fruition. I do not doubt that the aesthetic and technical choices I made have a direct correlation to the advancements in the industry, education, and availability of globally sourced information.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Throughout my life, my fascination with all facets of the arts has been apparent: from my early years learning drawing and sculpting, to my performance education through theater, and to the digital arts through interior design and eventually animation. I've sought ways to express myself and to explore the existential perils of human existence. Through my explorations, animation has proved the most versatile and, yet, the most misunderstood form of expression in the American experience. Even my history reflects the conflicting relationship we have with the medium as I cycled through general disinterest to a deep abiding appreciation.

Animation poses a unique quality that lends itself to the exploration of difficult topics. The medium intrinsically feels one step to the left of reality, allowing audiences to suspend their disbelief in a fashion that doesn't necessarily apply to live-action film. Discomfort is good. Pain is necessary. All emotions, negative - fear, anger, jealousy- and positive - happiness, joy, love - are essential to experience to be a whole person. Denying the less savory aspects of our personalities is denying the foundational pieces that make us human, and art is a natural outlet to explore. To avoid experiencing them in a safe place such as media is akin to telling society these emotions are fundamentally wrong. By strictly defining animation as a children's or family-friendly medium, we historically hamstrung artists who choose pixels over paint strokes to express themselves in this fashion, missing an opportunity to reach the broadest demographic possible.

Animation provides a safe space to explore with unlimited creative possibilities and is why I choose to utilize it to explore deeply personal and painful topics. Mental health isn't an easy avenue to pursue, but the emotional honesty wrapped in the animated form feels less threatening. The animated approach develops a comfortability and acceptance in the viewer that broadens the appeal of difficult subjects without losing its impact. As Paul Wells noted in his book, *Understanding Animation*, " In short, the animated film has the capacity to redefine the orthodoxies of live-action narratives and image, and address the human condition with as much authority and insight as any live action film" (Wells, *Understanding Animation* 4).

The work that I've produced could be classified as experimental animation, which is typically viewed as employing anti-narrative conventions, "resisting the depiction of conventional forms and the assumed 'objectivity' of the exterior world" to allow the artist to "concentrate on the vocabulary he/she is using in itself without the imperative of giving specific function or meaning" (Wells, *Understanding Animation* 44). However, this still limits the metamorphic possibilities of the medium, reinforcing categorization that compartmentalizes the various niches of animation into distinct uses. Current experimental animation has evolved itself, expanding on the foundations used to define the technique beyond the exaltation of abstract forms in motion. The argument exists that much of the current content produced by mainstream media evolved from the experimental category. Yet, much of it follows a narrative structure codified by an individualistically defined visual vocabulary, as you would find in the experimental form. As with any art form, animation exists within shades of grey, the final product reflecting less about the technology and more about the intention of the creator. By

removing self-imposed limits through the definition of use, the practitioner becomes intellectually and emotionally able to grasp and utilize whatever tool works best for intention, and the medium transitions from a device employed strictly for entertainment to the vehicle for artistic expression.

What has emerged within the past thirty years, heralded as another golden age of animation, is undoubtedly directly tied to the rapid growth in global online communities and the expansion of the types of stories produced by mainstream media. The willingness to experiment, championed by content creators rising to positions of power within the industry that has grown up with a vast array of animated storytelling, has changed the landscape within the animated medium in the United States. Coupled with an ever-growing list of nationally and internationally recognized academic programs, affordable technology, and seemingly limitless paths to self-distribution, the evolution of American animation has transitioned from industrialized children's entertainment to an art form in its own right.

My relationship with the use of the medium has developed in lockstep with this evolution as my initial general disinterest held firm until I re-discovered it through mature television shows and the internet as an adult. I never correlated the medium with fine art until I understood the power it held to express the depths of the human condition. Through exposure to independent, globally produced content, I now recognize the power inherent in the relationship between the individual content creator and their audience. The barrier to entry has been taken out of the hands of the major studios because we can self-publish in seconds, and I am no longer censored based on what a studio head or an organization feels is appropriate.

That freedom, coupled with relatively unlimited access to all the world's knowledge and a moderately priced computer setup, means I can create my chosen art at will.

The animated medium changed for me and many others, some artists and some not, as this evolution in the perception of what constitutes animated content in American culture has taken hold. In her article “BoJack Horseman, Rick and Morty, and the new golden age of animation”, Dana Schwartz stated:

We live in a golden age of cartoons because creators recognize animation not just as the only plausible way of conveying a universe with humanoid animals, but also as a tool for a new kind of storytelling. BoJack Horseman and its ilk are deepened by an ability to toggle between the absurd and the profound, to one-two punch an audience that still doesn't realize how much it should be expecting from an animated show. (Schwartz)

To be an active, creative force for change, we must look back to move forward. It's now more important than ever to understand the history of our medium and entertainment as a whole and the efforts to censor it. As an independent animator, I currently enjoy the freedom to explore my medium with the understanding that I can self-distribute to a global audience at will. Most importantly, this distribution isn't predicated on appealing to a centralized, standardized moral code. However, threats are emerging that could impact this founding principle of free expression that has defined the internet and my potential ability to do so in the future. The loss of net neutrality and the recent developments with the COPPA ruling threatens to again define animated content as a children's medium online and to limit distribution channels. Creatives who use online platforms are standing up and protesting these threats, recognizing as I have the massive gains we've made in free expression in the absence of

suppression. By having a firm grasp on history from an artistic and cultural standpoint, not only can we be better our art, but we can be better-informed artists that utilize this knowledge to avoid the censorship pitfalls of the past.

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