Animating Social Pathology: Ontology, Aesthetics, and Cartoon Alienation

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by

Wolfgang Boehm

Under the Direction of Professor Greg Smith

ABSTRACT

This thesis grounds an unstable ontology in animation’s industrial history and its plasmatic aesthetics, in-so-doing I find animation to be a site of rendering visible a particular confrontation with an inability to properly rationalize, ossify, or otherwise delimit traditionally held boundaries of motility. Because of this inability, animation is privileged as a form to rethink our interactions with media technology, leading to utopian thought and bizarre, pathological behavior. I follow the ontological trend through animation studies, using Pixar’s WALL-E as a guide. I explore animation as an afterimage of social pathology, which stands in contrast to the more ludic thought of a figure such as Sergei Eisenstein, using Black Mirror’s “The Waldo Moment.” I look to two Cartoon Network shows as examples of potential alternatives to both the utopian and pathological of the preceding chapters.
INDEX WORDS: Animation, Aesthetics, Ontology, Cartoons, Utopia, Technology, Film studies, Media studies, Walter Benjamin, Television.
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by

Wolfgang Boehm

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Animating Social Pathology: Ontology, Aesthetics, and Cartoon Alienation

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1 INTRODUCTION

When Sergei Eisenstein first described the early work of Walt Disney, he wrote that the animator provides spectators “a momentary, imaginary, comical liberation from the timelock mechanism of American life. A five minute ‘break’ for the psyche, but during which the viewer himself remains chained to the winch of the machine.” With this sentence, Eisenstein characterizes a problematic in animation studies that persists in the present day. Can a product of such a rigorous, industrialized practice contain liberatory potentials? When stated broadly, this issue echoes questions regarding the relationship between the economic base and cultural superstructure and the self-undermining logic of capitalism. In this thesis, I hope to respond to these tensions not from an industrial or historical analysis, but from an ontological and aesthetic one. This requires tracing the ironic relationships between this industrial practice and animation’s puzzling ontology. Animation studies is a body of theory that revolves around various paradoxical or opposing ontological categories: animation and automation, mechanism and animism, or, perhaps most importantly for this project: “the motion of life” and “the life of motion” described by Alan Cholodenko. These ontological conundrums inform animation’s aesthetic practices and thus, by my utilization of Walter Benjamin’s work, its political dimensions. I use Over the Garden Wall (2014), The Lego Movie (2014), and WALL·E (2008), as well as select episodes from the television programs Adventure Time (2010-) and Black Mirror (2011-) to highlight iterations of how these ontological and aesthetic qualities give rise to utopian orientations towards technology’s role in our social and political lives. These texts likewise highlight the tension between this utopian register and the peculiar way social pathology is rendered as pathological behavior in cartoon animation. I demonstrate how these texts act to underscore the role of animated motion
in our orientations toward technology, the desire to enter and lose oneself in animated space and hopes of a future where technology and nature have beneficially merged.

I find I need to briefly explain, perhaps justify, my method for the present project. A reader will note a reluctance to limit myself to a particular type of text—I cross the television and cinema barrier, the SVOD and cable network divide, and I even, on a project involving the ontology of animation, include live-action in the form of Black Mirror. In my analysis I similarly shift between aesthetic concerns, allegorical readings, and comments on industrial practice. A critic might call this approach a scattered one, but in the spirit of animation I prefer to describe it as a mutable one—an approach that, like the animated image, seeks to cross various boundaries and defy certain categorical assumptions. Second, I feel the need to justify my use of the term ‘utopian.’ Utopian cartoon theory does not refer to an ability by which animation can produce or initiate a utopia. Rather, it refers to a specific strand in animation studies that celebrates the plasmatic, morphing, category-defying potentials of the medium. It is perhaps best expressed by Eisenstein when he writes if “Chaplin is the ‘Paradise Lost’ of today” then Disney’s shorts are “paradise regained.” Cartoons might indeed be a homeopathic remedy to the social unrest produced by industrial modernity, but for Eisenstein these shorts do not serve the exploiters, they are “anti-ideological” in their brevity and aloofness. I find Eisenstein’s ideas form a trend in animation studies, which I explore in depth in the ontology chapter, of theorists expanding on the chaotic, disorderly, utopian rebellion present in animation and cartoons.

The theory of animation that emerges from Walter Benjamin’s writings on Mickey Mouse is much more ambiguous than the one presented by Eisenstein. Miriam Hansen writes of the mouse’s role in Benjamin’s overall project: “the image of the frantic mouse is brought to a standstill at the crossroads between fascism and the possibility of its prevention.” This potential
for prevention Benjamin describes as a “psychic immunization” against the “mass psychosis” of fascism. By highlighting the “repressed pathologies of technological modernity” characters like Mickey Mouse or Charlie Chaplin can perhaps diffuse the psychosis through collective laughter. Mickey and the *Silly Symphonies* were not explicitly praised by Benjamin, however the theorist saw some homeopathic potential—not the traditional Marxian opiate shot that allows the worker to continue work, but a potential remedy to the fascism threatening liberal democracies of the era.

This project in many ways doesn’t diverge from animation studies’ lasting heartbeat—it encircles, diverges, but ultimately doubles back to a—perhaps the—central concern of animation: vitality. The “Blurred Ontology” chapter acts as a sort of expository survey of animation theory and its central concerns, fascinations, implications, and themes. My goal is to trace a certain thread, which runs from Sergei Eisenstein to Vivian Sobchack and weaves itself through the literature of the dancing images, stuttering clay figures, and fluid Pixar heroes. This thread focuses on the role of motion, specifically as a source of both fantasy and anxiety, in regard to the ontology of the animated image: why is the display of a particular kind of inhuman motion a source of such pleasure? Why does this motion seem so alive, when we well know it is decidedly not? The term pleasure, as used here, references what I describe as the ‘utopian’ theory of animation, starting with Eisenstein and evolving through the history of animation studies. The utopic in animation is inextricably connected to the image’s ability to defy logical structure, established form, and the inescapable limitations of the human body—this is what Eisenstein refers to as animation’s “plasmaticity.” And, implied by the preceding question of pleasure, what category of motion is on display and how is it different from live-action cinema? This first section likewise addresses differences between traditional, historical animation and contemporary, computer
generated animation. To help illustrate this thread within animation studies I utilize Pixar’s WALL-E, which as I will discuss with The Lego Movie, is a film that seems consciously aware of its own ontology.

The motion displayed in animation we know to be somehow causally related to human activity—there are animators, after all. Thus, the “Cartoon Pathology, Animated Alienation” chapter understands these issues of vitality as issues of labor, which in our current mode is always a displaced labor—an alienated labor. Animation, like all cultural forms, exists in a relationship with material relations and the concurrent economic mode within it is situated. The nature of this relationship is a matter of timeless debate. While not attempting to be reductive to the rich history of this discussion, I admit my indebtedness to the work of Walter Benjamin and his idea of the ‘afterimage,’ which I explain at length in the “Blurred Ontology” chapter. I understand the animated image to exist as a burned afterimage of certain capitalist logics—the motivation for this analysis is an avoidance of embracing a naïve utopianism surrounding cartooning. Benjamin’s views of Mickey Mouse, for example, offer a healthy dialectical understanding of animation that is neither unapologetic, uncritical fawning nor vulgar Marxist, reductionist fury. For this chapter I use texts that seem to openly acknowledge the labor dynamics at play, however they do so in entirely different ways. The Lego Movie works to delineate the creativity of intellectual workers in so-called ‘post-industrial’ economies, using digital animation to induce object-like sensations. Legos and animation, in this context, offer spectators and children a certain sensation of oscillation and mutability, however, boundaries, categories, and restrictions are merely being re-negotiated, as opposed to obliterated. The Black Mirror episode I use, “The Waldo Moment,” is mainly live-action; however, the narrative concerns itself with the social function of the animated, specifically the digitally animated, image. The boundary-defying ontology of such an
image—often praised for its utopian potentiality—in this contexts seeps into human life in a profoundly upsetting way, offering a vision of a world where certain transgressions of traditional boundaries, such as entertainment and politics, are not de facto liberatory. As Donald Crafton asks, do cartoons invasively “infect their viewers” or are they merely “simple benign amusements?” Animation, I find, offers unique illuminations as a tool for understanding contemporary labor practice, as it is a medium built in the factories of the early twentieth century, unionized in the Depression, offshored in neo-liberalism, and computerized during our current Silicon Valley epoch. Animation’s production is somehow indexed within the visual and narrative field, and thus the productive forces of our time and those of the past also exist, haunting the frames.

Blurred categories, strange vitalities, and bizarre movement and agencies that don’t necessarily correspond to our traditional categorizations inevitably force me to address the role of the uncanny in animation. This, however, is nothing novel—the uncanny, life/death of animation, as addressed in the “Blurred Ontology” chapter, has been theorized by many preceding this project. In the “Death and the Animating Apparatus” chapter I use Cartoon Network’s miniseries, Over the Garden Wall, to illustrate the vitality central to three interconnected theoretical concerns: the aforementioned uncanny, Walter Benjamin’s ideas pertaining to the aura and the outmoded, and commodity fetishism. I am greatly indebted to the theoretical work done by Hal Foster, who exhaustively details the means by which these conceptions exist in relation with one another. In this chapter I understand Over the Garden Wall as a series morbidly, yet still somehow adorably, concerned with dying, the archaic, and the slippage between our notions of life and death. Vitality and human presence, or its absence, are crucial to these three theoretical preoccupations, and thus they are crucial to understanding animation’s bizarre ontology. In working through the theoretical work and textual analysis, I arrive at an understanding of the series that,
through its fascination with the archaic and the auratic encounter, frustrates traditional understandings of full and limited animation categories. As will be further explained, the use of obsolescent animation practices releases outmoded energies that potentially carry with them ideologica Implcations wholly different from the work of, for example, Walt Disney.

If the “Cartoon Pathology, Animated Alienation” chapter attempts to offer a socio-critical take on the animated image, while the “Death and the Animating Apparatus” chapter offers a more ambiguous one, the chapter “Gender, Race, and Plasmatic Utopia” seeks to understand the animated utopia in the present day. By this present-day utopian thinking I mean something specific: the utilization of animation’s plasmaticity for what we might call ‘ethical’ cartooning. As an example of the wedding between plasmatic animation aesthetics and a politics that seeks to defy oppressive, ossified social structures, I look to Cartoon Network’s Adventure Time—a show whose progressive treatment of gender and sexuality many before me have already noted. To think of the animated image dialectically, the social pathology explained in the “Cartoon Pathology, Animated Alienation” chapter exists as an afterimage of specific, self-alienating qualities of capitalism, while this chapter understands animation in relation with current, shifting attitudes towards various identities. If the cartoon allows for a brief release from the limitations of the human form, then it similarly allows for a certain release from numerous other ‘biological’ restrictions. The category-defying plasmaticity of animation has potential to rupture certain sexual and gender boundaries. Adventure Time envisages a post-human utopian, albeit post-apocalyptic, world where these residual masculine and heteronormative hierarchies seem to have been ultimately put to bed. However, where Adventure Time connects the plasmatic with gender bending, it completely fails to extend this to race. This chapter explores why this might be. In a project dealing with labor, vitality, and the history of animation, minstrelsy’s ghost within the cartoon
described by Nicholas Sammond cannot be ignored. Can the American cartoon ever shake itself free from its blackface past, or is this past congealed within the medium’s form, somehow imbricated with its very ontology? In this concluding chapter I work to understand how the pervasive idea of the ‘plasmatic’ is in fact a racialized notion, and why the utopias of disorder American cartoons celebrate are forever haunted with the uncanny past of slavery. Where *Adventure Time* makes inroads with gender, it almost *can’t* address race, because of animation’s history of caricature, minstrelsy, and blackface. Thus, while I think dialectically about the utopian and pathological of animation, I find cartoon utopianism suspect—who is invited to this paradise of the plasmatic and who is left behind?

In the most general terms, this project demonstrates how the ontological instabilities outlined in the “Blurred Ontology” chapter connects to the political uncertainties of the animated image. It is the image’s very resistance to ontological categorization that can lead to these opposite impressions. On the one hand, the ambiguity is an uncanny manifestation of the animated image’s control over human motility, while on the other hand the boundary-defying nature allows resistance to pre-established ontological categorization. I should also add, as the inclusion of Benjamin and a figure like Thomas Lamarre suggest, these conversations often encircle issues of technology’s role in human social relations. While this might have been implied in the preceding summaries, I feel the need to explicitly state such a claim. Animation, as Lamarre suggests and will be further explained in the following chapters, is a site of “thinking technology,” while Benjamin understands the early Mickey shorts as offering a fantastic glimpse of a new *physis*, one where nature and technology have beneficially merged.

This thesis tries to understand the relationship between animation’s ontology and aesthetic practice, which leads to a simultaneous hope and aversion latent in the medium I describe
using the utopian and pathological terms. There is a general assumption I make in the thesis, which will be justified in the following chapter: animation is a spectacle of motion that is wholly unattainable to the spectator, yet desired by the spectator. However, the enticing, plasmatic, images and our desire to see them morph and bend are likewise a source of strong anxiety for audiences, as conversations regarding the uncanny and fetishism imply. The use of the animated image as both a source of utopic hope and an index of social pathology, I find, originates and is in relation with the ontological ambiguity expressed by the likes of Alan Cholodenko and Vivian Sobchack. The ontological ambiguity of the animate automata produces an ambiguity in our spectatorship: should we be wary of the figures flickering across our screens? Or should we embrace them as dreams of a better techno-future? I hope that by considering these questions in relation to the texts I have chosen, I can arrive at an understanding of animation as a medial site negotiating emergent utopian orientations and the visual rendering of certain social pathologies associated with contradictions of capital.
2 BLURRED ONTOLOGY

The increase of interest in animation, both generally as an idea and particularly as a cinematic form, has been coincident not only with the increasing power and reach of computer graphics, but with an increasing focus on the ‘posthuman.’

Vivian Sobchack

Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being... so the explanation for the huge popularity of these films is not mechanization, their form; nor is it a misunderstanding. It is simply the fact that the public recognizes its own life in them.

Walter Benjamin

In our present moment of special effects and digital filmmaking, an attempt to pin down a definitive ontology of the animated image might appear futile, at first glance. Why distinctly track the nature and qualities of the category called ‘animation’ right at a point in cinema when the traditional distinction between such a category and ‘live-action’ is disappearing? It is this very disappearance that fuels my inquiry, however. Any attempts to categorize animated ontology will ultimately end in failure, as animation theorists since Eisenstein have implied. The medium itself resists this categorization. Whether the motion we see is automated or animated, mechanic or vital, agential or non-agential, does not matter, which the most profound animation scholars acknowledge. The category-defying nature, however, does not deny ontological status to animated images, as certainly they contain ‘being-ness.’ The difficulty, then, is how to put into words the ontology of a specific type of image and motion that seeks to disrupt and conflate traditionally held categories. It is because of this that I find animation to be the afterimage of postmodern category- and institution-melding phenomena. It is also because of this phenomenon, as I will explain at length, animation and animation studies often concerns itself with the utopian, as there is a sense of liberation from logical form central to the ontology of the medium. Sobchack updates the conversation regarding animation’s ontology by emphasizing the role of the
computer. She identifies in contemporary, computer graphics driven animation a medium that reenacts current trends away from an industrial, thoroughly mechanical mode of production to a digital, ideational, electronic one. The shift from automated to autonomous is a shift primarily concerning the diminishing role of human interaction with the means of production. In this sense, the current wedding of live-action and animation is the perfect time to consider the ontology of the animated image, as animation seeks to, in the words of Eisenstein’s praise of early-Disney “revolt against partitioning.”

My goal for this chapter is twofold: first, I wish to outline a thread running through the critical literature surrounding animation and animated ontology and second, I wish to understand how this thread appears in animated texts—the latter of which continues through to the following chapters. This thread is perhaps best understood as confusion—why do the images flickering and dancing across the screen, so unhuman in their design, demeanor, and mortality, appear so, well, alive. They can cause us grief, laughter, and fear, while so too they can be sadistically tortured in a way that seems so benign we deem it appropriate for children. We might call this the Bambi to Itchy and Scratchy scale. Of course, so too might we describe live-action in similar terms: how can the shadowy figures of light induce such strong sensations? However, the question of alive-ness is a bit different than that of the empathetic/sadistic responses. The shadow image of Humphrey Bogart appears living to us because it indexes a living human. Why does Bugs Bunny seem so alive, or Fantasia’s dancing broomsticks, or even the bouncing steamboat’s smoke-stacks in Steamboat Willie? This question of life, and indexing life, is where discussions in critical literature surrounding the cinematic and animatic diverge. Of course, the divergence ends, perhaps, with the advent of digital filmmaking, as the likes of Alan Cholodenko, Lev Manovich, Esther Leslie, and Vivian Sobchack acknowledge.
Before I begin outlining animation theory and ontology in particular I should, like any good philosophy student, briefly define my terms in general. Ontology and ontological questions are traditionally concerned with two distinct, yet interrelated, inquiries: first, does X exist, and second, what are the properties of X and its relations with Y and Z. Ontological questions are generally understood to be metaphysical questions and therefore I should admit without delay my lack of faith in metaphysical language, which arises from my philosophical formation around Ludwig Wittgenstein. Traditional metaphysics we might say is a pursuit of essences—what are the necessary qualities of X, which makes it X, assumes an essentialist program before attempts to answer the question are even made. I instead look to Wittgenstein’s idea of “family resemblance” in order to ground my ontology in a non-essentialist schema. Whether we would still call this metaphysics—perhaps a non-traditional or non-Platonist metaphysics—I’ll leave to philosophers for debate.

Wittgenstein begins the *Philosophical Investigations* by describing at length a pictorial theory of language outlined by St. Augustine—a theory of language centered around ostensive learning in which a parent points at an object and provides the word. Through repetition and association, the infant gains language. A sizable chunk of the early sections in the *Investigations* is spent responding to this theory of language and thus so too the logical atomist assumptions Wittgenstein’s early career was defined by. Wittgenstein famously uses games to illustrate his changing attitudes towards language. If we look at all the entities included under the signifier ‘game,’ we find that there is not a core set of properties in which games are made up. Instead, games “resemble” each other like members of a family resemble one another—not by a single defining

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*a “A philosophical thesis in the traditional sense is a thesis concerning an essence… essences have been the concern of metaphysical philosophy or metaphysics.” Garth L. Hallett. *Essentialism: A Wittgensteinian Critique*. Albany, NY: SUNY. 1991. 97.*
quality or set of properties, but rather by a certain similarity one can only see by acknowledging the whole group. He writes, “I’m saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common in virtue of which we use the same word for all—but there are many different kinds of affinity between them.”9 This affinity is not determined by the hard lines of delineated categories but instead assumes an amorphous, blurring nexus where the resemblances’ trajectories cannot be easily traced through the numerous family members.

My ontological methodology is thus not concerned with essences nor a mystical metaphysics, however, neither does it approach Being from an analytic positivism. Rather, in the spirit of animation, I understand ontological clarity to only be possible if one acknowledges “there is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies.”10 In film studies Charles Pierce and Ferdinand Saussure dominate discourses surrounding semiotics and linguistics; however, I find Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance particularly useful when we consider the numerous methods of filmmaking subsumed under the term ‘animation.’ Perhaps all animating methods indeed encircle some idea of “the illusion of life;” however, this illusion doesn’t exist as an essentialist anchor or ideal Form. As we see, categorizing this illusion is surprisingly difficult—to animate is both to endow with life and to endow with motion, while an animated conversation implies something entirely different than the animatic. Suffice it to say, Wittgenstein’s family resemblance is a preliminary acknowledgment—a matter of putting my methodological cards on the table. A Wittgensteinian animation theory is not my goal. Rather, I find it useful to briefly outline what I mean by ontology and how my understanding of this phrase has been formed.

Before beginning a discussion regarding animation’s ontology, I likewise feel the need to briefly outline Walter Benjamin’s idea of the ‘afterimage,’ which appears in his essay, “On Some
Motifs in Baudelaire.” In trying to theorize the relationship between aesthetics and economic production Benjamin tries to avoid the typical reductionist, Marxist idea of art being merely ‘reflective’ of material relations. The example Benjamin offers of economic reality congealing itself within expressive, cultural objects, with the latter existing as an afterimage, is the ‘philosophy of life,’ associated with Henri Bergson. Early in the essay Benjamin writes that Henri Bergson was blind to the historical evolution of his own philosophy concerning memory, which was inextricably connected to “the inhospitable, blinding age of big-scale industrialism.” When Bergson “shuts out” this experience he then “perceives an experience of a complimentary nature in the form of its spontaneous afterimage.” Bergson then details the burned image of the epoch’s infrastructure, offering a detailed account of such an image—however, he “dehistoricizes” the image. The afterimage referenced here allows us to animate the discussion regarding base and superstructure. When we stare at a bright light and close our eyes, the determining factor disappears and for a brief moment the light continues to shine in the darkness of our closed eyelids. If we then quickly re-open our eyes, the afterimage burned into our retina continues to be seen within our visual field, composited with external stimuli.

Benjamin’s idea allows for a historical materialist theory of aesthetics that is likewise not reductive, vulgar, or absent of agency. The cultural, aesthetic objects burn after the source is gone, allowing for them to illuminate the present, by way of the past image. Terry Eagleton writes of this specific style of cultural materialism and criticism as constantly hovering “between the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘allegorical,’ between expressive and homologous notions of the base/superstructure couple.” The afterimage is not only a theory of aesthetics, but also a theory of history in general, which informs Benjamin’s methodology. The past is gone, however there persists a burnt image long after the original light fades or, in an auditory register, there persists the
“ticking of a clock whose chiming has first penetrated into our ears.” Throughout this project I frequently understand animation as an afterimage of material relations, whether they be pre-WWII industrial capitalism or our own current postmodern historical moment. In the following chapter, “Cartoon Pathology, Animated Alienation,” certain animation tropes, narratives, and aesthetic qualities emerge as both allegories and afterimages of the economic, material conditions present at the times of their production.

To begin discussing the ontological qualities of the animated image I start with some of the first descriptions of animatic aesthetics in film history. Sergei Eisenstein’s unfinished essays on Walt Disney, while ostensibly limited to discussions surrounding the Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphonies shorts of the late 1920s and early to mid-1930s, in fact take on overarching themes regarding animation in general. His discussion surrounds what he deems the “plasmaticity” of the form—the ability of the image to morph, stretch, bend, and otherwise rebel against the physical logic of human bodies. This plasmaticness, according to Eisenstein, connects the pleasure of cartoon spectatorship with a “pre-logical” attraction akin to animism. Thus, the term is often connected to the phrase “magical thinking” that many theorists use to explain cartoon spectatorship in general and Disney productions in particular. Animation is pre-ideological energy, characterized by fluidity, formlessness, and boundless energy not dissimilar from the nature of fire.

The pleasure of the spectator is connected to this plasmatic aesthetic, which amounts to “a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form.” The spectator is given a “drop of comfort” from the autocratic, strictly regimented life within industrial modernity. This approach to the animated image has been endorsed and elaborated in recent years by the likes of Scott Bukatman and Donald Crafton. Rather than simply rehash Eisenstein’s ideas, however, they’ve challenged, problematized, and
reworked the filmmaker’s theories. For example, Bukatman writes about “cartoon physics,” when describing the animated world. He says, “anything can happen in a cartoon… but Hollywood cartoons do not give us an entirely disordered universe of chaos and entropy.” Physics is not eradicated in cartoons, simply ordered differently. Plasmaticness ultimately refers to both an aesthetic practice and an ontological category of the animated image.

Bukatman’s take on cartoon physics appears in, for example, the nemeses of Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote—a tragic figure doomed to suffer and fail. The Roadrunner series constantly punishes Coyote for his commitment to rational thought and realistic physics. Bukatman writes of the character, “his is an eminently rational mind, and he knows it… his plans are meticulous, often carefully mapped and blueprinted, and their reliance on basic principles of physics makes their success seem inevitable.” Of course, the schemes ceaselessly end in failure. Coyote and his failings foreground the altered physics of cartoons—plasmaticity is not a formless, abstracted, ethereal energy but instead an underlying principle that guides gags, character design, and narrative. The humor of Coyote rests not entirely in a sadistic celebration of a villain’s suffering, but in the fact that Coyote sees the world like us. He thinks the animated space follows the rules and limitations of ours—his innovations, while often clever and sometimes outright ingenious, are not properly divergent from our non-cartoon physics. Coyote never learns his lesson—Roadrunner understands these physics intuitively, and thus Roadrunner never seems to really exert much effort when defying Coyote’s plots.

The utopian is ever-present in these cartoons—unless of course you’re Coyote. The animated space creates a world for spectators where the “immutable laws of the here and now are no longer so determinate.” The freedom from stricture in cartoons doesn’t distinguish between natural and social limitations, it is instead a freedom founded upon the mutability and ludic,
playful childishness of the medium, which are qualities emerging from the plasmatic ontology so-described by Eisenstein. In a more explicit connection to the utopic thought of the plasmatic, Bukatman describes altered physics and American cartoons: “the freedom claimed for the cartoon by Eisenstein here becomes a freedom from traditional causality, freedom from natural law, and freedom from consequence (punishment, death, skinned knees).” Roadrunner and the various prey of the Chuck Jones animated world seem to fully understand the altered physics of the cartoon and run wild and free. Meanwhile the predators remain somehow shackled to a thinking of a different cosmos, stuck in the endless, repetitive cycle reminiscent of a dead-end job—in-deed, Ralph Wolf and Sam Sheepdog clock in at the beginning of their endeavors.

![Figure 1](image)

Carrying their lunch pails and exchanging a laconic, “morning Sam/morning Ralph,” it is clear the two figures live a regimented life of daily routines and experience the monotony of the nine to five work week. Figures like Ralph Wolf exist as foils to the chaos and rambunctiousness of
the cartoon world—spectators can see themselves in the characters’ struggles. Like inverted Charlie Chaplins, whose Tramp character struggled to fit into the fast paced, stratified, and strict world of industrial capitalism, Ralph Wolf, Elmer Fudd, and Wile E. Coyote can’t fit into the plasmatic, anarchic world determined by plasmatic, cartoon physics. Their struggles, however, remind us these worlds and alternative physics are produced by labor, as they too are working stiffs just like the animators producing them. This self-reflective relationship with labor will be addressed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Eisenstein’s reference to fire and constant reminders of Disney’s ability to deny form and logic situates the plasmatic as a somewhat paradoxical aesthetic category that describes a quality that defies categorization. This is not to make a reductive, ‘I gotcha!’ type argument—I’m not saying Eisenstein undermines himself by categorizing animation as ‘plasmatic’ and non-categorical, but rather I highlight this paradoxical moment to explain how Eisenstein sets in motion a certain trend in animation studies. This trend, the ‘blurred ontology’ of the chapter’s title, is the means by which animation theorists attempt to account for animation’s category-defying qualities. If Eisenstein contributes to the origins of this trend, we must look to the present day and contemporary animating practices. Is this idea of plasmaticity still relevant; has digital animation altered the discussion? To answer these questions, I look to a specific Pixar film Vivian Sobchack uses to further her positions.

When WALL-E’s daily grind is interrupted by the arrival of a sleek, extra-terrestrial robot on a singular mission, the masculine coded trash compactor becomes infatuated. The rickety, rusted mechanical automaton follows the smooth, Silicon Valley-esque entity with obvious fascination and awe, while EVE searches the post-nature landscape for any scrap of life. WALL-E, at first, doesn’t know whether he should fear this new visitor, as the power she displays is terrifying
and destructive. Within the first moments of the film EVE exists in the middle ground between horror and attraction. Their relationship, writes Vivian Sobchack, is an apt metaphor for the era of transition between photochemical and digital cinema we find ourselves in today. She writes, “the computer-generated WALL-E… metaphorically compounds the end of the human being—that is, of human presence and animation—with the ‘death’ of photochemical cinema.” It is thus no wonder EVE’s directive is to search for life and it is likewise no coincidence it is through WALL-E that she accomplishes it. WALL-E’s imperfect body, cockroach pet, and love for corny musicals recall the presence of the human in the machine that, ironically, the last little robot on earth has preserved. The influence of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin and the robot’s love of Gene Kelly associate WALL-E with photochemical cinema, while EVE’s screen-face, incredible efficiency, and ability to inexplicably float, aligns her with the new, yet to fully develop, digital era of filmmaking. In the time of analog animation, we can see the blemishes, the jerky motion, and the imperfect lines moving between the frames; the human errors in the animations or the apparatus that comfortably remind us of our control of the image. Even in the marvels of Disney-style full animation or the high production values of series like Over the Garden Wall, the brush strokes of the painted backgrounds recall the human hand required to make such an image. Not so in computer-generated animation. In WALL-E, we can find ourselves, our agency, our life. In EVE, however, we find ourselves lost, as we cannot locate the human labor transferred into her image.

It is WALL-E, then, that serves as a useful guide when considering animation’s odd ontological categorization. In one regard, the coupling of WALL-E and EVE in the film’s conclusion speaks to a hope for the future. Or, perhaps, we are already residing in their combination, as live-action cinema merges with digital effects to produce a new, comingling of traditionally separated
categories of cinema. I, like Sobchack, find that embedded in animation studies rests a way to theorize the present state in which we find ourselves. In connecting animation to a present context, she writes that the post of posthuman articulates a primary shift in cultural consciousness and human labour from the mechanically automated to the electronically autonomous and pointing to our present existence in a transitional moment, its imagination uneasily located ‘in between’ future and past, gain and loss, promise and nostalgia, animate and inanimate—and, of course, life and death.22

Animation here serves as the art of ‘in between;’ a medium that visually renders the unstable boundaries between life, death, human, automata, analog, and digital. With WALL-E, animation enacts the transitional state described above in both narrative content and production: movement that would have taken days to animate by dozens of employees can now be induced by software that drastically reduces staff and labor cost to be imbricated in the filmic text. What is obsolete about the poor trash compacting robot is that he contains within him too much congealed humanity—what was once the pinnacle of innovation, the mechanical automaton, becomes more humanlike the less ‘useful’ it becomes. Similarly, the reverse is true for EVE: the more efficient and new she is, the less humanity seems contained within here. These, of course, are not outright and fixed identities, but rather, temporal modalities. Perhaps at some future date Pixar will release a hit film, EVE, in a fit of nostalgia for computer graphics at the moment they are replaced by some new technological innovation.

The categorical distinctions between automated and animated movement are central to WALL-E—the rickety, rusted robot is clearly a mechanized automaton, a machine designed by humans to fulfill human tasks. We might want to thus associate EVE with animation to neatly complete the binary, automation is to one as animation is to another; however, it is not this simple. EVE certainly resists categorization as a clearly mechanical figure—she fulfills a ‘directive’ that is something humans not only don’t want to do—collecting and compacting trash—but that
humans can’t do—explore inhospitable atmospheres. As Sobchack describes, EVE is clearly a figure of the digital, computer generated present and future, while WALL-E is the dinged up automated worker of a manufacturing, industrial past. The film thus not only reenacts the transition from photochemical to digital filmmaking, but likewise reflects the contemporary economic shift from an industrial to an ideational, global capitalism in the United States and western economies. Where this comparison fails, of course, is that manufacturing still occurs in the global economy—we still find ourselves surrounded by commodities made up of plastic, metal, and textiles. These commodities were not produced by autonomous, laboring machines, but by human workers in China, El Salvador, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and, for animation, South Korea. As geographer David Harvey notes in his study on the role of contradiction in economic disasters in capitalist countries, “capitalism doesn’t solve its crisis problems, it moves them around geographically.”

Not only does WALL-E display the transitional period we find ourselves in today, it replicates the global nature of our economic landscape. The hyperreal space ship that houses humanity, the Axiom, is shiny and replete with helpful bots, apps, and mediating screens, mirroring the ‘developed democracies’ of NATO or the EU. Earth, on the other hand, signifies industry and is full of metallic objects and outmoded commodities that, after losing their shine or relevance, vacate the desirable, affluent, markets. What is missing in this analogy, if we take the diegetic earth to be the nations where ‘post-industry’ economies send their labor, are the laborers. WALL-E goes about his day cleaning and trash compacting, working for an unknowing populace he is completely unaware of—he is happy with his work and only enticed to adventure by an infatuation with a feminine-coded EVE. Mechanism, automation, and manufacturing is thus seen as

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b Of course, in the film earth is hospitable, but the humans do not know this at the time.
irrelevant—part of the little machine’s appeal is his dedication to a senseless task. WALL-E is not only a highly self-conscious and reflective film because of the transitional state between photochemical and digital filmmaking it foregrounds, but so too because it speaks to the Disney-style of animating that induces the “magical thinking” of the spectator. This magical thinking is only possible with the removal of the human laborer in both computerized and analog forms of animation.

While Sobchack concerns herself with specific categories of motion, animation and automation, Alan Cholodenko directs attention to what these motions imply: the life/death of animation. To arrive at this conclusion, Cholodenko outlines what he calls the “first principles” of animation, which are two interrelating assumptions regarding the animation image. First, he charges that “not only is animation a form of film but all film, film ‘as such,’ is a form of animation.”

Following this principle, the second holds that “with the advent of digital film... animation has become the paradigm for all forms of cinema, and its study consequently become[s] the study of cinema’s basic ontology overall.” This sentiment is likewise expressed by Lev Manovich when he writes, “cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation.” To answer whether film theory can or cannot account for the animated image, Cholodenko poses a set of questions in need of responses. These questions all derive from one encompassing inquiry: what is animation? It is both the endowment with life and the endowment with motion, and “any theorizing of animation cannot limit itself to that endowing with life and motion but must consider the full cycles of each.”

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† If there is an analogy to labor relations in the film, EVE and WALL-E thwart the workers’ revolution when they sabotage the machine’s coup-de-tat against humanity.
As a result of the combination of life and motion—vitality and mechanism—ontologically implicit in the animated image, the cinematographic apparatus of live-action film, for animation, becomes the “animatic automaton.” This apparatus, which is both indebted to the anima and the automaton and thus considered by Cholodenko a “vital machine” animates not only “the illusion of life but the life of (that) illusion.” How ‘illusion’ is used here is of crucial importance for the ontology of the animated image and Cholodenko’s overall program. Rather than understanding it in either its colloquial use, as something a magician performs at children’s parties, or in its more negative, Platonic use, as the shadows dancing on the wall of the Cave, illusion here is associated with play. The animatic privileges the immature and the zany specifically because it is a medium so indebted to “the object and its games, the world of play.” Illusion, Cholodenko reminds us, derives from the Latin ludere, which roughly translates to ludic or playful. What it means when something is ‘animatic’ is when the play of life becomes the life of play, and thus what is animatic is not wedded to a filmic apparatus—the animation theorist “would be compelled to approach the idea of animation precisely as not delimited to and by the animation film but as a notion whose purchase would be transdisciplinary, transinstitutional” and, as will be addressed in the final chapter, transgendered.

If we recall the various predators discussed earlier in this chapter, Cholodenko’s emphasis on the life/death in animation offers a way to understand these tropes. Ralph Wolf perhaps suffers so greatly because his goal as a hunter is antithetical to the ontology of animation: life. Predators seek to destroy life, to end the vitality of the screen creations, and thus they must never be allowed to succeed. However, the cycle of predator and prey is crucial to life, and thus it serves as a fundamental genre in a medium whose stake, Cholodenko writes, is “life and death.” This genre practice reveals Cholodenko’s postmodern, post-structural take on animation, “not
only life but death has died, each replaced by cold, clonal hyperimmortality… the death of death, by definition, an escape from the human itself.” This “escape from the uncanny valley” is explicit on a narrative level in the Loony Tunes—the characters will not die, the predator will not catch the prey yet somehow the predator lives on without eating. The entire narrative structure surrounds the life and death cycle in nature, revealing the death present in life, however, no one ever dies. The plasmatic and Eisenstein’s utopian thinking is then not just an escape from the throes of modernity, but likewise an escape from the human body and from the seemingly deterministic nature of biology, which forces Coyote and company to continue their doomed hunts.

While animation’s non-categorical, anti-logical ontology can imply a utopian dimension, it can similarly invite a certain idea of an innate uncanniness. The animatic and the animatic automaton—the vital machine—is both mechanistic and animistic, and thus it is the “apparatus of the uncanny,” which “suspends distinctive oppositions” like those oppositions of vitality and death, or of animation and automation. Here, Cholodenko puts explicitly the tendency in animation studies that ties all the theorists in this section together—their collective attempts to theorize the ontology of the animatic engage with this seemingly paradoxical property. The language is different, animation/automation, animatic automaton, formless plasmaticity, but the underlying logic is all the same: what is animatic somehow defies basic categories delineated by centuries of Western thought. The following chapters seek to understand how this category-defying, ontologically puzzling quality is in a relation with both aesthetics and industrial practice. Which one determines the others, however, is not a definitive conclusion I draw.

Eisenstein’s influence in animation studies is one of utopian thinking, or at the very least, a celebration of animation’s ability to transcend certain restrictions of live-action filmmaking. The utopian is gleaned from the ontological qualities of the image I’ve outlined in this chapter,
which seemingly defy rationalization and categorization. The formless, pre-logical animism rejects social divisions and categorizations, offering images of a world where boundaries are permeable and bodies are mobile and mutable. However, I find the plasmatic—using this term to connote this rejection of form and category—offers a way to think about these images in terms that are not de facto utopian. In a certain sense, this thesis responds to the utopian of plasmatic cartoon theory, problematizing it, while also trying to understand if it is still a useful way to think about the animatic.

The ontological instability of animation—theorized by Cholodenko as the animatic apparatus, the life/death of animation, by Sobchack as a conflation between categories of motility, and Eisenstein as the ludic defiance of form and logic—perhaps explains why animation is currently enjoying a moment in the spotlight. This instability is at the core of two major theoretical concepts that engage with animation: the uncanny and commodity fetishism. Animation is motion that blurs the line between vital, agential motion and the lifeless, mechanistic movement of the automaton. Thus animation, as Sobchack writes, can display anxieties over what it means to be both animated and animate. Likewise, the apparent liveliness of animated figures, their relationship with labor, branding, corporate structure, and the mode of production invites discussions regarding the commodity fetish. The inability to locate the human in what is clearly human activity is at the heart of both of these concepts and likewise it is center to the medium of animation. The blurred categories that make up our thinking of postmodernity—politics and entertainment, base and superstructure, nation and corporation, human and machine—is exactly why animation is currently at the center of such a large amount of theory. If postmodernity in part consists of traditional categories blurring, it is animation that puts that blur on display: the hopes and fears that accompany postmodernity’s conflations thus accompany the animated figure.
When we look closely at the site of traditional categories conflating, what we see are the shapes, figures, and forms of animation, which is the art of blurring categories. The problematics encountered when considering animation’s blurred ontology emerge in our society in innumerable ways and through bizarre routes. The problematizing of personhood in films such as *Ex Machina* (2014) or *Blade Runner: 2049* (2017) express musings over who is graced with anima and who is relegated to the status of automata, while outside of Hollywood what legally constitutes a person is determined by the highest level of the judiciary. Our cell phones speak in soothing, feminine tones, reassuring us the only people listening are Siri or Alexa rather than Pompeo, Rogers, or Wray. New digital characters mediate the buying, selling, and monitoring of the seemingly infinite amount of data we generate. These problems remind us of our bizarre moment in history where it is unclear where the brand stops and the human starts. Will there be a day when the name adorning hotel towers or titling bestseller book clubs ascends to power without a human body in accompaniment? These are exactly the reasons animation’s ontology is of interest to me—it forms an afterimage of these contemporaneous events and dialogues. This also explains my choice of animated texts. Certainly, I could have included more avant-garde aesthetic objects, ones that challenge traditional understandings of the animated image. I chose popular texts precisely because this conversation is happening on a global scale, interwoven in the fabric of our trans-medial landscape. Animation, as it begins to merge with live-action in the era of digital filmmaking, sounds the ticking clock whose chime we have only begun to hear.
3 CARTOON PATHOLOGY, ANIMATED ALIENATION

It’s immediately clear that these performances reveal crises of agency. Who has the authority, the power, and the will to intervene?

Donald Crafton

I’m not walking away from a cartoon.
Liam Monroe, Member of Parliament. “The Waldo Moment,” Black Mirror

This chapter seeks to understand the limits of thinking about animation in a utopian register—a style of theorizing associated with Eisenstein. I find, as this chapter seeks to justify, animation exists as a particular aesthetic iteration of social pathologies—a phrase borrowed from Miriam Hansen when she describes Benjamin’s view of Mickey Mouse and slapstick comedy as revealing “the repressed pathologies of technological modernity.” I focus on two animated iterations of what I consider socially pathological, which are present not only as themes or motifs but as crucial properties with ontological implications for the medium. The first is deeply connected to what Donald Crafton calls the “digestive motifs,” which refers to the obsession animation has with extreme eating, autophagy, and cannibalism. This I find to be expressing a certain social logic regarding accumulation, which is rife with contradiction. The second iteration of social pathology regards an evolving notion of alienation in present, postmodern conditions. Both The Lego Movie and the Black Mirror episode “The Waldo Moment,” bring this alienation to the fore. “The Waldo Moment” concerns itself with the ways animated figures and their worlds, once fully alienated from the animator, can interpenetrate our own, real world, in profoundly disturbing ways. Animated space and live-action, which interacted in early animation, merge once again in digital filmmaking. In “The Waldo Moment” this merging takes on a horrific quality. A cartoon character taking control of the social apparatus is a particular, animated vision of the
product of ideational labor fully detaching from the producer, gaining an agency and vitality not only replacing, but ultimately dominating, the human.

To understand animated social pathology, we first look to the pathological behavior of the animated figure—a behavior that persists through time and across national boundary. This behavior centers around extreme eating, cannibalism, and ravenous appetites. The autophagic themes and appetites of animated characters—fantasies of eating and being eaten—have been detailed by Donald Crafton, who explores the digestion motifs at length in *Shadow of a Mouse*. What is fascinating about these motifs surrounding appetite, food, autophagy, and cannibalism in the texts Crafton considers is their prevalence through time and across national boundaries. In the early days of cartooning Emile Cohl’s *The Newlyweds: He Poses for his Portrait* (1913) displays a man eating a baby, while in *Brains Repaired* (1910) we see a bird eating itself, akin to an image of a snake eating its own tail. Disney’s early career is similarly replete with ‘digestive’ images, such as in *Alice Cans the Cannibals* (1925) and the predator/prey relationship at the heart of *The Three Little Pigs* (1933). In the present day the theme continues. For example, in S3E1 of *Adventure Time*, “Conquest of Cuteness,” Jake the Dog makes an ‘everything burrito,’ a burrito that contains not only eggs, beans, and cheese, but likewise the spatula, some candy, and what appears to be a teacup—a gag revealing the insatiable appetites of the two protagonists. Everything burrito aside, the show’s constant jokes surrounding the confectionary citizens of the Candy Kingdom being eaten ceaselessly recall these digestive, cannibalistic, and autophagic themes. Beyond cartoon animation and the United States, surrealist Czech animator Jan Švankmajer consistently displays cannibalistic and autophagic images. In *Food* (1992) a man sits down at a table with an inert, automata-like companion, forces coins down his throat, which then wheels up a dumbwaiter from the depths of the companion’s innards with some sausage and
bread, which the man eyes with hunger. Upon finishing his breakfast, the man suddenly becomes inert and automated, while the companion he used for his meal breaks out of his machinic state, stretches, and writes a tally on a wall full of tally-marks before leaving the room. The man then sits motionless, presumably waiting for the next hungry customer.

Digestion—be it ravenous hunger, cannibalism, or autophagic self-consumption—has been present in animation since its pre-industrial era. It has appeared in France, the United States, and the Czech Republic in both television cartoons, cinematic animation, and art-house productions. We might also recall the chase or predator/prey narrative structures that dominate the Tex Avery and Chuck Jones cartoons—Bugs constantly eating a carrot, being pursued by the hunter Elmer Fudd. Or, the speedy Roadrunner pursued by Wile E. Coyote, and Jerry inevitably outfoxing Tom. At the center of these cartoons is the threat of being devoured—a threat constantly averted by the clever target, but a threat nonetheless.

These ‘digestive’ motifs have been explained in historical terms. Nicholas Sammond details how the animated figure is a remediated blackface minstrel performer—the caricatures and “savage” white racist fantasies regarding Africans and African-Americans at the turn of the century congealed themselves into the animated figure. This is especially apparent in the aforementioned Alice Cans the Cannibals and Leon Schlesinger’s Jungle Jitters (1938). Meanwhile, Donald Crafton points to the role of the Great Depression in the lives of the animators and movie-goers of the 1930s. Extreme eating, it seems, can be easily read as a fantasy of the masses who were malnourished and starving. Autophagy and cannibalism appear as fears one might have, and subsequently repress, when they’re desperate and undergoing extreme hunger: can I eat myself? Will I have to eat another human to survive?
I’d like to think of autophagy and appetite in a broader context, one that departs from merely hunger and digestion. Appetite in animation is not limited to food and nourishment but can similarly be seen in terms of sexual appetite and greed in general. Warner Brothers’ Pepé le Pew is not necessarily driven by an appetite for food, but by a sexual desire for his disinterested feline love interest, while Tex Avery’s *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943) conflates the two appetites—the Wolf’s desire to ‘devour’ Red is both one of lust and hunger. We might also consider greed as an appetite related to, yet not necessarily, one of hunger—the Looney Tunes constantly roll their tongue out, temporarily gaining dollar sign pupils with the prospect of financial gain. These toons seek and chase the impossible to obtain, whether that be their meal, sexual gratification, or financial reward and they, without fail, seem to always end up head over tail, careening down a mountain or blown up by their own traps and devices.

Autophagy, a term originating from ancient Greek, is a biological process by which a cell disassembles its parts that are superfluous or non-working. In certain cases, the process can lead to the destruction of the cell itself, thus the term originally means something akin to ‘self-devouring.’ Crafton, however, clearly understands autophagy and appetite in a much broader way, as a general trend in animation relating to fantasies of eating and fears of being eaten. Wile E. Coyote is situated in an autophagic narrative not because he eats himself, but because of the endless, repetitive loop he’s stuck in; a loop where his demise is brought about by his own machinations. His self-consumption here isn’t literal—rather, he shoots himself in the foot. In Švankmajer’s *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982) we see the devouring—a human face formed from random, metallic utensils swallows another, similarly formed, face—and an odd renewal, as clay figures vomit up other clay figures. In the “Passionate Discourse” section of the film, there is likewise an odd violent, yet sexual, merging of a man and a woman, produced from clay. When their lips
meet, their hands clasp, and the man’s hand rests on the woman’s breast, the clay is smushed together, violating the boundaries between the two subjects.

The myth from Plato’s *Symposium* of the unisex creature breaking into two parts, man and woman, which constantly desire a return to wholeness, is frighteningly rendered in Švankmajer’s short film. As the figures merge into an amorphous mound of grey clay, hands appear randomly and a face emerges, shaking back and forth in what could by ecstasy or agony, before the mound of clay recedes back to form the two figures. However, now there rests a small mound of clay on the table, which begins to move and jump—a new subject has been created from the two figures’ bizarre sexual encounter. Both figures push this new creature aside, as neither appear to care very much that it now sits between them. The man and woman begin angrily throwing the figure at each other, back and forth, which begins a violent fight that sees the two grabbing handfuls of
clay from their faces and digging out holes in their bodies. “Passionate Discourse” ends, like the sexual act, with a writhing, amorphous pile of clay.

*Dimensions of Dialogue* reveals how the autophagic in animation—the self-devouring, self-undermining logic—is not just that of hunger and food. As Švankmajer shows, the appetite present in the sexual act is connected to the self-devouring, autophagic violence present in the concluding confrontation. The violence of the two clay figures leads to an erasure of them as subjects, just as the sex act leads to a similar erasure; both reduce the figures to a formless pile of clay. Not only does this short film concern itself with ambiguities between creation and destruction, but it likewise displays repetitious acts, which lead to formless clay, back to human subjects, back to formless clay. This repetitiveness, if we recall, is also present in *Food*, as the man initially interacting with the inert companion himself becomes inert, as the automaton-like man regains consciousness and exits the room, notching a new tally mark among hundreds of old ones. Švankmajer reveals not only how the autophagic exists alongside appetite thematically, but also how these are not only understood in relation to digestion.

Animation, from the Czech Republic to Burbank, television to cinema, and 1908 to 2018, ceaselessly concerns itself with these tropes, themes, and narrative structures. They invite a diverse set of ideas surrounding renewal, paradox, cognitive dissonance, latent fears and desires, and repetition. This cyclical repetition is present not only at thematic and narrative levels but likewise within the medium’s aesthetic and industrial practices. For example, the practice of ‘mickey-mousing’ emerges from the first experiments with sound synchronization in cartoons, which produces looping movement corresponding to rhythm, creating a cyclical effect. Lea Jacobs writes of the animators’ practice in the early sound cartoon era as being wedded to the “tyranny of the beat” alluding to the demanding process of animating in correspondence with tempo.
Similarly, the repetition of sequences and backgrounds—championed by UPA and the limited animation of televised cartoons and Japanese anime—reuses frames so as to reduce production time and cost. We might see two characters pass the same backgrounds, or a running motion occur at different moments in a single short. This, like mickey-mousing, produces cycled movement and sequences.

The repetition present in mickey-mousing, or reusing backgrounds, is connected to the laborious process of producing animation, which for your average in-betweener is an extremely repetitive activity. These ‘tricks’ allow for animators to reduce the amount of work involved, thus cutting costs and allowing more cartoons to be produced, which in turn alters the aesthetics. These innovations then inherently concern themselves with issues regarding agency and labor. Mickey-mousing, the thousands of tally-marks in *Food*, the tragic, infinite failures of Wile E. Coyote or Elmer Fudd, and movement from formless clay to individual subjects in *Dimensions of Dialogue*, all present, either aesthetically or narratively, repetitive loops characters or images seem stuck in, unable to break free. The autophagic image, of a snake consuming itself, present in Crafton’s analysis of the digestive motif in cartoons, I read in terms beyond that of merely eating.

I read these interrelated motifs—autophagy, cannibalism, ravenous appetites—as relating to a particular feature of capitalism. The relationship, I find, is a bit complex. Animation, as mentioned above, is an extremely repetitive process. One could imagine an in-betweener spending weeks animating one sequence, only for the lead animator to make her do it over again; a frustration I’d imagine one working in the industry would have to come to terms with. Going back to the drawing table to re-do a sequence, in an almost identical way but with say, a new color, or a new background, perhaps explains the tragedy of Wile E. Coyote in an allegorical
way. The poor coyote is stuck in a repetitive loop, a loop which many animators probably ident-
ify, clocking in like Ralph Wolf each morning for the inevitable, repeated activity. This echoes
animation historians who find the rambunctious, rebellious cartoon character to be an allegorical
manifestation of labor disputes in the animation industry. The figures and narratives serve as ex-
pressions of the very tensions underlying the relations producing them, they are “a dream of la-
bor’s revolt and its suppression.”38 In this way I similarly find that the autophagic and appetites
of animation can act as allegories for those producing animation under the conditions of capital-
ism. However, allegory doesn’t quite explain the relationship between these motifs and anima-
tion production in its entirety. Rather, Benjamin’s idea of the aesthetic object as an afterimage of
material relations and the specific historical moment offers yet another explanation.

How do we make sense of the looping, autophagic, and digestive themes in animation
and the repetitive, looping, industrial practices and aesthetics of animation? In the first chapter I
discuss Walter Benjamin’s idea of the afterimage as a useful way to understand the relationship
among culture, aesthetics, and material, social relations. The afterimage is a metaphor relying on
vision and images; however, in other moments Benjamin’s theorizing of this relationship takes
on a terminology almost tailored to this current discussion. He writes, “the economic conditions,
under which society exists, are expressed in the superstructure; just as an overfull stomach, alt-
ough it causally conditions the sleeper’s dream content, does not find therein its reflection but
its expression.”39 Animation, to extend Benjamin’s analogy, is expressive of certain infrastruc-
tural properties, however, it is not merely a reflection of said properties. Rather, it is distorted,
different, and in certain ways aesthetically independent of the otherwise determining base. There
exists, however, traces of the mode of production and history within these aesthetic objects,
which our criticism seeks to uncover.
Walt Disney, perhaps the most recognizable animator and dream-creator in the world, was first and foremost an entrepreneur and industrialist who rationalized the animation industry. His career can be described in terms of technological innovations, labor relations, and his company’s structural evolution, as much as it can be described by his evolving style, shorts, and films. He was one of the first animators to use sound synchronization, and his acquisition of Technicolor’s three-color process for the company’s exclusive use between 1932-1935 both recall the base underlying Disney’s aesthetic triumphs: his shrewd, relentless, and often morally dubious approach to animating. The growth of his company in the decade following Steamboat Willie was rapid—in 1928 Disney Studios had six employees, by 1940 it had 1,600, growing roughly 26,566 percent in just over a decade. This indicates the autophagy and appetites of animation can be read in relation to the cyclical nature of the circulation of capital accumulation. By this I refer to the means by which a business owner compounds capital by way of reinvesting profits into the means of production, garnering more wealth, leading to a greater reinvestment in the means of production. This leads to an ever-increasing growth over time, which is often used in political and economic circles as a measuring stick for a ‘healthy’ economy. While the appetite motifs perhaps reflect the insatiable appetite of a figure such as Disney, the autophagic and cannibal preoccupations underscore the catastrophic conclusions this unending growth implies. The catastrophe of this growth can assume two forms. The unsustainable economic growth of the entrepreneurial class leads to an empowerment and ever-increasing alienation of the working class, producing volatile social conditions by which the system undermines itself. Or, the
ceaseless proliferation of capital and exploitation ends in ecological destruction. Either implicate the theme of autophagy: in cartoon animation the system dreams of eating itself.

Like the many animators and texts previously mentioned, cannibalism and ravenous appetites served as crucial themes for Winsor McCay’s filmed animations and paper comic strips. *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* and the animated short, *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend: Bug Vaudeville* center around a man who eats too much rarebit, a popular snack of the era, inducing bizarre and terrifying nightmares that conclude with the dream-figures trying to subsume or consume the dreamer. Crafton writes, “McCay uses the dream of the catastrophic demise of the protagonist to provide a suitably autophagous moral: he who gorges may dream of being gorged upon.” This trope and Crafton’s explanation succinctly summarizes the capitalist logic present in animation: those in consumption repress the horrifying truth that their consuming act contributes to the undermining of the system which they are imbricated. This autophagy, repressed from waking life with the aid of organic apples, free range eggs, fair trade coffee, and reusable tote bags, returns in the grotesque, burned afterimages of eating, cannibalism, and autophagy in cartoons. Animated autophagy is a reperformance of the contradictions inherent to capital accumulation—a reperformance of a snake that eats its own tail.

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The autophagic and digestive motifs render animation as uniquely concerned with a certain self-undermining logic present in our economic system—the pathological behavior of cartoon figures animates a certain social pathology present in the contradictions of accumulation.

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The repetition of these contradictions, I find, complicates a utopian theory of animation, as the plasmatic potentials of the medium are overtaken by the compulsive, pathological behavior of the figures, which is of course the social pathology latent in our productive system. This second section of the chapter considers the labor, and its alienation, within this productive system. Animation’s ontology is intrinsically connected to the work which produces it, as addressed in the first chapter, and thus it concerns itself with alienation. What this alienation looks like in the present, postmodern moment, and how this alienation manifests in the animated image, is central to the 2014 Warner Brothers film, *The Lego Movie* and the *Black Mirror* episode “The Waldo Moment.”

*The Lego Movie* reenacts a certain tension within animation studies between the rationalized, delineation of the plasmatic in animation and the medium’s latent, anarchic potentialities. The thematic tension is given narrative expression by establishing a totalitarian Lego dystopia that is ruled by what is revealed to be an over-controlling father, who restricts the ‘limitless’ constructive potential of the blocks. In-so-doing, *The Lego Movie*’s moral does not embrace a mutability, but rather acknowledges that creativity within constraints is necessary for innovation. It reveals the codependence of both mutability and regimentation in postmodern capitalist relations. *The Lego Movie* allows for a reading that is both formal and allegorical, as the ability to morph and defy categorization is given thematic expression in the form of Lord Business’ requirement that all Lego people follow set instructions to produce a rigid, autocratic, top-down society. The film subtly problematizes the utopic Eisensteinian theory by wedding the medium to the commodity, and ultimately rejecting animation’s truly liberatory potential.

When watching *The Lego Movie*, we might have an impulse to read the film as a conflict between two understandings of the brick-building toy sets, a polarity that is characterized by the
attitude of The Man Upstairs and his son Finn, who are given Lego roles as Lord/President Business and Emmet Brickowski. The adult man uses Legos to build static worlds that are structured by the instructions, describing the construction toy in almost Kantian prose as a “highly sophisticated interlocking brick system,” while the child uses his imagination to construct whatever he pleases. Lord Business’ guiding motivation is ossification, while the Master Builders of the Lego-verse seem to advocate for a world of oscillation, one without boundaries or the instructions’ strict, petrifying regimentation. In such a reading, the film ends with the father learning a valuable lesson from his son concerning creativity, imagination, and play, leading the Lego-verse to achieve its Master Builder utopia of freedom and oscillation. Oscillation in this section refers to a specific type of motion caused by variations around a central point—for this project I use it to emphasize a constant movement or vibration, which contrasts with the stillness of the ossified, glued, Lego block. The contrast between rigidity and constant, morphing, motion, present in much of the popular criticism surrounding the film, is in need of problematizing.

To begin I note a few moments in the film that immediately complicate such a neatly organized dichotomy. When Emmet is captured by Lord Business he is threatened with melting—a true moment of oscillation—highlighting that the childlike imagination praised on the narrative level of the film is in fact likewise categorized. As Richard Burt writes, “the brick, the indivisible unit, is the limit of unreading.” A non-categorized, regimented, utopian world is in fact unachievable by Legos, rather, the freedom of thought and innovation of the Master Builders exists within a pre-fabricated system of rules, dimensions, and a finite number of pieces. Thus, when the Master Builders are captured by Lord Business near the end of the film they are imprisoned in his ‘think tank,’ where their creativity is harvested for Business’ nefarious ends. In this sense, the oscillation/ossification binary exists in a relation not of opposition, but rather one of
dependence. We might recall that Emmet’s plan to infiltrate Business’ tower is to follow the instructions and build something completely mundane, while Business uses the Master Builders’ creativity for his own purpose.

For Richard Burt the distinction between ossification and oscillation—rigidity and plasmaticity—is problematic in part because it considers aesthetics as categories. The guiding question should not be which aesthetic category best characterizes postmodernity, but whether one should think of the aesthetic as a category at all. Using Paul de Man’s critique of Friedrich Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, Burt opposes Kantian based aesthetics, instead supporting an idea that “the aesthetic is not a category but an articulation or, one might say, management of cognition.”

This echoes de Man when he writes the aesthetic “is not a separate category but a principle of articulation between faculties, activities, and modes of cognition.” To characterize *The Lego Movie* as a struggle between ossification and oscillation is to assume aesthetics “are stable… categories that constitute a kind of ethical menu” and that from this menu, if we were to “choose our favorite categories” we would “remain uncritically inside the ideology of the aesthetic state in which readings are ‘pre-fab-ulated.’”

Burt writes *The Lego Movie*’s binary rests not in this thematic tension, but between the two worlds—the Lego-verse and the ‘real world.’ The difference between these worlds rests in signs and semiology. The Lego-verse, writes Burt, is distinct from the real world because of its “unusual signage.” The signs in the real world are clear, distinct, and central to the shots—their messages are easily decoded by spectators. They read, “Do Not Touch,” or “Off Limits,” clearly connoting the regimented, ossified worldview of Business/The Man Upstairs. Signs in the Lego-verse, by contrast, are used to produce vehicles, turned into puns, or barely visible to viewers unless one pauses the film. In this sense, “signs are deprived of their function or turned
nonsensical.” The binary opposition of the film, manifested by key differences between these worlds, is not one of following rules or not following rules, but “between intelligibility and unintelligibility, or between readability and unreadability.”

My reading of the film follows Burt’s general, anti-category premise; however, I focus less on the readability of the worlds and instead further consider the binary between the Master Builder ethos and that of Lord Business. This involves re-considering the think-tank moment of the film. When Lord Business captures Master Builders he imprisons them in small, individual compartments, siphoning away their ability and creativity, serving the villainous aims of the antagonist instead of their own, unique visions. Lord Business does not seek to destroy these agents of oscillation, but rather he needs their constructing skills and creativity to further his empire, which involves producing categorized worlds and strict, fixed structures. Once his building mission is complete, Business plans to super-glue the worlds so that the Master Builders may never explode and reassemble the blocks. Motility will be all but abolished and the Master Builders, because of the appropriating think-tank, will be complicit in their own demise. This is truly the dystopic quality of the film and, as I will argue, allegorically relates to the production of animation in a variety of ways.

The Lego Movie’s narrative thematically works through traditions within animation. The animator’s labor, which once created worlds and was once admired as an end-in-itself, is subsumed and erased from productions. It’s hard not to think of Art Babbitt’s or Ub Iwerks’ role at Disney Studios as somewhat analogous to the Master Builders locked away in the think-tank. The anarchic, ludic, and category-defying aesthetic potentials of the medium are restricted and delineated so as to serve the commercial, ideological, and specific aesthetic goals of Walt Disney. Their creative work is, well, exploited by (Lord) Business. The binary between formlessness
and rationalization in the film is not one of strict opposition, but rather it is interrelated, just as Disney’s use of the animated medium to produce his magical kingdom is indebted, yet resistant, to the alleged radical potentialities of the medium. His *Symphonies*, which Eisenstein admired and whose rambunctious figures morphed and danced, were primarily experimentations in sound synchronization, character animation, and animating with color, leading to Disney’s goal of the first major American feature length animated film. The experiments, while works in their own right, were drawing boards for Disney Studios to practice and perfect the rapidly changing technological innovations in the field of animating. The *Symphonies* acted, in a sense, as test subjects or industrial experiments for Disney’s later, larger investments. The ludic shorts and their associations with a more formless, nonrepresentational animation style ultimately served the realism associated with later-Disney productions.

Like the think-tank, Business’ threat to the captured Emmet early in the film nods to an allegorical understanding of the film as dealing with the plasmatic potentialities of the animated medium. Emmet, prior to his rescue by Wyldstyle, is threatened in a James Bond inspired moment with being melted down. The horror here is that of true oscillation—Business threatens Emmet with the extreme ideological implication of the Master Builders’ worldview. The melting of a Lego piece, as anyone who had Legos as a child would understand, destroys their utility—the block ceases to perform its proper function in the overall system. In the film, this melting would kill the characters—their life is lost along with their use function. The plastic material, if it changes shape, immediately loses all exchange value and falls out of market circulation, its vitality endowed by the commodity form a distant memory. The Master Builder oscillation ethos exists only as far as “the brick, the indivisible unit… the limit of unreading.” Both protagonist and antagonist share a point of origin: the Newtonian, atomistic, representational cosmos of the
Lego-verse. To further the allegorical reading, we might say that Disney’s rivals, internal or external to his company, were still committed to representational, figural animation. The progressive strikers of the UPA might have more closely approached “the limit of unreading” than Disney Studios, but they never completely shed their “brick,” which would be figural, representational animation. Both share this point of origin, and neither truly committed to exiting the radical aesthetic potential of their craft.

*The Lego Movie*’s allegorical narrative and its unique animation style—digitally produced images meant to resemble stop-motion, object animation—makes it a useful pivot for this project. So far, I have mainly concerned myself with its themes and plot, however, I’ve read them as allegorizing tensions within animation aesthetics, which I’ve already somewhat problematized with Burt and de Man. *The Lego Movie* adds to a growing list of computer-generated cultural objects that digitally reproduce non-computer-generated animation. The arcade-style *Cuphead* game, for example, imitates Fleischer Brother cartoons, and a majority of television animation is not celluloid, but produced digitally in South Korea. *The Lego Movie* contributes to this trend by its computer imitation of stop-motion, object animation.

I suppose one could dismiss this digital reanimation of analog practices as mere nostalgia, or even a lack of desire on the part of content producers to push past preformed audience preferences. However, the imitation of object animation in *The Lego Movie* can’t be explained away by that specific line of reasoning. By objectifying computer-generation animation, the film produces a specific sensation that recalls the playroom and the imagined liveliness we gave our toys as children. Toys and play, which one might be inclined to dismiss as part of some idyllic, imagined world of children, do not consist of an “autonomous separate existence” but are engaged in “a silent signifying dialogue between them and their nation.”51 Toys such as dolls or action figures...
are more often than not given life by the kids who play with them—a film such as *The Lego Movie* or *Toy Story* acts on this apparent impulse. Not limited to children, toys and play, as Benjamin notes, are outlets for adults “who find themselves threatened by the real world and can find no escape.” The miniature world of toys offers respite from a cold, uncaring world around them, offering a way to “make light of an unbearable life.” Simulated object-animation, then, invites a certain idea of escape; an escape to the world of things.

This style of animation, its relationship to toys and play, and its mass appeal recalls contemporary conversations regarding the object and things existing external to subjective relations. The desire for non-relational objects in current philosophical circles such as New Materialism, Speculative Realism, or Thing Theory, revolve around a conception of the non-relational thing, the object in-itself as opposed to the object for a subject. I find, following Diedrich Diederichsen, this trend in the current discourse speaks to a reconceptualization of alienation and reification that accompanies current shifts in economic production. There is a tendency “in a wide range of fields to declare things to be (ghostly) beings and to call for their emancipation,” which “is a response to a contemporary capitalism of self-optimization.” Diederichsen articulates the current fascination with the thing-in-itself as a way to understanding a changing alienation—the desire “to make light of an unbearable life” by escaping to the world of toys is a manifestation, perhaps, of an evolving reification.

In the United States and Western Europe capitalism has shifted from twentieth century manufacturing to twenty-first century service, ideational production. Labor has become immaterial and capital in postmodernity now “exploits knowledge and commercializes aliveness,” as opposed to exploiting the physical exertion and external movement characterizing the work of industrial modernity. Because the worker now must “identify with their work and their
workplace” alienation has been fundamentally altered. In Fordist conditions workers separated their physical work from their non-physical fantasies—escaping from lived conditions into imagined landscapes of the mind. This, in turn, leads to a theory of alienation where the objects produced by workers and the workers’ “energies, desires, and fantasies” which could have been utilized for a reclamation of those objects, becomes diverted into “scenes of fierce escapism set elsewhere.” In postmodern social conditions superstructural objects become the central products of the economic base, and thus a theory of alienation as outlined above is in need of an update. In neo-liberal, service driven economies the individual has become the product, the demand for “persuasive presentation” overpowers physical skill or external, bodily labor. For an economy to be ‘ideational’ entities must produce ideas, and thus the modern worker becomes their own mental factory. In a sense, the dreaming minds become the producing bodies, or, in Diederichsen’s terms: “the worker is the object of her own subjective labor.”

Diederichsen contrasts object-oriented philosophies with Bergsonian philosophies of life and vitality roughly a century ago. In this past industrial economy, the dreams of workers were of pure ethereality and a detached, abstracted vitality. In these terms we may better understand this era’s cartoon spectatorship and Eisenstein’s appraisal of the plasmatic. Eisenstein describes the pleasure regarding the animated image for those trapped in industrial capitalism as a lyrical revolt against spiritual stagnation. This revolt, he adds, “is a daydream.” As production shifts from physical objects to ideational, conceptual commodities, the desire now shifts to the object-in-itself, as opposed to the spiritual revolt of this ethereal daydream described by Eisenstein. The detached, abstracted energy ceases to be the object of our escapist fantasies, as that psychic space is now colonized by the neo-liberal system. We must now subsequently seek refuge in the inanimate—the object external from our internal, subjective laboring. Again, Diederichsen neatly
summarizes: “the reified soul yearns to finally become a thing through and through, just as the
exploited body sought to become pure physicality and energy.” The human who has become a
commodity is now alienated from themselves, desiring objecthood and things-in-themselves.
This, Diederichsen dubs, is a new de-reification.

*The Lego Movie*'s artificial object animation fleetingly plays with this desire for the
thing-in-itself—however, its dual-world readily reveals the Lego-verse is in a causal relationship
with the human-verse. Similarly, Lego-objects are commodities with cheeky, smiling faces de-
manding consumers to purchase what in reality are simply oddly formed plastic blocks. The ob-
ject-like aesthetics do not provide us with an object-world existing independent of subjects, but
instead they play into the fantasy of the reified soul yearning towards thingness—thus the phrase
‘de-reification.’ The Master Builders stuck in the think-tank can be allegorically read as the men-
tal factories laborers become in postmodern economic conditions—they become alienated from
their mental products, seeking consolation within objects. The Master Builders produce from
their imaginations, celebrate individuality, and scorn Lord Business, the evil Fordist of past
modes of production. However, the film’s lack of a proper binary invites a discussion so often
missing from an essay such as Diederichsen’s. The idea of a ‘post-industrial’ economy is com-
pletely misleading. We are surrounded by objects of heavy industry—textiles, electronics, raw
materials—produced overseas and shipped to our shores. The ideational, postmodern conditions
are in a non-binary, if also antagonistic, relationship with the ‘old-fashioned’ industrial mode of
production. This relationship is non-binary because one relies on the other—the postmodern, ide-
ational mode is built on an industrial, manufacturing foundation. The antagonism emerges from
the class and national boundaries separating these modes, as the heavy industry is geographically
distinct from the ‘developed’ western economies. *The Lego Movie*’s digital effects produce
sensations associated with object, stop-motion animation, combining the “pure physicality and energy” of industrial modernity’s fantasies of animation with postmodernity’s desire for the thing-in-itself. The aesthetics parallel a contemporary geographic schism in our current mode of production. The film is thus displaying the reliance of a post-industrial society on industry, and the complications of traditional understandings of base and superstructure in postmodernity.

The Lego Group is a Danish company that perfectly embodies what Žižek calls “capitalism with a human face.” It partners with environmental groups and seeks to achieve 100% green energy in all its factories, meanwhile it enjoyed a profitable partnership with Royal Dutch Shell until 2014, when the Danish company let the contract go unrenewed—fixing with the right hand what it destroys with the left, to echo Oscar Wilde. The actual plastic blocks are manufactured in locations such as Monterrey, Mexico and Jiaxing, China, while its headquarters are located in Billund, Denmark. Its website explains the difference between the “corporate hubs” and the factories where the blocks are built—separating the ideational labor from the physical labor.

*The Lego Movie* then allegorizes animation aesthetics and the Lego Group’s own practices—the Master Builders, ideational laborers, are mental factories plugged into the think-tanks, ostensibly producing the ‘instructions’ that are then disseminated to the physical workers across Lord Business’ empire. Lego, like many other companies, geographically and financially separates mental and physical labor. Of course, this also resembles contemporary animation production. The lead animators storyboard and outline the productions in Burbank or Atlanta and then send them to South Korea or China for in-betweening. *The Lego Movie*’s clashing of two worlds, the function of reading and unreading, is allegorically related to the object-fantasies of the ideational laborer, who thinks of the other world where things are produced, and objects reign supreme.
The Lego Movie is a film whose allegory and aesthetics blend together. The object-ness of its digital animation invites a discussion surrounding the thing-in-itself and simultaneously rejects such an interpretation, while its narrative allegorically concerns itself with animation aesthetics, Lego production, and contemporary animating practices. The thematic tension between ossification and oscillation is likewise an aesthetic tension within animation, and a contemporary tension within capitalist production. Writing for The A.V. Club, Kevin McFarland claims the tension between creativity and following the instructions is resolved in the film’s conclusion because, “as it turns out, they’re both right.” The film then enacts The Lego Group’s mission to foster what they call “systemic creativity,” which “is a particular form of creativity that combines logic and reasoning with playfulness and imagination.” McFarland and The Lego Group both underscore the need to partially resolve and partially preserve tensions between creative destruction and systemic petrification in current capitalist conditions.

The “systemic creativity” of Legos, expressed in McFarland’s conclusion that we need to both follow the instructions and think creatively, demonstrates a shift between industrial and ideational economies, as in the former the laborer must follow the rules and not think outside the Fordist mode, while in the latter the laborer must produce ideas. This second type of production, be it selling tactics, brand recognition, marketing strategy, design, cell phone applications, or data analytics, requires the individual to think, to a certain extent, creatively. Yet, they must likewise adhere to certain boundaries, territories of thought, and limitations. Thus, the use value of “systemic creativity” in this system: it helps prepare children for their white-collar careers.

The Lego Movie is one of many animated texts in recent years that seems to self-consciously index certain economic shifts in contemporary production—the villain is named Business, after all. We might also recall Sobchack’s essay on WALL-E, which sees the film as
particularly concerned with animation production, and cinema in general, at the advent of the digital age and the conclusion of the photo-chemical. We could likewise include *Boss Baby* and *Inside Out*, the former an Oscar nominee that extends a single gag, a boss also being a baby, to a feature length film. The role of voice acting is interesting for these films. *The Lego Movie, Inside Out*, and *Boss Baby* use extremely recognizable voices—Chris Pratt, Will Ferrell, Amy Poehler, and Alec Baldwin, all stars for NBC sitcoms *Parks and Rec, The Office*, and *30 Rock*. Whether Ferrell was a ‘star’ for *The Office*, I should add, is a bit of a contentious claim—I should say he is a star that happens to be in *The Office*. These shows all center around office life and demonstrate a shifting setting in sitcoms from the nuclear family in the living room to the nuclear family produced by white collar social relations. The dullard father is replaced with the moronic boss, while the overachieving yet under-appreciated sister becomes the hard-working secretary or second-in-command. Meanwhile, *WALL-E*’s voice-acting is interesting for opposite reasons: voice is absent for a massive portion of the film. The main characters, EVE and WALL-E, don’t really speak and when they do their voices are not those of humans. WALL-E is modeled after the silent stars Chaplin and Keaton to help drive home the nostalgia of photo-chemical cinema, while also demonstrating how past genres and narrative tropes are re-mediated into new forms.

Animated works in a certain sense have always concerned themselves with their own ontology and production—the handsome prince kissing Snow White, as if breathing life into her, animating the inanimate. This might be because, as Sammond writes, “the performance of animation was from the first also a performance of labor.” Where early animation foregrounds the industrialization of its era, these contemporary animated films seem to do the same for white collar, office work. Alienated intellectual labor of the office worker is qualitatively different than alienation of the factory worker—thus new narratives emerge reflecting such an alienation.
Where Orwell, Zamyatin, or Huxley find a factory age anxiety in the human turned cog in the machine, I find the dystopias of *Black Mirror* identify and extrapolate the fears of this new alienation so-described by Diederichsen. *The Lego Movie* et al. identifies these social structures; however, their ideological functions are clearly those of many Hollywood productions, with perhaps the exception of *WALL-E*. The animated image as the digital image in *Black Mirror* connotes an alienated intellectual labor, a fear surrounding a surrender of agency to the computer in economies where physical labor has been largely offshored. However, the dystopian criticism of assembly line ideologies by the aforementioned novelists and the social criticism present in *Black Mirror* are both grounded by a similar motivation. They both seek, consciously or not, to foreground certain social pathologies arising from alienation present in economic production.

The titular moment of “The Waldo Moment,” is a slippage between animated space and reality. The episode tells the story of Jamie, a failed comedian who now controls and voices a digitally animated puppet on a comedy talk show, where he ‘roasts’ guests in an insulting and offensive way. When his vulgar bit targets Liam Monroe, a Conservative MP seeking reelection, the network decides it would be a good publicity stunt to have Waldo, the figure, run for Parliament. Jamie is reluctant to follow along—he seems to hate Waldo in an almost jealous manner—and becomes increasingly unwilling to go along with the spectacle when an American ‘agent’ of an unknown governmental agency approaches the network to buy the cartoon’s rights. Clearly, the animated figure has the ability to destabilize political landscapes and can direct the rage of the masses. When Jamie quits voicing Waldo in a fit of rage, screaming “don’t vote for me!” to a crowd from the mouth of the animated bear, his producer takes control, easily mimicking Jamie’s voice. When the votes come in, Waldo comes in second behind Monroe. Foreshadowing the final epilogue, Waldo, with his new voice, entices the mass to riot and attack the reelected Tory. The
last scene shows a future where Waldo adorns every screen and armored, SWAT-style police patrol every street. Clearly, the potential seen in Waldo by the American agent comes to fruition.

The episode narrativizes and allegorizes a meeting of animated and live-action space in a political setting. Monroe understands the threat posed by the animated bear when he mutters, “if that thing is the main opposition then the whole system looks absurd, which it may well be, but it built these roads.” Monroe understands both the appeal and danger of the bear; on the one hand it points out the failings of liberal democracy, failings caused in part by archetypal politicians like himself. On the other hand, the voters who are moved by what the bear shouts are inclined to forget the very real, material consequences voting for such a figure might reap. Waldo provides the mass aesthetic expression without altering social relations—in fact, in Waldo’s case, the figure offers expression while ultimately bringing about a more autocratic and oppressive system.

Miriam Hansen writes that Benjamin’s artwork essay “proceeds from the assumption that the masses are not an intrinsically progressive productive force but a problem, if not the problem of modern politics.” This problem of modernity remerges in postmodernity in “The Waldo Moment” as we see liberal democracy losing its grasp on the aforementioned mass, without socialism filling the void, echoing the Weimar period and Benjamin’s epoch. Black Mirror envisages an evolving, new mass connected to, albeit different from, the one theorized by the Frankfurt School intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century. This new, amorphous mass grows out of algorithms and its boundaries are delineated by data analytics—it guides Netflix programming and the feedback loop of contemporary studio film production. This mass is not new, like the presence of the nineteenth century minstrel in twentieth century animation, it has been remediated. The first two seasons of Black Mirror ceaselessly demonstrate the failures of liberal democracy when confronted with this mass—in “The Waldo Moment” its darker side is given expression by
the blue bear, in “15 Million Merits” various entertainments are displayed as digital opiates, and in “The National Anthem” the desire to see a figure of authority completely humiliated overpowers any sort of empathetic impulse. “The Waldo Moment” displays the interaction between this newly formed mass and traditional society as one mediated by the digital image and the performance of a cartoon figure.

A key distinction made by Crafton concerning animation performance refers to the performance in animation as opposed to the performance of animation. The first refers to the ways the figures move, jump, sing, dance, crack jokes, and ‘act.’ It is the way by which animated figures become actors who can embody certain characters. The second refers to the technicity of the animator, it is a public display of ability by which the animator produces the images on the screen. In “The Waldo Moment” this distinction is blurred—Jamie increasingly assumes a hostile relationship with his character specifically because his performance and the performance of the figure merge. Jaime and Waldo’s relationship reminds us that the distinction between performances in and of animation can specifically manifest as a relationship between the producer and the producer’s alienated labor. Jaime is angry, almost jealous, of Waldo because his jokes, his gags, and his ‘craft’ as a comic writer are not being identified as his, rather, they are seen as somehow inherently Waldo’s. Indeed, when the producer replaces Jaime in the end of the episode, we see that Jaime’s work was always that: work that could be replaced; an unskilled labor that could be trained and easily done by another. By the conclusion, Jamie the animator completely lacks the ability to stop what has been put into motion, his agency has been completely removed, as his alienation reaches an apex. Meanwhile, his creation Waldo can, with a single quip or retort, incite a crowd to violence. By the episode’s finale, the process of transferring the human animator’s agency into the animated figure reaches dystopic proportions. This, in the
episode, is the mechanism by which liberal democracy loses control of the mass. This animated image and its ‘performance,’ are crucial for the dystopic message.

In a disturbing act of merging, or as I will argue further in this section, ‘compositing,’ the screen space, the ‘Tooniverse’ as Crafton calls it, comes to us, whether we want it to or not. Writing about the massive popularity of the song “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf” from Disney’s *Three Little Pigs*, Crafton writes of animation’s “new found opportunity to merge this melody infused Tooniverse with the real-life communitas created primarily in the social cohesion pictured in the cartoon.”65 This immersion allowed for audiences of the day, disguised as pigs, to act out the end of the Depression through an act “of cathartic violence against a despised animal.”66 The Depression enters the Tooniverse, allowing for mass audiences to envisage its end and act out revenge against an amorphous force that destroys their livelihood: poverty. However, the ‘melody infused Tooniverse’ subtly creeps into human life outside the cinema, as the song becomes ‘stuck’ in millions of viewers heads and its sheet music rapidly sold. Within the cartoon, as Benjamin said of Mickey Mouse, the spectator in industrial modernity sees themselves. In “The Waldo Moment” the ‘moment’ is the point in which a certain balance between the Tooniverse’s immersion into reality and reality’s control of its own boundaries comes undone—the agency of the animator, Jamie, is overpowered by the agency of the figure, Waldo. Waldo is a character who, like Ko-Ko in *Out of the Inkwell*, desperately wants to leave the animated space—however, unlike the Fleischer Brothers figure, Waldo succeeds. These episodes thus display a specific, animated vision of alienation and alienated labor.

If all dystopian stories extrapolate trends from the present into the future, “The Waldo Moment” displays a speculative, extreme vision of the merger between “this melody infused Tooniverse” and “real-life communitas.” I find we can theorize this merger in terms more
specific to animation studies—this merging is a certain form of compositing. Compositing is the process by which animation combines images from different sources into a single frame—in traditional cel animation this is the means by which multiple celluloid sheets are layered one on top of the other to produce a cohesive image. In digital effects compositing describes the means by which the computer-generated images merge with the live-action image and, at least in mainstream cinema, this merging is made to be as seamless as possible.

For Thomas Lamarre, compositing “is a matter of assuring that the gaps between different elements within the image are not noticeable.” It is the interaction between numerous images within a single image that produces a unitary whole. Lamarre characterizes two types of compositing, one of which is the traditional closed compositing associated with most American cel animation. It minimizes the gaps between the images and allows for effects that simulate a movement into depth. This technique of compositing was first made possible in the history of animation by means of the multiplane camera, which allowed for multiple celluloid sheets to be moved and interchanged in a calculated, measured way. Although the multiplane camera had its predecessors with the likes of Lotte Reiniger, the apparatus was made famous in Disney’s first feature length film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. This style of compositing, which seeks to mask the merging of multiple elements of an image seamlessly, guides the compositing of digital effects in contemporary Hollywood. The goal of effects houses is to merge the live-action sequences with the computer-generated sequences in such a way as to conceal the compositing that is being done. Open compositing, on the contrary, is a style of compositing that emphasizes the play between cels in animation. It is, as Lamarre notes, more associated with Japanese anime than American animation. Indeed, Lamarre claims that when critics describe certain American
cartoons, like *Powerpuff Girls* or *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, as ‘anime-esque’ what they are describing is this specific type of compositing.\(^68\)

Closed compositing allows for a sense of movement into space—to use Lamarre’s analogy, it gives us the vantage of the train engine rather than that of the passenger looking out of the window, watching the world go by laterally. In closed compositing we forget the images within the single image that have merged to produce the sense of wholeness and depth within the frame. In this regard, compositing is crucial for Lamarre’s overall project, which posits that animation is a site where we “think technology,” and various alternative animation techniques, such as open compositing, allow for us to “think technology differently.”\(^69\) The ballistic perspective of closed compositing, movement into depth—what he calls “cinematism”—speaks to a dangerous orientation towards technology that demands ever-increasing velocity, which leads to self-negating alienation and ecological catastrophe.\(^70\) Lamarre’s thoughts on “cinematism” are heavily influenced by the work of Paul Virilio; he writes “cinematism is part of a more general optical logistics that ultimately serves to align our eyes with weapons of mass destruction, with the bomb’s eye view.”\(^71\) The movement is substituted for our own and, for Lamarre and *Black Mirror*, so too is our agency surrendered. However, “animetism” in animation—the open composited, lateral moving, flat aesthetic of certain cartoons, primarily Japanese anime—can offer a new way to think technology that is not quite so nihilistic.\(^72\)

Central to the success of closed composting, as has been mentioned, is the need for its hiddenness, which thus situates this type of compositing as an animated iteration of the classic Hollywood style. Compositing that acts to mask the animatic apparatus performs similar ideological functions to continuity editing that similarly masks the cinematic apparatus. The interaction between the separate images must be mitigated if the spectator is to believe they form a single,
cohesive image. From Disney’s realism to the contemporary digital effects of modern blockbusters, the innovations in this arena have grown immensely. Continuity editing directs viewers to the plot and narrative, producing seamless, logical transitions between cuts and keeping physical space intact within shots—it glues together images that, for example, Soviet montage explodes. Closed compositing is likewise committed to a sense of cohesion, however, rather than a cohesion between images, it is a cohesion within the image itself. The animated film is doubly fractured. There are multiple images edited together, while there are also multiple images edited into one frame. This can also be said of digital filmmaking, that composites live-action and special effects. Open compositing, then, is almost Brechtian. Where the boundaries between the images is hidden in continuity editing and closed compositing, open compositing plays with the boundary, foregrounding the multi-planar reality of animation.

“The Waldo Moment” asks a fairly simple question: can the hiddenness of closed compositing hide a wholly new type of composting: the merger of reality and the Tooniverse? As we have mentioned, dystopia extrapolates trends from the present—in this case “The Waldo Moment” looks at the benign way toons and their tunes get stuck in our heads, as Crafton points out, as a moment of interaction between reality and screened space. This interaction is driven to the extreme, as Waldo the character overpowers Jamie the animator/puppeteer, assuming a certain level of social capital above both Jaime and the Labour Party. Jamie’s performance of animation, using Crafton’s terminology, is completely sublimated by the liveliness, power, and persuasiveness of Waldo’s performance in animation. “The Waldo Moment” adds this idea of compositing between the real world and the Tooniverse, which is contingent upon the alienated performance of animation and the vitality of the performance in animation. Describing a brief moment in Emile Cohl’s Fantasmagorie when the clown grows to an enormous size, Crafton writes “though the
scene is almost too fleeting to be processed on first viewing, it plays out the idea that the drawn
animated figure has the potential to transgress the theater space and eat the moviegoer”. In this
moment, the digestive and the ‘invasive’ compositing features tracing social pathology are com-
bined. “The Waldo Moment,” to put it simply, offers a vision of this happening in a very literal
sense.

The anxieties of Black Mirror are of a future where nothing is extra-diegetic—the stories
that jump from film to video game or show to online series, suddenly transcend the boundary be-
tween reality and fiction. “The Waldo Moment,” in part, satirizes the immersive worlds of the
Marvel universe, various role-playing video games, or Game of Thrones-style television shows.
The immersion is, in “The Waldo Moment,” a wedding that blurs the boundary between ‘reality’
and the animated-verse. This episode allows us to theorize animation and the animated figure in
terms that offer a pathological, as opposed to utopian, understanding of the medium.

What emerges when we combine these disparate, yet interrelated, ideas of the autophagic,
compositing, and “systemic creativity?” The autophagic present in the history of animation and
the invasive compositing present in “The Waldo Moment” reperforms certain social pathologies
present in contemporary relations. “The Waldo Moment” enacts an anxiety present in animation
spectatorship—an extrapolation of the animators’ erasure from the object and the loss of human
agency upon its transference into the image. The autophagic, autonomous manifestation of the
destructive logic of capitalism merges with the increasingly seamless ability of closed composit-
ing to consume human agency. Dystopic implications aside, what Black Mirror envisions is a
specific position regarding a lasting problematic in cultural theory. The theme of autophagy and
extreme eating as an afterimage of the logic of capitalism and capital accumulation places
animation at the heart of a seemingly timeless debate between the cultural ephemera of the superstructure and the all-powerful infrastructural base. The digestive, autophagic motifs in animation are the traces of the logic of capital accumulation and the repetitious, looping industrial practices of the medium. Meanwhile, *The Lego Movie* allegorizes these social relations in its think-tank moment and its Master Builder/Lord Business conflict between oscillation and ossification. The film foregrounds the fracturing of ideational and physical labor, didactically reinforcing an idea of “systemic creativity,” producing productive, postmodern, white-collar office workers.

Before concluding this chapter, I should state clearly that by pushing against an Eisenstein theory of animation, which considers the utopian elements of the medium, I don’t mean to suggest a vulgar reading of cartoons as a mere reflection of neo-liberalism or capitalism in general. This is why I find Lamarre’s project and Benjamin’s work to be of great interest, and why I find both share certain affinities. Benjamin writes in *One Way Street*, “what, in the end, makes advertisements superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.” The “fiery reflection” in the pool of water stresses the object and its light as independent of the social forces that brought them about. Advertisements are superior to criticism because criticism will only bring us to the written words and the commodity form, while the advertisements themselves begin to reformulate our sensorium. Cities begin to glow and those lights, when reflecting in a puddle of rain water, are not wholly under the spell of the commodity. By reorienting ourselves we begin to look sideways—new worlds of color and movement emerge before us. This, I find, is similar to Thomas Lamarre’s emphasis on lateral motion and movement across planes. Criticism would be analogous in Lamarre’s scheme with the penetrative gaze that guides spectators ballistically, which will only end in self-destruction.
Meanwhile, lateral motion across, as opposed to into, the image offers a new way to “think technology.” His theory is indebted to the philosopher Gilbert Simondon, who wrote humanity “has a role to play between machines rather than over and above them, if there is to be true technological ensemble.” Animetism and the stress placed on lateral motion in Lamarre’s aesthetic theory is influenced by this foundational view of techno-human relations. Both Benjamin and Lamarre are preoccupied with alternative functions, energies, or modalities that can be exited from the products of late capitalist production. The afterimage of economic production conditions creative production, but those creative productions have a certain autonomy—the image continues to burn in our iris long after the light turns off.

As a concluding example of the relationship outlined above we look again to Winsor McCay’s rarebit fiend. The character is the figure whose “overfull stomach,” as Benjamin writes, “causally conditions [his] dream content.” His over-consumption produces the ephemeral dream, the superstructural mirage, a mirage that does not distract or encourage his consumption but terrifies him. The fiend ends each strip declaring he’ll never gorge himself on the rich treat again—the horrifying dreams induced by eating reveal to him his follies. However, the strip appears in next week’s paper and the protagonist yet again over-indulges—does self-awareness do anything to stop the urges of a fiend? Black Mirror, like the rarebit fiend’s self-devouring dreams, present spectators’ nightmares produced by extrapolated contemporary trends. The autophagy motif enters into a mediating relationship with compositing when the fiend’s dream seemingly merges with his waking life. If contemporary digital effects can offer utterly convincing moments of compositing between live-action and animated images, can this be extrapolated into a future where this compositing occurs between reality and animation? This self-devouring autophagy
and an idea of composting extended to a merging between reality and the cartoon, digital, or ‘Tooniverse,’ space is the foundation for theorizing animated pathology.

4 DEATH AND THE ANIMATING APPARATUS

Somewhere lost in the clouded annals of history
Lies a place that few have seen,
a mysterious place called The Unknown,
Where long-forgotten stories are revealed to those who travel through the wood.
“Into the Unknown”

Insofar as film animation puts life and death at stake, films and film genres that explicitly stage and perform that stake are privileged for and as animation.
Alan Cholodenko

If I were forced to describe Over the Garden Wall in a sentence, I would have to say the cartoon is about death. Rather, it is about a close encounter with dying. The prevalence of skulls, darkened corners of the frame, and black cats suggests an established association one has with the fall season: the coming of death. Upon finishing the series, of course, this association is explicit, as the two young boys are traveling through the land of limbo, evading a shadowy antagonist who seeks to trap them there forever. As the pumpkin-mayor of Pottsfield Enoch says in the second episode, “not many people pass through” this land. The autumn colors are replaced with the oppressive white of winter in the final episodes, as the boys near their end. In the show’s introduction, Jack Jones’ voice, embodied by a piano-playing frog, sings “how the gentle wind, beckons through the leaves, as autumn colors fall, dancing in swirls of golden memories.” While singing, a voice-over announces, “somewhere lost in the clouded annals of history lies a place few have seen, a mysterious place called: The Unknown.” A breeze, wind, and swirling golden
shapes made up of dead, golden leaves couples with the matted frames, painted woods, and a suggestion that autumn “colors” the environment during this season of transition. Thus, the lyrics and images of the introduction not only narratively situate the spectator, but likewise foreground the aesthetic style—in the fall the shocking color changes combine with a coming, cold breeze to make the “autumn colors” dance in “swirls of golden memories.” To frame the miniseries, I will look at two pervasive motifs suggested by this introduction—wind, breeze, air, or breath and painting—and situate them within the overall preoccupation of the series: death.

Before moving to a discussion of these two pervasive motifs in the text, I would like to map out three interrelated concepts that I find implicitly concern themselves with the stake of animation, or rather, animation is implied whenever attempts are made at these concepts’ explanations. They are the uncanny, the aura, and commodity fetishism. All concern themselves with a repressed quality of a work or object; rather, they concern themselves with an ambiguous human quality, whether it is perceived as a presence or a lack. The congealed history and returning gaze of the auratic object—the glimpses of the repressed death drive characterizing Freud’s uncanny—the vitality contingent upon the laborer’s removal that produces the commodity form. These three theoretical concepts are directly connected to the relationship between death and the animatic apparatus—a relationship perhaps first made explicit by Alan Cholodenko. This relationship is one conceptually based in the Freudian notion of the uncanny, and Over the Garden Wall’s thematic and narrative preoccupation with death seems to demand observations regarding uncanny and animation theory. I find that the two guiding motifs present in the miniseries, that of wind/breath and painting, help illuminate the conceptual nexus that locates these three theoretical concerns.
For Freud, the uncanny experience occurs when something seems oddly familiar—the rehashing of the familiar, the uncanniness of the double, and the recurrence of specific number on your train ticket or grocery bill, for example. The theme of recurrence these instances share invites Freud to theorize the uncanny as a sensation in close relationship with the repetition compulsion, which itself relates to the death drive—the repressed desire of organic life to return to an earlier state of death. If we consider the uncanny in specifically animated terms, we might be inclined to look to the child throwing a toy and crying, connecting Freud to the childlike nature of animated film. However, I find it more fruitful to look, as Cholodenko does, to the very ontology of the animated image—the endowment of both life and motion. The uncanniness of animation unsettles the “distinction between animate and inanimate,” it “unsettles distinction itself, which is the mechanism of identity.” This unsettling of distinction in *Over the Garden Wall* is rendered as an ambiguous limbo state where life and death have either merged or both disappeared.

The uncanny in an animated context emphasizes the means by which the animatic apparatus endows objects and images with both life and non-life—with both mechanistic automation and animistic vitality. It is a distinction, category rupturing apparatus, which shares an ambiguity reminiscent of the indistinctness between the Freudian life and death drives; Cholodenko explains,

> It suggests that life is never without its death at the same time, even that in a sense we have not one but two deaths—the one which precedes us, the one which awaits us—and a third as well—the one which lives with us. And what it suggests for animation is profound: that animation always has something of the inanimate about it, that it is a certain inanimateness that both allows and disallows animation.

These preceding paragraphs demonstrate the difficulty of theorizing the uncanny, a difficulty acknowledged by Freud when he wrote “the writer of the present contribution, indeed, must himself plead guilty to a special obtuseness in the matter.” The uncanny is a fleeting sensation,
a brief moment, that nonetheless resonates long after the moment passes. It defamiliarizes the familiar by making it familiar in a different sense—if I were to walk into my room and glimpse activity from actions figures and dolls who abruptly cease upon my entry, I would not feel the tenderness one might have for figures such as Buzz Lightyear or Woody.

The relationship between popular animation spectatorship and uncanniness is tense. Disney, Pixar and Ghibli do not want to unsettle children; thus, they deliberately avoid the uncanny valley. *Over the Garden Wall* is no different. However, this valley is somewhat *flirted* with in the miniseries. In “Hard Times at the Huskin’ Bee,” for example, Wirt, Greg, and Beatrice find Pottsfield, a small, rustic, rural village snatched from a Washington Irving, New England nostalgic imaginary. Lost as they are, Wirt decides to ask for directions in the homey, inviting hamlet. However, the village is abandoned. The familiar image of a kindly, slow-paced rural life free of modernity’s social ailments begins to fade as the music takes on a sinister minor key and the dark shadows of the wooden houses envelope the characters. Things become increasingly bizarre when Wirt cracks open a door to one of the structures and finds a turkey sitting behind a desk that looks up to him—Wirt doesn’t know the animal’s level of sentience, as Beatrice the talking bluebird has already disturbed this particular metaphysical foundation, so he awkwardly apologizes and closes the door. Attracted by music from a nearby barn, the characters find themselves in the middle of a harvest festival. The party-goers are all wearing pumpkins, which Wirt at first doesn’t recognize as costumes, instead thinking they are vegetable people dancing around a maypole. He bumps into a villager, who reveals they are in a bizarre, festive attire. Wirt then says, “oh, they’re costumes,” to which the villager responds, “pumpkins can’t move on their own” then, in a very noticeable and ominous shift in tone, “can they?” Wirt tries to reassure the group that this is not in fact a creepy place, rather its just a weird cult where they wear vegetable
costumes but the “people seem nice enough.” Beatrice, however, suspects something is amiss when she says, “okay, but something feels off about this place.” We then cut to a villager sitting alone in a shadowy corner carving a pumpkin, slowly turning to gaze at the newcomers.

![Figure 3](image)

The fleeting, uncanny moment coupled with the foreboding line, “pumpkins can’t move on their own… can they?” foregrounds the uncanny of the animatic apparatus, which gives objects an eerie motility. This eeriness arises from self-moving objects, things, or images that should not, according to our scientific knowledge, be self-moving. This sequence in “Hard Times at the Huskin’ Bee” directly addresses this moment. Not only do the characters seem unsure of the ontologies around them, the image above displays a pumpkin person carving what could be another villager’s head. The image is fleeting and disruptive to plot—it breaks into the sequence as quickly as it disappears.
Pottsfield, the village’s name, references a potter’s field, which was a nineteenth century North American expression for a graveyard for the indigent, criminals, and unidentified bodies. Its mayor is Enoch, referencing one of the only figures of the bible to ascend into heaven alive in both body and soul—a figure entering the land of death while somehow being alive. At the end of “Hard Times at the Huskin’ Bee” Wirt learns the true nature of the dancing pumpkin-clad villagers: they are skeletons dug up from the ground. Punished for trespassing and disturbing the peace, the trio are sentenced to a few hours of community service, which involves digging out in the fields. At a moment when they think they’re digging their own graves, it is revealed that they are in fact digging up graves, bringing the dead from the ground up to the surface—a villager proclaims, “thanks for digging up the life of the party!” The skeletons climb up from the graves and put on their pumpkin costumes, dancing together in an allusion to Disney’s 1929 “The Skeleton Dance” Silly Symphony. Uncanniness is ultimately connected in “Hard Times at the Huskin’ Bee” to the playfulness of animation—animation’s ability to disrupt distinction can be both uncanny and joyous, both disturbing and elating, both pathological and utopian.

Wirt and Greg are looking for a way home and are surrounded by familiar images of white, European, North American heritage. The limbo space is not merely a dark forest full of snares and traps, but a land full of the familiar—the heimlich—which glances back at spectators familiar with this heritage. The uncanny of The Unknown is coded in pastoral, North American signifiers, connecting a nostalgic cultural imaginary to both the ambiguous life/death of the animating apparatus, and to the limbo state that is neither life or death. These images and connotations produce an overwhelming sense of the archaic for spectators, a sensation I would like to approach from a different lens than the familiar nostalgia-criticisms of shows like Stranger Things.
In reading the uncanny of *Over the Garden Wall* with its archaic imagery I understand the concept in relation with the auratic encounter. The understanding of aura in Walter Benjamin’s thought is largely derived in the present day from his work of art essay(s). In the canonical work Benjamin describes the aura as an artwork’s “unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” The aura is that which is lost from the work upon duplication, replication, or mechanical reproduction. The aura, in this limited sense, is connected to the ritual and exchange values of artwork. The historical testimony of any given work is founded on its physical duration—thus the aura in the artwork essay speaks to a congealed history within objects. The seminal essay’s ambiguity regarding the implications of the withering aura are well-documented. The liquidation of historical testimony from artwork and thus of its ritual foundation leads art to a new foundation: politics. However, as Miriam Hansen points out, the artwork essay is only one moment in Benjamin’s work where he considers the aura and, upon close inspection, the essay is more concerned with the fabrication of aura than qualities of the aura itself.

In “Little History of Photography,” Benjamin directly asks the reader, “what actually is the aura?” He responds, “a strange weave of space and time: the unique experience of a distance, however near it may be.” Hansen points out how the aura is thus relating “to the experience of *nature.*” And, connecting this conversation with previous passages, Benjamin explains, “while resting on a summer afternoon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.” The aura, contrary to what it may seem in the artwork essay, is for Benjamin a concept with an “esoteric nature.” Hansen provides useful insight in this regard. The beholder of nature, a subject within an auratic encounter breathes the mountains, as well as seeing them. Breathing, in its mystical and biblical context, understands that “this mode of perception
involves surrender to the object as other.” The aura cannot be manufactured, it exists before the subject but not for the subject. This is what is meant when Benjamin writes of the aura as an experience of a distance—no matter how close we come to the auratic object, or how much we desire its possession, it always exists out of our reach. What is beautiful about the aura, then, is reliant upon its unobtainability. This unobtainability is socially endowed—it is not a physical or metaphysical quality of a work.

In the Baudelaire essay, Benjamin writes the auratic experience to be founded upon “the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man.” He continues, “to perceive the aura of an object we look at, means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.” The glances of the object back at the beholder “envelop(s) the subject with the aura [and] thus [is] not so distant from the fearsome look that riddles him with anxiety.” The connection being made between the aura and the uncanny seems clear—to endow an object with the ability to gaze back, while not connected in the Benjaminian program to psychoanalysis, still seems to induce a certain level of anxiety. The repressed human element of the work—its historical testimony—glances at viewers, returning their own gaze.

This passage in the Baudelaire essay, referring to a “transposition” of a common feature of human relations to relations between “the inanimate or natural object and man” seems to also suggest the aura somehow relates to the commodity form. If the aura, in part, involves the perception of the human within the object articulated by Benjamin as “traces of the practiced hand” then it is somehow in a relationship, perhaps a negative relationship, with the commodity fetish, which seeks to remove all trace of human labor from things. The aura “inverts the definition of commodity fetishism as a perverse confusion of the human and the thing… as if aura were the
magical antidote to such fetishism.” In *Capital vol. 1* commodity fetishism is presented as a phenomenon that turns the relations between things into social relations and social relations into the relations between things. In short, it objectifies humans and vitalizes objects, so they might assume “the mystical form of the commodity.” The auratic experience, however, recalls this forgotten human dimension within the things, as in this experience “the object becomes human” defying the force of fetishism where “the human dimension remains forgotten.” The recollection induced by the aura is what invites the comparisons between the aura, the uncanny, and anxiety, as commodity fetishism is ultimately understood by Foster as a force of repression, while the auratic encounter takes the object of our gaze and “invest[s] it with the ability to look at us in return.”

The uncanny and commodity fetishism both lend themselves to theorizing animation, as both involve an ambiguity between vital force, human presence, and inanimate objects. Hal Foster’s work reveals how the aura, considered beyond its presentation in the artwork essay, invites a discussion involving repression and its return. Of course, I’m selectively appropriating work from Foster’s book—he considers repression, the uncanny, and the auratic encounter in both Marxist and Freudian contexts—I’m considering the repression and its return similar to Bill Brown when he writes of the “American uncanny” as a return of the repressed ontological scandal of American slavery: the slave as both animate human and inanimate property. While not excluding a psychoanalytic reading, and in many ways perhaps inviting one, I use the axiom “the return of the repressed” in a greater, social context. Like the American uncanny, commodity fetishism represses the trace of human labor congealed within the commodity by altering the relations between things to more resemble the relations between humans. This, in turn, alters social relations to more resemble relations between objects. The forgetting involved in commodity
fetishism is the act of repression, which Foster writes the encounter with the aura helps recall. This is what Benjamin meant when he wrote of the “revolutionary potential” of outmoded objects. The uncanny, commodity fetishism, and the aura all encircle a certain idea of animatedness or its absence. Because of this, the conceptual nexus they form leads to a decidedly non-utopian theory of animation—one that reconsiders the anima of the medium and takes seriously the death and social pathology crucial to the medium.

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As noted in the opening paragraph, the motif of wind in Over the Garden Wall is introduced with the first lines of the opening theme song. The lyrics contain words like wind, mist, and cloud that accompany sounds of wind and leaves blowing in the breeze. The strong wind in the last episode overpowers Beatrice as she searches for the boys and Wirt attempts to fight through the powerful gusts to find the missing Greg. Likewise, in Greg’s dream in “Babes in the Wood,” a clear homage to the Silly Symphonies and Merrie Melodies of early animation, the villain is The Great North Wind, which Greg battles like Popeye to force into a bottle and save the Cloud City. In the dream the episode cuts to the sleeping boys and we see them attempting to stay warm as the freezing wind blows over them. The true nature of the Unknown and the boy’s journey further expands the ethereal wind/breath motif: they’re drowning on a Halloween night in the modern day. For the entire series they are not breathing. The motif’s presence inversely reflects Wirt and Greg’s absent respiration—is The Unknown then a limbo state, or a split-second fantasy space that distorts temporality in a fashion similar to “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge?” A lack of respiration certainly causes death, yet the boys bound through the forest full of vitality. This, in a sense, recalls the animated figure as one who is both a non-living,
mechanistic automaton and a seemingly vital performer who can cause viewers to emote and sympathize.

Painting is likewise called to mind in a number of ways and thus acts as a second pervasive motif. The backgrounds are painted and constantly privileged by the series in shots without characters in the introductions and conclusions of episodes, showcasing the background design of the series. Likewise, the skull-laden frame of the introduction produces a painterly sensation that is intensified by the matte, iris framing device used throughout the series. This framing technique will be spoken of in greater detail further in the section; however, I point it out here to highlight the way it emulates painting frames for the painted backgrounds on display.

To be clear, I am not arguing that the painted backgrounds and what has been described as a “painterly” style alone makes painting a guiding motif through the series. Painting plays a significant role in both aesthetic and plot; for instance, in “Mad Love” painting is central to the narrative. The episode begins with Wirt, Greg, Beatrice, and the brief sidekick Fred—a talking, kleptomaniac horse—in a mansion owned by a tea magnate, Quincy Endicott, who fears he is going insane. After the children ask about his manic behavior, he explains how one evening he found a painting in his massive home that he had never seen before. He proceeded to fall in love with the woman in the portrait and, in a macabre turn of events, believes he sees the ghost of the woman wandering around his manor. The gothic tale ends when Endicott discovers that the woman he saw is real—his mansion is so massive he didn’t realize it connects to another mansion owned by his business competitor. They fall in love and live happily ever after.

In “Mad Love,” which is the mid-point of the miniseries, these two motifs combine in a truly meaningful way. The wind blows through the orange leaves just as the spectral ghost

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See Kevin Johnson’s review in The AV Club TV Reviews, 11/04/14 or Robert Lloyd’s review “Welcome to a Land of Enchantment in Over the Garden Wall” LA Times 11/03/14.
breathes life into the portrait, giving shape, form, and vitality to Endicott’s fantasies. The swirls of “golden memories” referenced in the theme song are created by a combination of wind and the colors of autumn—they are beautiful swirls formed by dead plant matter and the cold air that brings winter. The transitional period between summer’s abundance and winter’s sparsity situates autumn as a limbo period between seasons of life and death. It is no wonder that Over the Garden Wall designs its limbo world as a land in perpetual fall. The death associated with the ghost in “Mad Love” is the death brought by this chilling air. This is the same air manifested in Greg’s Disney-like dream as The Great North Wind, and the breeze that “beckons through the leaves.” The eeriness of this line is revealed in the “Mad Love” episode and throughout the children’s encounters with The Beast. The cold, freezing wind of death is inviting to the children, further encoding the Unknown as the uncanny, as the death drive pushes the two boys closer and closer to their final confrontation with the Beast.

The threat of an ethereal ghost emerging from a painting in “Mad Love” recalls what Scott Bukatman calls the “animating spirit,” or what Donald Crafton might refer to as the visually absent animator that is nonetheless present in the object. The inanimate, nonmoving image, such as a painting, is endowed with motion by the work of the animator. The animator haunts the animated image because her presence is removed to ensure the life of the image or perhaps to produce the commodity form—when reminded of the animator we recall the in-animacy and mechanistic nature of what dances before us on the screen. The relationship between life and movement animation negotiates is foregrounded by Wirt and Greg’s simultaneous life and death-like state. In a paradox similar to the living death of a ghost, the breath of the animator is what both endows the image with its life and what reminds us of its nonlife.
If the importance of these two motifs and their significance for both the dominating narrative theme of death and the aesthetic influence of autumn has been established, why is this significant for animation ontology and the hopes and fears of animation’s social implications? Recalling the preceding passages summarizing Benjamin’s work on aura, one might not be too surprised by my forthcoming observations: the combination of painting, ethereal air, and death brings us to a theorization of the auralic experience within art and the convergence of this experience with the uncanny and the commodity form. The word aura, after all, originates from the ancient Greek term for breeze. Thus, the ghost of a painting, the ethereal presence of the past, can easily be understood as the presence of the aura.

The Unknown is replete with antiquated, archaic images and references, while likewise serving as a precarious space between life and death. It thus connotes both the auralic experience and the category-bending anxiety surrounding the uncanny confusion between animate and inanimate-ness. The series combines one with the other, our encounter with the outdated is linked to the uncanniness of the animating apparatus, the life/death so described by Cholodenko. The Unknown is indebted as much to Washington Irving as it is to pre-WWII animation. The tavern keeper in “Songs of the Dark Lantern” looks and sounds just like Betty Boop, the first episode’s title, “Old Grist Mill,” recalls the Mickey short, “The Old Mill,” while Greg’s dream sequence near the end of the series takes on the qualities of a Silly Symphony. In-so-watching this series we are watching a style of animation that we might say is losing its relevance. Everything on display in this show is slowly being phased out—even, as certain critics note, its industrial practice. It is a one-off, closed story resistant to transmedia continuation and expanded universe exploration. Likewise, it was made specifically to be a Halloween/early-November autumn special, using its time slot within the creative process. Finally, it builds from motifs, aesthetics, and storytelling
practices from New England, resisting a corporate strategy in present-day media to move away from regional specificity in favor of universality so as to more easily attract a global audience.

Do I mean to say that by sounding a death throe of a specific industrial practice in conjunction with motifs that bring to mind the aura endows *Over the Garden Wall* with an aura? Not quite. Rather, the practice coupled with the aesthetics and referential nature of the show produces within the viewer a sensation of the archaic and outmoded. The pertinent question to ask in relation to this show, then, is what do we do with the last century’s animation practices? Rather than glorify or romanticize the archaic or attempt to artificially reproduce its aura, the show intentionally associates the outmoded style and form with the uncanniness implicit within both the narrative and the medium. The cultural imagery is not used for nationalistic purposes, but rather to play with two powerful, and perhaps opposing, sensations of nostalgia and uncanniness. The familiarity is simultaneously uncritically celebrated and oddly defamiliarized at any given moment in the series. We can then place the show in the intersections of our three conceptual guides expounded in the beginning of this chapter. The two motifs connote an archaic, cultural memory in an ethereal way, inviting a certain conversation regarding aura and the uncanniness of animation—however, the outmoded seems more appropriate when thinking of the series’ style and practices, which then invites a certain account of commodity fetishism.

The centrality of vital force, labor, and the human dimension of objects encircle conversations regarding the uncanny, the aura, and commodity fetishism—they are likewise interwoven, deliberately or not, in the many works of animation studies. Using these concepts as guides, we can move to a brief description of how *Over the Garden Wall* self-reflexively plays with the magical thinking induced by its own style. In the episode “School Town Follies” this is perhaps the most explicit. Wandering through the woods Wirt, Greg, and Beatrice come across a single
room school house where animals are being taught by a heart-broken human teacher. Rather than animals ‘magically’ acting like humans they are being forcefully trained into human behavior. As the teacher’s father inexplicably states, “I thought we were doing important work here like teaching animals how to count and spell!” Instead of animals singing and playing in human-like ways, they are being imbricated into a categorized, regimented life. This perhaps explains why the animals appear so morose and depressed. In an ironic turn of events, it is the human Greg whose whimsy, song and dance innervate and empower the animals, rather than anthropomorphic animals energizing children.

Beatrice, the talking bluebird, is similarly used as a punchline that reminds us of assumptions we often bring with us when viewing cartoon cinema. When we are first introduced to her, Wirt precociously reminds the viewers that birds’ brains are not “big enough for cognizant speech,” inciting an angered reaction from Beatrice. Also, when Greg frees her from a thorn bush she says she owes them a favor. Greg immediately assumes he’s been granted a magic wish, but an increasingly flustered Beatrice claims she’s not magic and only owes him a favor. A talking bluebird who was once human is not magic? Over the Garden Wall is full of humor based on assumptions we might have when viewing a classic cartoon: Fred the horse is a seemingly ‘normal’ horse throughout “Songs of the Dark Lantern,” only to reveal in the finale that he has been able to talk all along. Similarly, Greg’s frog suddenly bursts into song in “Lullaby in Frogland” after numerous episodes of mere croaking, only to return to his non-linguistic state following his performance.

Through these references, throwbacks, and playful self-reflection regarding Disney-like magical thinking, The Unknown doesn’t simply connote an autumnal limbo space between life and death, but likewise it is somehow explicitly associated with animation. The point here,
following the section on ontology, can be made plainly: of course, a space located between life and death is somehow overtly associated with animation, as animation is the endowment of life. The uncanny, life/death animatic apparatus of Alan Cholodenko is The Unknown. *Over the Garden Wall* subtly associates the boys’ encounter with death with the practice of animation. Indeed, in the show’s pitch the original name for The Unknown was The Land of the In-Between—a not-so-subtle reference to the interplay between the show’s setting, the practice of animation, and death. This, in turn, recalls Alan Cholodenko when he writes of animation and animation theory as “itself of the order of the ‘in between,’” that it cannot be thought without thinking the nature of the ‘in between.’” In the final episodes it dawns on viewers that the adorable, wide-eyed Disney-like character, Greg, very well might die before the series ends. The rambunctious and naïve cartoon figure can never die, or so we’ve been told by Chuck Jones and Tex Avery. The “death of death” Cholodenko writes of in the classic hunter/prey cartoons is somewhat reconsidered, as the series takes place in the land of limbo with characters who are slowly dying. Rather than simply suggest *Garden Wall* reintroduces death to animation, which would ignore the years of traumatic animated deaths in *Bambi, The Lion King,* or *Watership Down,* the series reconsiders what the cartoon’s “escape from the uncanny valley” actually looks like.94 The boys wander around a world that isn’t quite the land of death or the land of the living—they wander and explore the uncanny, animated valley in an almost literal sense.

The relationship between death and animation is not just a product of theorizing done by Cholodenko and other contemporary animation scholars, but dates back to the very beginning of animation as a cinematic medium. The first moments of animation, which are well-documented, were not of drawings or cels but of inanimate objects. Donald Crafton writes of the mythic origins of animation: the relatively unknown process of singular exposure—photographing an
object, moving it for a moment, and then photographing it again—hit Paris by storm in 1907 with the release of James Stuart Blackton’s *The Haunted Hotel*. This, of course, seems like an obvious way to situate the new technique: there is something ghostly about objects moving on their own. The uncanniness of animation was there from the beginning and *Over the Garden Wall*’s “throwback” aesthetic combined with the aforementioned story of limbo and death reveals the series as one situated at the intersection of the uncanny, the auratic encounter, and the confused ontology of the animated image.

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If this project is based around ideas regarding animated utopia and the problematics associated with this genre of theory then the preceding dialogue must be given a social valence. What are the politics of this show—the ethical implications of the preceding analysis? I take this opportunity to level a criticism against the series that I don’t think can be remedied: the overwhelming whiteness of the show, which is not merely a problem concerning a lack of representation, but a bit more insidious of an issue. The early jazz inspired soundtrack and the iconography from the late 1800s-early 1900s recalls the indebtedness early animation has to blackface minstrel performance of this time period. If *The Unknown* is a space associated with the animatic apparatus, what it misses is Nicholas Sammond’s charge that the early figures of American cartooning aren’t just like minstrels, they are minstrels. In this context, uncanniness and nostalgia take on a political importance we might not have originally assumed. Do we want to defamiliarize this time period—to be uncomfortable and uneasy—or do we want it’s iconography to induce wistful recollection? *The Unknown*, while sometimes invoking uncanny sensations, is often presented in a nostalgic light. As a personal fan of the series even I have to admit waxing romantic about the *Birth of a Nation* era during our own ‘make America great again’ historical moment is
less than ideal. It is certainly not in representation that *Over the Garden Wall* will be somewhat redeemable, and so I unfortunately bracket that to the side for future projects. Instead, I suggest we look to its particular implications for animation aesthetics in conjunction with the theorizing of Benjamin, the uncanny, the commodity, and the outmoded.

A classic binary in commercial animation aesthetics involves a polarity between full and limited animation. Full animation, a term describing both the pictures used per second and a style of animation that aims for mimetic and ‘realistic’ representations, is more associated with cinematic animation, while limited animation’s modern and pop art influence has come to be more associated with television. *Over the Garden Wall*’s full animation more resembles Hayao Miyazaki than Walt Disney, and thus I periodically bring in Thomas Lamarre’s work on Studio Ghibli’s aesthetics. The full and limited distinction also assumes specific ideological and political orientations, made explicit by the historical grievances between the United Productions of America (UPA) and Walt Disney Studios. The UPA was founded by former Disney animators who left the studio after the 1941 strike and was influenced by the contemporary art movements of the day, while Disney was committed to a brand of animated realism indebted to live action cinematic norms. For Disney the strike was a personal grudge and he allegedly referred to the UPA as “those damn commies down [the Burbank] river.”

The miniseries does not necessarily hold up to the traits that define full animation. To begin, there is little to no simulated camera movement. Unlike Disney’s desire to emulate a movement into space—virtually entering the animated space through illusions induced by the multiplanar animation stand—*Over the Garden Wall* maintains a relatively static vantage. Furthermore, the relationship between the planes—the compositing of the show—is not as seamless as one might come to expect from a fully animated work. The simple, cartoon design of the main
characters is juxtaposed with the detailed, painted scenes of the background planes. Full animation seeks to eradicate the sensation that you are watching multiple planes interacting with one another, while the Cartoon Network miniseries stands out in that the backgrounds strikingly stand out in relation to the foregrounds. Consider, for example, the following image from “School Town Follies,”

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

**Figure 4**

The golden light emanates from the foliage in the background, making the lines which define the characters fairly harsh. This makes sense, of course, considering the backgrounds are painted and the characters are not. This also fits thematically: the boys are lost in The Unknown just as En-dicott is lost in the painting, which yet again invites us to consider this narrative display of an au-ratic, uncanny encounter. In traditional full animation compositing is hidden—the fact that the image is an interaction between multiple layers one on top of the other is done as seamlessly as possible. Recalling the earlier conversation involving closed compositing, full animation’s com-positing is analogous with the continuity editing of the classic Hollywood style in that both seek
to conceal the workings of the apparatus from spectators. The series’ use of compositing and its classification as full animation calls for a need to rethink this traditional binary between full and limited in a new light, especially in the computer-generated era.

The goal of full animation in Disney’s context was verisimilitude. As his ideological and aesthetic rivals at UPA said, “why does everything have to be so damn realistic all the time?” In this sense, the historical differences between full and limited animation speak to an intent on the part of the animator: whether animation’s goal should be to imitate live-action cinema, producing what Disney called the “plausible impossibility” of dancing brooms and talking mice, or whether animation should embrace its anarchic dimension and disorient spectators. The distinction also refers to very specific, competing aesthetic practices. If a cartoon’s average images per second is closer to twenty-four it is generally considered full, while a cartoon that decreases images per second is limited. Limited, as opposed to full, reduces the amount of background detail and movement and reuses sequences so as to decrease cost. However, as Thomas Lamarre notes, limited animation is as much an aesthetic/ideological approach to the medium as it is an economic cost-saver. Full animation, associated with Walt Disney, often seeks to animate motion and worlds as ‘accurately’ as possible, while the works of limited animation were originally more influenced by modern or abstract art.

Two different notions of the full/limited distinction emerge from the preceding paragraph. On the one hand, the traditional distinction refers to practices that can be seen, noted, and documented. Reducing images per second or increasing background motion, for example, can immediately place you in one camp or the other. We might be inclined to call this a normative distinction. On the other hand, the binary speaks to a driving force, a mission of the animator towards verisimilitude and a specific relationship with ‘reality.’ This force, I would like to argue, is
not easily pinned down by aesthetic practice. In the 1940s, painterly backgrounds and seamless movements of cels were indeed a push towards an ever-greater mimesis of reality, while the harsh lines and stark contrasts of UPA’s style were an intentional move away from such animated realism. The driving force behind full animation, however, leads to the twenty-first century’s computer-generated films. The virtual camera movements and the three-dimensionality coupled with the smooth lines and perfectly colored images replace painted backgrounds and multiplanar illusory motion to produce a new, digital, full animation. *Over the Garden Wall*, in a sense, is using yesterday’s full animation in place of today’s. This, however, doesn’t somehow make the series limited in any sense; rather, it speaks to the way digital production disrupts and challenges distinctions and categories of last century’s animation and animation theories. Thus, the image in Figure 4 is using an outmoded full animation practice, producing a composited image that isn’t quite closed. The images seem harsh and the backgrounds distinct from the foregrounds because the computer-generated compositing associated with contemporary animated images are so incredibly hidden and seamless.

Furthermore, the series constantly employs a matte framing device, which recalls not only early photography and painting frames, but likewise produces a sense of limited space. This is not to be confused with the closure of animated space, which is the process by which animation practice gradually removed the animator as a character and ceased interaction between live-action and animated space. Alternatively, this limiting of the world is opposed to Disney’s desire to produce a sense of wholeness to his animated space. The matte frame produces a sensation that we are in fact squinting at this world through half-closed eyes of two drowning boys. Consider the following image:
There are numerous stills from the series that can illustrate this matte frame. The iris suggests not only the moment of limbo, but likewise the experience of walking on a path through the woods, as this above image displays. The idea of following the path out of the darkness and towards the light reminds us of the survival struggle the two boys are undergoing. However, this framing likewise produces a sensation of limitation. Yes, the mountains and trees are lush and detailed, however, we are distanced from them by the mediating presence of the matte frame. We are not invited into this space, we are only asked to watch from a viewpoint outside the action. We are watching the world through a crack or hole in the garden wall dividing animated space and our own. We are presented with a distance, even if it might appear to us on our screens as close at hand.

The motifs of wind/breath and painting recall ideas surrounding the aura and auratic experience, however, the miniseries is very much a ‘mechanically reproduced’ work. Reading the series through Benjamin’s work on aura will only lead us to the conclusion that the series manipulates the withering aura and seeks to provide viewers with a simulated one. Calling forth the
simulated aura pivots on whether *Over the Garden Wall*’s use of the archaic induces outmoded energies or whether it is purely a nostalgia trip to the halcyon days prior to the fracturing of modernity. For Benjamin, outmoded objects consist of refuse, out-of-fashion restaurants, textiles whose popularity dwindled, or commodities that cease to truly embody the commodity form. Often understood in relation to the theorist’s work on surrealism, Benjamin writes of the “revolutionary energies” that surrealist artists release from these objects. They remind us of the artificiality of the commodity fetish and of the senseless march of fashion, trendiness, or ‘innovation’ among consumer goods in capitalist production, which render objects obsolete as the “vogue” begins to “ebb from them.”

Can a cartoon series be considered outmoded? If we consider it a work of art, probably not. However, can the act of animating be considered outmoded—can it evoke similar sensations of an outmoded object, depending on the particular historical moment? One might simply deduce by the show’s setting, influence from fairy tales, and “throw-back” style that the series is somehow reactionary or the darling of luddites resistant to adopt modern practice. In response to a similar reaction to the work of Miyazaki, Thomas Lamarre writes of the animator’s adaptation of children’s literature as

> Part of a general tendency to ground a critique of the modern technological condition in a classical or premodern worldview… Miyazaki does not embrace classicism or Cartesianism or propose a return to the early modern or to rationalism… Rather he wishes to sustain, however tentatively, some stable frame of reference to impart a sense that something new can coalesce beyond the modern technological condition.

Using a fairy tale narrative structure or grounding stories within a pre-modern context does not de facto render the politics of the aesthetic object reactionary. In fact, as Lamarre points out, one might look back at these pre-modern worldviews not to emulate, but to give us courage that the current condition we live in is not a natural or necessary one. This does not mean we must move
backwards, but rather, like the energies the surrealists released from outmoded objects, we are reminded of the impermanence of present social relations.

If we again recall the image in Figure 4 and the discussion surrounding its compositing, we can understand how Over the Garden Wall might be considered outmoded and the consequences that may have for spectators. The compositing of the image reveals to the viewer how past innovations, considered the pinnacle of realism for their time, age and become obsolete, reaching a point where spectators don’t find them to be all that ‘real’ anymore. Using outmoded realist techniques in animation, then, releases quite different energies from the images than when those techniques were fresh and new. Thus, as the theme song plays for the final time at the end of the miniseries we hear for the first time the last line omitted from the introduction. The “golden swirls” and the specific painterly style of the fully animated object of last century’s apparatus “lost in the clouded annals of history” is described by the final words uttered in the series as, “the loveliest lies of all.”
5  GENDER, RACE, AND PLASMATIC UTOPIA

I do know that you can fall into a lot of traps with girl characters when you're considering, you know, all the girl characters in the past.
-Pendleton Ward, Adventure Time creator and showrunner

Comics and animated cartoons are filled with tales of playful disobedience in other-worldly realms and, at the same time, themselves constitute fields of playful disobedience.
-Scott Bukatman

Mickey Mouse isn’t like a minstrel. He is a minstrel.
-Nicholas Sammond

Adventure Time is one of Cartoon Network’s most popular series currently on the air—in 2013, at the height of its popularity, three Adventure Time episodes were in the top five most watched episodes on the network. It has become a staple for the Atlanta-based network and helped launch the careers of many other animators, such as Over the Garden Wall’s Patrick McHale and Steven Universe’s Rebecca Sugar. Part of the show’s success is its mass appeal—children, adolescents, and adults can all be counted among the fans, not to mention rapper Tyler, the Creator who references the show in his single “Yonkers.” The narrative structure of the show, as opposed to other children’s media, is explicitly influenced by role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons and various video games. This structure revolves around quests and questing, the hero’s journey, retrieving a desired object, saving the realm, etc. What has been explicit from its beginning, beyond its mass appeal and role-playing influence, is the unique way the show deals with gender. Rather than just ensure a modicum of ethical representation, the show directly engages with issues of toxic masculinity and female empowerment. In context of this thesis, the plasmatic, category-defying ontology, which can induce uncanny sensations or become complicit in the commodity form, manifests in Adventure Time in an entirely different way, as it allows for gender bending and at times a complete undoing of gender. The morphing
oscillation of animation in Cartoon Network’s show rejects ossified social boundaries and bina-
ries surrounding gender and sexuality. However, in this chapter I also describe how the plasmatic
aesthetic the show embraces is specifically racialized due to the historical debt American anima-
tion has to blackface minstrel performance and racial caricature.

To speak of the show’s preoccupation with genderbending, we first concern ourselves
with its more general plasmaticness and category-defying nature. In-so-doing, I ground this con-
versation in Benjamin’s disparate references to Mickey Mouse that appear scattered throughout
his work previously discussed in the thesis. In discussing these references in relation to Adven-
ture Time I emphasize the function of the animated body for Benjamin in relation to a new social
body—the “collective physis”—in the animated shorts. Questions during this interwar period
in critical theory, especially for those associated with the Frankfurt School, centered around “the
role the technological media were playing in the historic restructuring of subjectivity: whether
they were giving rise to new forms of imagination, expression, and collectivity, or whether they
were merely perfecting techniques of subjection and domination.” For Benjamin, the figure of
Mickey Mouse came to embody this role and its ambiguity. The mouse’s function and the polar-
ity presented is often crudely personified as an Adorno versus Benjamin argument, however, as
Hansen notes, Adorno’s negative response to Benjamin’s use of Mickey highlights ambiguities
in Benjamin’s own thought.

The polarity between the utopian and the socially pathological in animation in many
ways is an iteration of the polarity present in Benjamin’s work, articulated in the preceding para-
graph in terms of historic changes in subjectivity. This ambiguity is guided by the anxieties in his
particular historical moment between technology’s utopian hopes of “giving rise to new forms”
and its repressive potential “perfecting techniques of subjection and domination.” If Black
Mirror presents a dystopic image of one side of this polarity, Adventure Time gives us the other. The blurring and blending present in the plasmatic is not merely an aesthetic category but speaks to a greater blurring present in the dream of nature and technology merging—a dream that requires the dismantling of traditionally held epistemological and ontological categories. In “Experience and Poverty” Benjamin writes the dream of Mickey Mouse is of a figure whose body internalizes “the wonders of technology”—Mickey is a figure who can “improvise out of the body” the achievements of technology without the necessary machinery. Mickey is then fantasy of nature and technology “completely merged.” If, to echo Thomas Lamarre, animation is a site of “thinking technology,” then it is a site where we can collectively program this merger, or at least, imagine it as a utopian hope. This blurring comes with angst and fear, present in a narrative like “The Waldo Moment,” where this merging leads to the complete subsuming of humanity by the technological figure.

Adventure Time’s location in this merging and blurring is apparent in its treatment of gender and sexuality. To introduce Adventure Time and the specific ways it deals with gender we first consider the role of characters and their specific designs. One thing we instantly notice is the way the show subverts the fantasy genre to which it is indebted. Princess Bubblegum, who we may initially characterize as a fair maiden in need of rescue, is in fact an extremely capable, intelligent, and just ruler. Finn and Jake, who envisage themselves heroic knights, more often perform menial tasks for the Princess or they completely mess up the quests handed down to them. Clearly, the Princess doesn’t need the heroes in any sense of the term. Her overwhelming pinkness—she is made out of gum—avoids coding her authority and control as masculine. She is still clearly feminine, demonstrating that a woman need not act ‘like a man’ to hold a position of power. The Ice King, as enemy of Princess Bubblegum, clearly demonstrates the politics of the
show: the pathetic, toxically masculine villain preys on the residents of Bubblegum’s realm. However, the King never truly seems that threatening—in the Land of Ooo the violence and destructiveness of traditional masculine social forms exist merely as an annoying residue to be dealt with by somewhat ineffective heroes, Finn and Jake. The Ice King is blue—connoting the traditional masculine/feminine binary present in his eternal conflict with the pink Princess. The material they are associated with, gum and ice, is also significant. One can stretch, bend, and assume multiple forms, while the other is the rigid, ossified state of what is usually liquid and formless. They are not merely enemies because of their coded genders, but because of the substances that make them up. However, challenging the fantasy genre’s black and white, Manichean morality, in later episodes of the series the Ice King’s backstory reveals he has acted extremely heroically and cannot merely be dismissed as an archetypal ‘bad guy.’

Jake, Finn’s dog-best friend and adopted brother, has the incredible ability to morph, stretch, bend, and increase or decrease in size. He is truly the embodiment of the animated body, a subject that is somehow also the object of play and ludic space Cholodenko characterizes as animatic. Jake is constantly performing sight gags and physical comedy, forming his body in humorous or helpful ways.
The plasmaticness so described by Eisenstein is the defining characteristic of Jake the Dog. Finn, on the other hand, is the only human of the show, with few exceptions. Because of this he is more limited than Jake, bodily speaking. However, as with many characters of the show, Finn seemingly lacks certain joints and bones—his arms can wriggle around like worms or snakes and his legs can assume angles that would snap any non-animated human’s bones in two.
Finally, the Gameboy-like computer BMO deserves a brief description. While by no means a major character of the show, BMO has been pointed to in contemporary literature as the figure par excellence that represents the show’s gender politics. Christopher Olsen and Carrie-Lynn Reinhard write the robotic figure’s “gender identity remains unfixed throughout the series” remarking that in the episodes where the characters’ genders are swapped, BMO remains completely unchanged.\(^\text{112}\) Furthermore, they survey multiple episodes where BMO is referenced with both masculine and feminine pronouns. By making the figure of BMO the completely gender-less or gender-ful body, the show draws a connection between gender fluidity and the play implied by BMO’s status as a gaming console, a connection already made by the overall association between the Land of Ooo and role-playing table top, fantasy games.

S2E3, “Loyalty to the King,” begins with Finn and Jake rescuing a princess imprisoned in the Ice King’s lair. The bearded King is snoring in bed, his room an overwhelming blue, stalactites and stalagmites surrounding the sparse abode. Upon realizing the princess is gone, he pitifully concludes, “she broke up with me.” This fleeting moment is one of many; *Adventure Time* is replete with the Ice King’s predatory approach to gaining favor with women in the Land of Ooo. He is a lonely, pathetic man who is both pitiful to the spectator and a menace, albeit glossed in the playful nature of the show. Heartbroken, we see the Ice King eating pizza, mournfully sprawled out on his exercise equipment. In an attempt to get over his loss, he decides to make major life changes, beginning with shaving off his iconic beard, which allows him to fly across Ooo with its flapping, wing-like qualities. Wading through his shaved facial hair, the Ice King exits his lair to go into the world to exercise and put himself out there. Because of his physical changes the villain is not recognized by the denizens of Ooo, and his introduction is
misheard as the Nice King, leading the princesses across the land to come investigate this new, handsome monarch.

Finn and Jake are likewise fooled. Seeing the princesses amassing around the duplicitous villain and assuming he is good because of his ‘Nice’ title, the heroes pledge themselves to his service. The newly dubbed ‘Nice Knights’ are given a task by the King to systematize the women of Ooo who are interested in him, weeding out the “ugly” ones and organizing them in a line so he can meet each one personally. Finn and Jake are skeptical but they go along with the plot. After they see a few of the princesses leave the King’s presence in tears, the heroes confront him. Before Finn can properly explain their misgivings, the King’s beard begins to grow back. Terrified, he instructs his Knights to fetch his razor from his lair, telling them the evil Ice King stole it from him. Always down for an adventure and fighting their nemesis, Finn and Jake put their concerns to the side. When they enter the lair and see the amount of hair on the floor, they realize what has happened—they’ve been duped. They rush back and begin to fight the Nice King, who initially is defended by the princesses. When the heroes glue his beard back on the women realize they’ve also been fooled and they collectively beat the Ice King to smithereens in a violently happy ending.

Upon summarizing this episode at length, a reader unfamiliar with the series will immediately notice that gender still very much exists in Ooo. Princesses, Kings, and beards all point to the continuation of certain ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ identities. However, by the King shaving off his beard—the symbol of masculine prowess and patriarchic power—he briefly improves his social station, only to exploit this newly acquired status. The show’s gender bending is not a gender annihilation, with the exception of BMO. Instead, as its influence from Dungeons and Dragons and fantasy video games suggests, gender exists in Ooo in a similar fashion as classes exist
in role playing games. They are assumed and can be shed. The showrunners can, and have, invert the gender of every character with the flip of a switch—Finn becomes Fionna, Princess Bubblegum becomes Prince Bubblegum, etc.

“Loyalty to the King” reveals the show’s specific take on toxic masculinity, which is embodied by the figure of the Ice King. This masculinity also threatens to subsume both Finn and Jake, who are both coded as cis-gendered masculine ‘allies’ to the, should we say, feminine post-humans of Ooo. The Ice King is mired by contradictions that motivate visions of unreality—he imprisons princesses and thinks they’re his partner. He holds both thoughts at once: ‘the woman needs to be enslaved and the woman loves and pairs with me of her own free will.’ The show’s ability to be ridiculous and engage in hyperbole offers its own brand of ideological criticism, one that envisions cartooning as a revealing medium. The King fashions a certain image of himself and the world he lives in, one that does not correspond with the reality of Ooo. This, I find, demonstrates the show’s specific take on masculinity: toxic masculinity consists of world building and role playing. The logic of the King’s masculinist world, its coding, is one based on chivalrous ethics and violent confrontations with ‘illogical’ depravity that seeks to threaten the foundation of such a world. To participate in this brand of masculinity requires an extreme level of cognitive dissonance, one that situates the subject as borderline delusional, as the Ice King demonstrates.

Yet, as the episode described above shows, Finn and Jake often flirt with this masculine world and role as well. Similarly, Finn’s constant pursuit of Princess Bubblegum at times mirrors the King’s desire for the many women of Ooo—however Finn’s unrequited love is the harmless crush of a younger pre-teen on an older girl, as Bubblegum is probably around the age of 18 and Finn is most likely 13 or 14. In their non-relationship the intelligent and mature Princess has all
the power, sending the heroes on quests mainly to make them happy and provide them a sense they are contributing. In “Loyalty to the King,” however, we see a moment where Finn and Jake are complicit in the villainous activities of the Ice King. They continue to go along with the King’s demeaning actions—at one moment forcing one of the princesses to try and physically alter her appearance—because, well, they feel a certain amount of peer pressure from this new, handsome, adult man. Luckily the episode ends with the heroes ‘snapping out’ of this pressure when they realize the true nature of the Nice King, however, we see a consistent conflict within the show: the attempts by certain forces to interpellate Finn, and sometimes Jake, into a masculinist world opposed to the guiding, gender-bending ethics of Ooo.

The Ice King is the consistent ‘bad guy’ in the show because of his desire to construct another world in opposition to Ooo, one based on strict roles and ossified gender, while the ruling sovereign of the land, Princess Bubblegum, desires her kingdom be run based on elasticity and plasmaticness in regards to not just gender, but likewise sexuality. The show doesn’t merely confuse the genders of certain characters or swap them in certain episodes, highlighting their arbitrariness or constructed nature, but it likewise suggests that sexuality in the Land of Ooo is not defined by the heteronormative structures of contemporary society. The symbolism that allows for this claim is not always subtle: Jake’s partner is a Korean rainbow unicorn, suggesting that certain boundaries, ethnic, linguistic, etc., do not exist in the fantasy realm. In a subtler way, the troubled relationship between the kind and patient Princess Bubblegum and the morose, brooding vampire Marceline is nuanced, touching, and surprisingly mature. Their relationship ended on bad terms yet they remain somewhat friendly, even if they constantly bicker when they are around each other. However, Bubblegum’s favorite shirt is an old gift from Marceline and it is revealed in S5E29 “Sky Witch” that she wears it under her clothes, smelling it each morning. In
this episode we also see a picture of them together in Bubblegum’s closet, revealing her feelings for Marceline persist in the present day.

On a narrative and thematic level, *Adventure Time* consciously seeks to undermine traditional gender and sexual binaries. This observation is nothing novel; the show is consistently praised in popular criticism for its attempts to use the cartoon medium to foster progressive attitudes among children and adolescents. However, I’m interested in the ways plasmatic cartoon aesthetics relate to this gender-bending and to a ‘progressive’ style of cartooning. When writing about Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, Scott Bukatman writes that Slumberland is more than just Nemo’s dream space. It is “an aesthetic space… an animated space that opens out to embrace the imaginative sensibility of a reader who is never farther than an arm’s length from this other realm, a space of play and plasmatic possibility… and it is an impermanent space.”

This space is not of the dream, which would invite psychoanalysis, but of the daydream, which offers a brief respite from the structures of everyday life. These daydreams offer “little utopias of disorder” and are not simply tied to what we would traditionally consider the animated medium, but can exist in slapstick comedy, musicals, and written comics. Bukatman, in many ways, is working through Eisenstein’s original observations surrounding the early Disney shorts, which as previously discussed in this thesis he praises for their rejection of “once-and-forever allotted form.”

The Land of Ooo exists as another manifestation of the Slumberland—it is a brief, temporary respite from certain restrictions and limitations within waking life. Unlike *Over the Garden Wall*, *Adventure Time*’s space is sparse, with minor details and limited interaction between planes. The backgrounds are undefined and simple, without the painted detail of the miniseries.

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Music, crucial in both shows, plays a much more anarchic function in *Adventure Time*, often used to allow Jake and Finn to wiggle around, jump, and dance. Character movement is often synchronized with music and the desires of Finn and Jake to constantly have fun and party is usually accompanied with party-like tunes, which feature in almost every episode. Unlike *Little Nemo*, *Adventure Time*’s Slumberland, the Land of Ooo, includes within the category-defying space a specific, gendered resistance. The “little utopias” offer daydreams that eradicate restrictions of the human body, as suggested by Benjamin’s view of Mickey Mouse as demonstrating a “creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being.”

In *Adventure Time*, these daydreams offer respite from the repressive enforcement of patriarchic gender identity and heteronormative sexual identity. The liberational potentials within animation’s playful disobedience are attempting to be harnessed for the purpose of this gender and sexuality-bending play in Cartoon Network’s hit show.

*Adventure Time*, indebted to the fantasy genre, comes with lore that one can immerse themselves. The back stories of characters and their various relationships are immense and in-depth and certainly not necessary to go into detail for this project. However, a brief survey of the Land of Ooo’s lore allows us to better understand the show’s specific take on Bukatman’s Slumberland. The realm is comprised of multiple feudal, monarchical kingdoms that range from fairly free and open to despotic and totalitarian. The Land of Ooo was created following the Mushroom War, a nuclear apocalypse that eliminated all but a miniscule minority of humans, and thus the realm is full of detritus and decaying technology and structures of a recognizable, human social origin. The war and its outcome play crucial roles in the lore and backstories of certain characters such as the Ice King and the purely evil Lich. The Lich is an interesting figure in Ooo, as it

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b The *Adventure Time* wiki was incredibly helpful for this project to help me organize and manage the show’s massive amount of content: [http://adventuretime.wikia.com/wiki/Adventure_Time_with_Finn_and_Jake_Wiki](http://adventuretime.wikia.com/wiki/Adventure_Time_with_Finn_and_Jake_Wiki)
is singularly motivated by the destruction of all life, as Bubblegum claims, and was described in the pitch bible: “The Lich is not funny.” The Lich’s backstory is a bit unclear, in some episodes it seems the Lich originates from the nuclear event as some vague mutation that embodies and personifies the total destructiveness of the bombs. This is evident when Finn wishes the Lich never existed in S5E1 “Finn the Human.” Upon making this wish to the character Prismo, Finn inadvertently produces an alternate reality where the bombs never went off, suggesting the Lich’s existence is somehow connected to the nuclear event. In others, like S6E24 “Evergreen,” the Lich originates from a destructive comet that, like nuclear weapons, sought to destroy all life. However, the comet is likewise the origins of Finn, who is a human form of an ultimate ‘good’ the comet also brings. The “Catalyst Comet” brings both pure good and pure evil, serving a similar function to the monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) as a harbinger of change.

The Land of Ooo is then a world of post-humanity, an earth where human life has all but ended and non-human, vital things and forms take control. Whether they mutated from the war or not isn’t the point, it seems. The space of objects-in-themselves that animation so convincingly seems to vitalize is done so literally in Adventure Time. The fetish character of these peppermints and sticks of gum which, like the dancing table of Marx, smiled and winked at us from across the counter, is now detached from humanity completely following the ultimate self-alienation and negating act of annihilation. Like Toy Story (1995), The Lego Movie or, looking even further back, Arthur Melbourne Cooper’s Dreams of Toyland (1908), Adventure Time plays with the fantasy of autonomous toys, or to slightly modify this schema, candy. The show’s specific, gender play-space, however, seems possible only because of nuclear holocaust—a somewhat pessimistic conclusion for an otherwise bubbly, optimistic series.
The Land of Ooo explores the “little utopia of disorder” Bukatman describes Slumberland as manifesting. Its negation of form and fantasies of entirely different modalities of life, including the paradoxical life of the inanimate, is expounded upon in *Adventure Time* in a myriad of ways. The Land of Ooo furthers this utopia by imagining it as a post-human future, with gender-bending ethics, plasmatic aesthetics, and object-orientation. Jake the Dog takes Mickey’s stretching and morphing to an extreme—his body can assume almost any form or size and allows for him to perform seemingly impossible tasks. Eisenstein’s “rejection of once-and-forever allotted form” is Jake’s daily calling. If Slumberland and the Land of Ooo speak to certain spatial qualities of animation and animation’s utopian tendencies, Jake brings to mind the animated body, which takes on an impossible motility and often assumes a post-human, or non-human, form. He also adopts the same character tropes as past figures in this animated tradition; Jake is always ravenously hungry, rambunctious, and crass. It was in this plasmatic body, Benjamin wrote, “mankind makes preparations to survive civilization.”¹¹⁸ Hansen summarizes the function of Mickey Mouse films for Benjamin: they “suggested alternative visions of technology and the body, prefiguring a utopian mobilization of the ‘collective physis’ and a different organization of the relations between humans and their environment.”¹¹⁹ The dream of Mickey is a dream of the human and the apparatus gaining equilibrium. In the animated space of Slumberland and Ooo, the body can liberate itself from the constraints of the biological human and the constraints of technological determinism through a utopic synthesis of the two, which gives “rise to new forms of imagination, expression, and collectivity.”¹²⁰ A connection is draw between this rejection of form present in the character of Jake, *Adventure Time*’s entire plasmatic aesthetics and ethos, and a social rejection of ossified gender and sexual boundaries.
Finn’s body, while not clearly plasmatic, still deserves brief observation in regards to this conversation involving Benjamin and Mickey. While clearly human, in S6E2 “Escape from the Citadel,” Finn loses his right arm trying to hold a crystal ship to the ground and, after coming into contact with a nutrient that keeps the prisoners of the Citadel healthy, a flower grows in its place. In subsequent episodes conflict revolves around Finn’s missing appendage—he tries to replace it with a candy arm but it doesn’t quite work and then, in another episode, the flower begins to wilt and the duo must seek a solution. These episodes playfully engage with the idea of the human body, which is underscored in Adventure Time as it is made explicitly clear that Finn is one of the last remaining representatives of humanity. However, his body is affected by the post-human landscape and environs, as his body can similarly morph and take on new forms. It is also important to note that Finn loses his arm trying to chase his negligent father. When his candy arm fails him, Finn and Jake set out to find his dad in space so as to punch him in the face. It is no coincidence that the episodes in which Finn’s body is altered in a thoroughly non-human way—in that he has a flower growing from his body and is somehow causing candy fingers to move—involves conflict with the masculine patriarch. Like his ongoing conflicts with the Ice King’s residual gender ideology, Finn’s conflict with his father is a conflict with a past, gendered, problematic of a negligent father who does not feel the rearing of children is his role. The flower makes Finn unable to respond with stereotypical violent masculinity. Finn’s ability to alter his body in non-human ways situates him in the Land of Ooo with post-human characters, which is in turn associated with a gender-fluid utopia.

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Presenting patriarchic ideology as a residue of the past in Adventure Time’s utopian landscape recalls a past that haunts contemporary American animation production: the simultaneous
presence and visual absence of the blackface minstrel performer. Minstrel performance is a genre founded upon white fantasies of blackness—the black subject as inherently resistant to work, as endowed with ravenous appetite, and as somehow intrinsically ludic and energetic. Nicholas Sammond’s work describes how these tropes and genre practices remediated into American cartooning—the animated figures of Felix the Cat, Bosko the Clown, and Mickey Mouse took the baton passed to them by the declining vaudeville blackface performers. The gendered residue present in Adventure Time’s narrative causes one to think of this other, formal and thematic, residue—the debt animation has to these performance practices.

Plasmaticity and its “drop of comfort,” specifically how it is utilized in Adventure Time, must be understood in light of Sammond’s work—the minstrel’s astounding physicality and connection with abstracted energy served as a useful conduit for spectators in industrial modernity to escape the stratification and regimentation of their daily lives. Eisenstein’s fascination with the plasmatic is then a fascination with an abstracted fantasy of blackness, a fantasy fractured and removed from the iconography and signifiers of blackface.

In theorizing animation in terms of human labor and motion one must address the racialized history of labor in the west in general and the United States in particular. Categorizing movement that is agential and movement that is non-agential is not only a conversation regarding automation and animation, but a conversation involving the political ontology of blackness. Regarding motion Alessandra Raengo makes a distinction between automated movement and motility, the first lacking agency and the second as “traditionally interpreted as a sign of agency.”

The restriction of movement in slavery and the permutations of slavery, such as Jim Crow or the prison industrial complex, results from a history of labor as slavery and the repression and reification of that labor. The formlessness and chaotic motion associated with animation aesthetics is
deeply at odds with the labor producing it and the history of labor in the United States as the restriction of free motility.

Sammond helps historicize the utopian thinking of animation by reflecting on the conditions of the animators and the context of their creations within a time of labor unrest in the industry. The rapid transition of animation from cottage industry craft to rationalized, Fordist assembly line production came with a certain level of discontent among animators, which leads to the 1941 Disney Studios strike. The animated space becomes a site of fantasy—a place where motility is not restricted by the division of labor and leisure is not doled out in brief moments of respite. The artist turned factory worker’s frustration is perhaps most apparent in the Fleischer’s *Out of the Inkwell* series, where Ko-Ko desperately tries to escape his animator’s control and cartoon space, reluctantly forced back into the inkwell at the end of each short. The rebellious character and the formless, liberatory qualities of animated space becomes utopian for spectators; however the irony of Ko-Ko’s plight is his desire to escape the animated world. Sammond writes the “animation industry often celebrated a fantasy of its labor, if not its reality; yet the rebellion of the animated character often took the form of an escape from the drawn world (oppressive for unknown reasons) into that same reality.”

The utopian daydream space for the spectator in modernity was ironically the dystopian factory floor for the animator/worker. This is expressed in Ko-Ko’s desired entry into non-animated space—to be free of the cartoon world. Animators’ frustrations and alienation are given allegorical expression in these characters, which complicates the utopian sensations emerging from the formlessness of the medium. This too explains the function of the minstrel for these early animators. Sammond’s historical work reveals how the “standardization of artists as
workers took place alongside the development of the continuing characters as blackface min-
strels.” To explain this relationship, I quote Sammond at length:

Fluid, flexible, and mercurial, ink was represented as the essence of their being and of the
blackness of their material base. Like the burnt cork and shoe polish of the blackface
minstrel, ink was a distillation of the qualities of an ideal blackness that began formless,
took shape as a trickster and rebellious commodity, and finally returned to the bottle from
whence it had poured.

Within the racist fantasies of blackness minstrelsy promulgated was an idea that blackness is
somehow inherently resistant to labor. This ideology informs the connection between the contin-
uing cartoon character in American animation and the blackface performer: the “blackness that
began formless” which then “took shape as a trickster and rebellious commodity” shares affini-
ties with the Eisensteinian theorizing of animation. The formless, pre-logical animistic energies
informing animation are reified and take the form of characters and spaces of naïve rebellion.

The minstrel’s resistance to work stands in for the animator’s increasing unrest in this historical
moment.

Thus, the minstrel haunts American cartooning and unfortunately Finn and Jake are not
exceptions. The figures, while lacking the iconography of blackface, are performatively minstrel.
They are rambunctious, endowed with ravenous appetites, and constantly desire to “party” and
have fun, while Princess Bubblegum is the rational interlocutor attempting to direct the heroes’
energies toward the service of the Candy Kingdom. All these qualities and attributes situate Ad-
venture Time historically with a minstrel point of origin. Finn and Jake are “rebellious commodi-
ties,” as are the numerous pieces of candy populating Ooo, whose vitality induced from the com-
modity form assumes a rambunctious and resistant quality, a quality informed by the fantasies of
blackness that permeated the medium when its tropes, genres, industrial, and aesthetic practices
were solidified almost a century ago. In this regard, the institution of cartooning in the United
States is not dissimilar from other institutions in this country that are still haunted by the scandal of slavery in the present-day.

Blackness as both racial signifier and white fantasy within minstrelsy is notably absent from *Adventure Time*’s visual field. Where early animation prior to coloring processes is dominated by blackness and black characters—think Betty Boop, Bimbo, Felix the Cat, Mickey Mouse—Cartoon Network’s hit cartoon is an extremely bright show, bursting with primary colors. Where the blackness of ink once defined cartooning, rendering the medium as a cultural site documenting a fascination with an “ideal blackness that began formless” which later takes shape “as a trickster and rebellious commodity,” *Adventure Time*’s aesthetic is conversely comprised of vibrant, bright colors.

The Land of Ooo is not the only imagined, animated world saturated with color; coloration in animation dates back to Disney and the Fleischer Brothers. The solid black ink, in the larger narrative of animation history, is brief and archaic, comparable to the fleeting years the animator was included in the space, interacting with the figure. Yet, this brevity speaks to the way minstrelsy quickly ceased to be an acknowledge grandfather of the cartoon, like it was in the short *Mickey’s Mellerdrammer* (1933), and begins to be a spectral haunting. As the iconography is slowly removed from continuing cartoon characters, so too is the essential imagery of minstrelsy: blackness. The changing colors of animation—once dominated by black ink to now bursting with primary colors—indexes the process by which blackface iconography is shed from the animated, visual field, becoming an ethereal specter rather than a noted forbearer. The removal of blackness speaks to the shared plasmatic fantasies between minstrel audiences and animation spectators—the fascination with self-moving, yet non-agential, figures. Minstrelsy, as performing plantation fantasies, antebellum nostalgia, and assumptions regarding blackness,
regards the slave as a paradoxical entity who needs to work yet is somehow inherently joyous and playful. This is because, as Bill Brown argues, slavery exists as an uncanny institution that turns humans into property—the slave is both alive and inanimate. So too is animation. This historical process that confuses inanimate property and animate human, and its manifestation in minstrelsy, Sambo art, and old racist memorabilia, Brown dubs the “American uncanny.”

The relationship between minstrelsy and animation is, following the insights offered in the preceding paragraph, not one strictly defined in terms of inheritance, but one defined in terms of a shared, paradoxical ontology. Both are fascinated with the self-moving, inanimate object, which is clearly expressed in the animating process. Brown reveals why this fascination exists in minstrelsy, as the slave was considered living property—a paradoxical social category producing ontological scandal and confusion. Thus, plasmaticity in animation aesthetics is racialized, as the plasmatic aesthetic program visualizes an abstracted fantasy of blackness, one severed from an imagined black subject. Whether this shared fantasy of self-moving in-animacy is intrinsically racialized, or whether it has become so, is a line of inquiry deserving its own project. For now, I must simply acknowledge the plasmatic, as arising from this fascination, is racialized. Suffice it to say I am not accusing Pendleton Ward, Adventure Time’s creator, of bigotry—the relationship between minstrelsy, plasmaticity, and contemporary animation speaks to a greater issue regarding the ways slavery, Jim Crow, and our racial ideologies persist in present institutions. Rather, I find this history should give anyone who would declare the plasmaticity of animation as intrinsically ‘utopian’ pause for thought. The historical analysis allows one to regard the plasmatic not as an inherent property of the form, but as a socially contingent feature grounded by history. This is not to say the plasmatic in animation is solely defined in this racialized way, but rather, it exists as one of many strands in its DNA.
*Adventure Time* engages in utopian thinking in terms of gender and sexuality, and in this regard the show is a well-intended attempt to produce a more socially responsible generation of future adults. This reflects the cartoon’s didactic social function, which I touched on concerning the means by which films like *The Lego Movie* ‘train’ children to be more productive white-collar laborers in a ‘post-industrial’ economy. However, as I’ve discussed, *Adventure Time* is still within a mode of performance Sammond would call “performatively minstrel” and therefore its utopian musings should be considered critically, rather than with outright celebratory sentiment.\(^{126}\) By understanding gender as plasmatic, *Adventure Time* calls forth the animated medium’s history of minstrelsy and abstracted, phantasmatic blackness, deeply problematizing notions of the animatic as utopian.
6 CONCLUSION

The initial inspiration for this thesis arose from a profound interest in the ubiquity of utopian thinking in animation studies. While not wholly opposed to the idea, I find that often plasmaticity or formlessness is presented as somehow being intrinsically, or perhaps ontologically, liberatory or utopian. In a modernist, pre-WWII world, perhaps this was true. Released only a year before Eisenstein compiled his essay on Disney, Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940) ends with Chaplin begging the masses to not surrender themselves “to these unnatural men - machine men with machine minds and machine hearts” reminding the viewers, “you are not machines!” Anxieties arising from the physical and intellectual restrictions placed on millions by industrialization and automation in the interwar period clearly led to fears of a threatened humanity or a cheapened sense of freedom. These fears are plainly expressed by Chaplin, who connects the machinic to the World War that had recently begun. The animated figure for Eisenstein and early spectators, then, displays a ludic motion in drastic opposition to the monotonous, controlled movement of the factory assembly line. The irony, however, which I find deeply problematizes the utopian in animation studies, rests in the fact this figure is made on the same assembly line in a monotonous, repetitive way, controlled to an extreme degree by animators. The mode of production and the conditions under which the cartoon is made is congealed within the aesthetic object, and thus within the associated plasmaticity, problematizing a utopian cartoon theory.

Animation and discussions surrounding its ontology seem to be inextricably wedded to ideas of formlessness, anti-rigidity, the aforementioned plasmaticity, rambunctiousness, or chaos. These categories arise from the medium’s ability to morph, stretch, squash, or otherwise visually display extreme violations of spatial logic and bodily limitations. In the Fordist, assembly-line,
Machine Age era, it is perhaps no wonder the anarchy in animation led a figure like Eisenstein to identify a certain utopian feature at work in Disney’s shorts. The freedom from formal constraints, at a time when everything in life was seemingly wedded to the time clock or the division of labor, probably did serve a certain liberatory function in the lives of pre-WWII moviegoers.

The era of streamlined automation and ruthlessly efficient factories was, in part, poked fun at by cartoon animation in a style of performance J.P. Telotte and Miriam Hansen describe as “vernacular modernism.” In this sense, cartoons do contain a certain subversive quality, as they “accustomed us to see differently” in a thoroughly modernist way. However, so too do they have a certain conservative orientation, one in which the “new visuality” being constructed in modernity is “tamed or naturalized, or, more accurately, diluted in the relatively harmless humor of the animated world.”

The subversive and conservative dialectic is altered to a certain degree in the work of Walter Benjamin, who instead read Mickey Mouse as a presentation of a new collective physis and as a remedy for the social ills produced by large-scale industrialization. However, as I argue, cartoon animation is not merely a steam valve for the “repressed pathologies of technological modernity,” but rather, the medium exists in part as a visual residue or trace of these social pathologies. Insatiable consumption and the self-undermining logic of capitalism conjoin with the dancing and chaotic images, producing scenes of engorgement, cannibalism, autophagy, and extreme appetites. In this regard, animation acts as an afterimage of production and the social relations formed around production, burned into our eyes, influencing the visual field once we look away.

If the anima in animation suggests vitality and life-force, then the uncanniness of the non-living anima implies its opposite: death and the death drive. The centrality of death in animation
is, in traditional cartoons, called to mind specifically because of its absence. No matter how many times Coyote is blown up or Tom is beaten to a pulp trying to catch Jerry, they get back up, dust themselves off, and continue on their way. Death’s connection to the animating apparatus—the death present in the illusion of life—involves the uncanny in a particularly charged way, however, so too does it call to mind the commodity fetish, the auratic encounter, and the outmoded object. Any theory of the animatic must concern itself with the interwoven nexus of these theoretical preoccupations and the conceptual outcomes such interweaving produces.

Specific to this thesis, how do the commodity form, a Benjaminian theory of the outmoded, the auratic encounter, and the inherent uncanniness of the animating apparatus alter or complicate the traditional aesthetic dialectic between full and limited animation? Can an approach to animating be considered outmoded, in a Benjaminian sense? If so, the revolutionary energies waiting release remain dormant in yesterday’s animation practices, which have been rapidly replaced and rendered obsolete by twenty-first century computer graphics. If animation cannot be outright utopian, or if its utopian value is at the very least delimited by this thesis, then the revolutionary potential of the outmoded animation practice perhaps salvages some progressive function of the animatic.

The most damning, and perhaps blatant, problem with animation’s utopianism rests in its troubled history with blackface minstrelsy and racial caricature. The category-defying plasmaticity of animation might fit perfectly into a gender-bending, gender-play program, but it comes up short when dealing with issues of race. As recently as The Simpsons’ Apu character or Family Guys’ black weatherman, Ollie Williams, cartoon animation seems unable to shake itself free from its own formative history, implying this history informs the medium’s very DNA. Eisenstein’s plasmaticity has always been intertwined with a white, racist fantasy of the black body as
inherently playful, resistant to labor, flexible, and astounding—its utopian charge and freedom from logical form ironically rests on a history of racism, revisionist history, slavery, and the restriction of free motility.

Gender and sexuality in Adventure Time, however, does suggest that within animation something akin to utopian thinking is clearly occurring. Meanwhile, shows like The Boondocks (2005-2014) or movies like Coco (2017) suggest there are indeed attempts to address the treatment of racialized Others in animation, if only on a narrative level. Animation is a medial site, one where emergent, utopian thought comes forth, in dialectical tension with the minstrel’s ghost and the burnt afterimage of social pathology. If the ever-churning cogs of capitalism, moving from Keynes to neo-liberalism, industrial to ideational, national to global, is indeed sowing its own demise, then it is in the cartoon, an aesthetic object more wedded to the mode of production than most, where this very mode dreams of its own end. This dream can be one of utopian hope, as in Adventure Time or WALL-E, or it can display disturbing images of violence, autophagy, and endless repetition.
ENDNOTES


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17 Ibid., 306.

18 Ibid., 309.

19 Ibid., 311.


21 Sobchack. “Animation and Automation, or, the Incredible Effortfulness of Being.” 379.

22 Ibid., 378.


25 Ibid., 99.


27 Alan Cholodenko. “‘First Principles’ of Animation.” 101.

28 Ibid., 101.

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31 Cholodenko. “‘First Principles’ of Animation.” 107.


33 Crafton. Shadow of a Mouse. 237.

34 Hansen. Cinema and Experience. 165.

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40 Bendazzi. *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*. 63.

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46 Burt. “What is Called Thinking with ShaXXXspeares and Walter Benjamin?.” 99.

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54 Ibid., 7.
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56 Ibid.
59 Slavoj Žižek. First as Tragedy, then as Farce.
60 Kevin McFarland. “*The Lego Movie* is Another Lovable Effort from the Creators of *Clone High*.” *The A.V. Club*. 02/06/2014.
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65 Ibid., 229-30.
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68 Ibid., 36.
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73 Donald Crafton. *Shadow of a Mouse*. 271.

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84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.


90 Foster. *Compulsive Beauty*. 197.

91 Benjamin. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” 1968. 188.


94 Cholodenko. “‘First Principles’ of Animation.” 107.


97 Screenshot from “School Town Follies,” *Over the Garden Wall*. Cartoon Network. 2014.


100 Screenshot from “School Town Follies,” *Over the Garden Wall*. Cartoon Network. 2014.


110 Screenshot from “The Tower,” *Adventure Time*. Cartoon Network. 05/05/2014.


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