Animating Adulthood: Emotional Resonance, Affective Quality, and the Human Condition in Adult Animated Television

An Examination in Theory, Viewership, and Practice

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ABSTRACT

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At its core, adult animation is animated content specifically created for an adult audience. Adult animation represents the intersection of childhood with its colorful package, and the often crippling reality of adulthood, with its content. What may initially appear as sweet and benign entertainment is in actuality an environment for self-reflexivity, where individuals are confronted with their own personal issues, and the reality of adulthood through the struggles of the characters and the narratives explored, both good and bad. The programming offers an escape from one's own problems, while engaging with the characters provides a surrogate experience. This recent shift in adult animated television is emotionally driven, ranging in theme from simply making it through the everyday, to having an existential crisis. Programs discussed include *BoJack Horseman*, *Rick and Morty*, *F is for Family*, and *animals.*. This paper reflects a multi-perspective approach to research, which is particularly lacking in animation studies, and where there is often a stringent divide between theory and practice. Accordingly the three sections of this paper correspond to three approaches to adult animation: theoretical, content or viewer based, and production or maker based, which includes a discussion of the accompanying creation component.

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Introduction: Animation and Adult Animation – Terms and Historical Overview

Animation is a chameleon; at times a technique, a genre, or style, animation is both the practice and the end result. Animation is many things at once. If a conventional film is one that is mapped out shot-by-shot, the animated film takes this one step further, mapping out the narrative frame-by-frame whether this is done with drawings, on a computer, with cutouts, or with puppets. Animation can be described as any media material which uses an animation technique, regardless of the narrative content, but this explanation is endless, encompassing all techniques, all media of any genre using animation techniques such as animated comedy, animated documentary, animated horror, and animated science fiction. "[*A*]*nimation* is an imprecise, fuzzy catchall that heaps an enormous and historically far-reaching, artistically diverse body of work into one pot" (Buchan, "Animation, in Theory" 113). A great deal of effort is made by scholars who write about animation to achieve a conclusive definition, but the results remain inconclusive. There is no all-encompassing framework in which to examine animation simply because of its scope and diversity. Consequently, in order to avoid generalization across all animation, this paper is focused on an examination of a particular subsection of animation, adult animation, solely within the context of television.

Adult animation (occasionally referred to as mature animation) in its simplest terms can be described as animated content intended for adults. What is key here is marking the difference between adult animation, and elements of adult content sprinkled throughout family or children's-oriented animation. Additionally the use of the term *animation* rather than *cartoon* is used because of its inclusivity of all types of animation regardless of the particular technique being used such as traditional drawn animation, stop-motion, or digital animation, etc. Fundamentally what sets adult animation apart from animation in general is its intended adult audience. Consequently it is the differences in narrative content of the adult animated genre which provides a stronger point of distinction from animation in general than the visuals. As with defining the term animation, the exact terminology associated with adult animation is inconsistent. It is at times recognized as a sub-genre of animation, and at other times distinguished as a standalone genre. Adult animation is not solely focused on adults fascinated by the fantastical nature of the visual that the genre uses, but rather the ever expansive genre of adult animation as a progressive means of storytelling. At its core adult animation combines the

innocence of childhood in form, with the reality of adulthood and the human condition, in content.

Historically, adult animated television has evolved from conventional family-oriented television animation and the integration of elements of adult humor in order to appeal to the whole family (Mittell 67). Animated television on the whole has wavered in popularity, that is, until the clear division of content, which normalized children's animated content as weekend morning programming, and family content as prime-time content taking place during evening hours (Mittell 66-68). The conjunction of primetime and animated content is what initiated and ultimately solidified the relationship between adults and animated content. With its original surge in popularity in the 1950's and 60's, primetime animation fell out of fashion and experienced a significant dry period with the final episode of *The Flintstones* airing in primetime in 1966, until December 1990 when *The Simpsons* premiered[1] (Mittell 71). The three programs which popularized the genre both for audiences and academics alike are *The Simpsons* (1990-present)*, Family Guy* (1999-present) and *South Park* (1997-present). These three programs are often seen as archetypes for adult animation, not only due to their longstanding success but also because they contain many of the *presumptions* that have become associated with adult animation: misogynistic content intended for a young male (often white) audience, reliance on crude humor including sex, bathroom humor, violence and alcohol as central elements—highlighting certain tropes those unfamiliar with the genre might expect. However, these initial iterations of the genre have also been progressive, featuring family-driven and dysfunctional-family storylines, social and political commentary, and subsequently laying the groundwork for emotionally-driven storylines. This was followed by a plethora of early 2000 iterations[2] such as *King of the Hill* (1997-2009), *Futurama* (1999-2003, 2008-2013)*, Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (2000-2015)*, The Boondocks (*2005-2014)*, Squidbillies* (2005-present)*, Robot Chicken* (2005-present)*, American Dad* (2005-Present), *Archer* (2009-Present), all of which expanded generic conventions and increased popularity but still relied on elements of the existing generic tropes. Increasingly as adult animation gained traction, the programs evolved, expanding the types of issues that the characters faced, integrating serious elements—a sort of testing of audience response—while still under the veil of comedy in order to not entirely scare off audiences.

[1] The Simpsons has since gone on to be the longest running primetime comedy (Mittell 71)
[2] See David Perlmutter's *America Toons in: A History of Television Animation* for a more complete list.

A recent shift now situates adult animated television no longer simply as a means of entertainment, or even social criticism, but rather has evolved into a space for catharsis related to serious emotional issues and trauma through the exploration of topics that greatly stray from the assumption of animation as either a child's innocent colorful medium, or a crude boy's club. Adult animated television still relies heavily on comedic elements as well as the sitcom format in conjunction with these new dramatic elements, resulting in a redefinition of many shows within the genre being described with a plethora of names such as dramedy (drama+comedy)[3], dark comedy[4], and sadcom (sad comedy)[5] (Bramesco, Jaffe). The overarching point being the convergence of comedy with drama or more serious, even 'sad' content. Animation is not only experiencing a resurgence with regards to the number of new programs, but also a redefinition of the genre, consequently opening itself up for audience diversification. This upward trend has not gone unnoticed, with multiple networks attempting to capture a piece of the market in what some are now calling the "new 'golden age'" for animated television (Hayden). In terms of existing literature, research into adult animation fits into one of two trends: focusing on an analysis of a particular program, or focusing on a discourse (such as representation of women, homosexuality etc.) Unfortunately, the existing academic literature has not yet caught up with the distinct shift of the past four years when it comes to discussing progressive trends taking place in adult animated shows, something which will hopefully change in the coming years as pop culture commentary and academic writing are forced to encounter each other.

Ultimately this research emerges out of my own personal longstanding interest with both television and animation and the significance it has had in my life. This is in part because of an early childhood fascination with the genre of animation which I never grew out of. But while I still enjoy animation as an adult, its ability to deal with issues that are not only relevant but often result in deep introspective reflections of my life, is what makes me want to take a closer look into what the genre is truly able to achieve. As I developed my skills in filmmaking, I was drawn towards making animated films. Not only were they tactile but they allowed me the opportunity to bring to life the narratives that I had imagined about the everyday objects around me. Moreover animated television has not only been a means of escapism, but it in turn speaks back

[3] Encompassing the extreme variance between humor and serious nature of drama
[4] Dark comedy is based on the serious or even taboo nature of plotlines which viewers may or may not initially be aware of as described by Bramesco
[5] Jaffe distinguishes sadcom from dark comedy in its use of rawness where the possibly reprehensible character tries to improve themself, but it does not necessarily work out. It is this sad reality which looms over any comedic aspect.

to me as a viewer. My personal struggles and the struggles of the characters appear to go hand in hand. Accordingly, in establishing my research topic it was a natural fit to combine my love of television and my passion for animation into a research-creation project. In this sense, I am fortunate to approach my research from a multi-perspective approach as researcher, fan, and maker, which suitably correspond to the three body sections of this work and related short film.

This paper is examining adult animation solely in a Western context. The reason is twofold: firstly, the sheer quantity of material to examine is not possible in the context of this research, in particular given the extremely rich history of animation in an Eastern context. Secondly, with the popularity and diversity of anime programming available, adult themes are already a more normalized part of animation outside of the Western context, in part because of sheer volume of programs being produced, whereas they are relatively recent in North America, nor are they as popular. This research is about breaking through the assumptions about adult animation by presenting it as an unexpected new means for audiences to confront their own issues. Part one focuses on establishing a theoretical framework through an examination of key themes that I have extrapolated during my research; part two focuses on an analysis of a select four television programs, Raphael Bob-Waskberg's *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix 2014-Present) Bill Burr and Michael Price's *F is For Family* (Netflix 2015-Present), Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon's *Rick and Morty* (Cartoon Network 2013-Present) and Phil Matarese and Mike Luciano's *animals.* (HBO 2016-Present); part three is a written component detailing the creation process in conjunction with the former two parts. All three areas are essential in discussing animation as a complete entity.

Part 1: Animation and the Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework: An Introduction – Theory vs. Practice / Theory and Practice

In establishing a theoretical framework for animation, let alone adult animation, it becomes increasingly clear that animation theory is a patchwork one. It draws not only on multiple disciplines such as television studies, film studies, and philosophy, but also encompasses multiple variances of the practices including stop-motion, cutouts, rotoscoping, traditional cell drawing, 3D. "[T]he field is far too diverse to succumb easily to a single theoretical apparatus. Nor should it. The state of animation today demands a multiplicity of approaches" (Bartlett 200). Additionally the subject or content of the animation contributes an additional level of complexity

to consider. This examination is focused on how adult animated television deals with sensitive or adult topics, in conjunction with the underlying comedic tones. Ultimately, there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to animation. Animation is filled with dualisms: form and content, life and death, childhood and adulthood. Furthermore because of the involved nature of creating animation, it is often self-reflexive of the people who make it. In this sense animation is arguably as much about the animator as it is about the end product. Accordingly, while animation exists at a crossroads between animation theory and animation practice, the unfortunate reality remains that these two vital components are often discussed as separate elements, when in actuality they are directly related; "there is no theory without practice; no practice without theory" (Wells and Hardstaff, 20). Animation theory provides the framework from which practice emerges, while the practice of animation provides the material that theory then examines. The challenge is that theorizing animation without being involved in the practice results in a somewhat speculative assessment. The animation process is quite complex to describe in and of itself, as well as very personal. For this reason, the goal is to examine key themes raised across animation theory in relation to both the practice of creating adult animated television as well as its consumption, highlighting what Cholodenko describes as "theorizing *of* and *through* animation" (99).

Much More than Movement: Situating Animation

Movement is fundamental to animation, so much so that in animation movement ultimately equates life. As Sergei Eisenstein put it: "'*if* it moves, *then* it's alive'" (qtd. in Clancy 248).While some see the illusion of movement and the illusion of life as conflicting philosophies, they exist as two sides of the same metaphorical coin. Animation always portrays some form of movement, as a stagnant image does not require animation in the first place, and any character, creature, or object depicted as moving inevitably is depicted as being alive. However, the reality of animated movement is evidently that it is not fluid movement but rather a successive number of still poses. For adult animation, what begins as movement transforms into narrative, with this narrative ultimately encompassing the character's life. Simply put, movement begets something bigger than itself: it is the catalyst for animated life. As fictional as this representation may be, in reality, it somehow manages to *feel* real. Animated movement entails two elements: in the literal sense it is movement of the object from one point to another; secondly, in a more abstract sense, animated movement is the movement of the animator articulated by the character.

Broadfoot and Butler provide a similar interpretation of animated movement: quantitative and qualitative motion. Quantitative motion corresponds with a literal approach of cause-and-effect, where poses reproduce external movement (266). Qualitative motion is "the *production* of something new itself, which did not exist before'' (Broadffot and Butler 266). In other words, quantitative movement is movement which "pre-exists our seeing it", with qualitative motion, seeing the motion firsthand is intertwined with the motion being created at that very moment (Broadfoot and Butlter 266). "If quantitative motion is a movement in the world, we might say that qualitative motion is a movement in the *soul*" (Broadfoot and Butlter 266). This 'spiritual' approach to discussing animation reflects the difficulty in describing the animator-subject relationship built during the animation process, in particular for those who have never engaged in the practice. Here spiritual is not meant in the religious sense, but rather in terms of spirit embedded by the animation in the subject which transforms movement into a an intangible essence that the character possesses.

Life and Death

Life is a central theoretical principle in animation, which can be broken down into two distinct streams: the characters themselves as living entities, and the animated subject as a representation or reflection of human life. In essence, animation is situated in the unique position of simultaneously producing life through the animation-making process, while also capturing the essence of what it means to be alive. Regardless of whether the characters are in fact human or not, in many instances the animated subject exists as a non-living fictional entity, without even a physical referent[6]. Regardless of this intangibility with their ability to portray the rawness and fragility of the human condition there is something undeniably *real* about them, even though the viewer is aware they do not exist.

Central to the life in animation is the animator-subject relationship, which as mentioned can be challenging to quantify and is a rather personal experience[7]. Animation production is a form of performance, where the actor simultaneously performs through their own body, but their performance is also captured on screen through their performance as the animated subject. Through the laborious physical, emotional, and temporal involvement of the animation process,

[6] The exception of course being puppets most commonly associated with stop-motion animation.
[7] My own personal experience and my relationship with my animated subject will be discussed in great detail in section three.

the notion of instilling life in the subject is not that far-fetched. Furthermore there is a temporality to the animated subject in that, while the life may be created during the animation process, it is only during the viewing process that these life fragments are combined in such a way that the viewer can experience the animated character as "alive" (Sensonske in Buchan, "The Animated Spectator" 17).

Parallel to the discussion of life, is animism, where all objects or entities contain within them a sort of life-force (Furniss 67). In this case, the process of animating the subject does not imply injecting life-force but rather drawing it out. Concurrently, this posits the animated subject with a certain amount of agency or autonomy separate from the desires of the actual animator. In this scenario, the human body is reduced to a mechanical role, simply enacting what is intrinsically contained within the character. Where this becomes challenging and increasingly obscure is when considering the construction of the puppet, and the role of the puppet creator in relation to the raw materials. Another possibility is animated subjects which possess no life-based characteristics to grasp onto, such as no facial features. Even without features to connect with, animation possesses the ability to humanize the most basic subject.

Life in animation is malleable, in that not only are the characters instilled with life, but often they are deathless. Historically, through the serializing of television, it is quite common for the status quo be reclaimed at the end of every episode, characters who may experience a circumstance that traditionally would result in death, or even long-term consequence miraculously survive, and there is little to no mention in future episodes. No matter what happens there remains the possibility of total restoration of order, without a single line out of place: "Anything can be erased, but it can also always be resurrected" (Levitt 131). Cholodenko uses the term "lifedeath" to refer to the convergence of life and death in animation where the animated subject is "both alive and dead, [and] neither alive nor dead, at the same time" (104). It is alive through the animation process, but not alive in reality, dead in reality, and not dead simply because it was never alive to begin with. As a viewer, deathlessness provides a visual representation of living without consequence, an experience not paralleled in real life. Concurrently not only can these characters live forever, but they are often temporally stagnant, while world-time progresses, the character-time is somehow frozen. "Cartoon characters are destined by their very deathlessness to suffer the eternal return to death, to live through a perpetual cycle of reversion" (Schaffer 469). Within the confines of the animation, characters are

preserved without the reality of aging or even the necessity to change their clothes across an entire series no matter what "real time" would typically dictate.

Increasingly and as will be discussed with the particular media texts selected for analysis, this façade of perpetual perfection in animation is being broken down. Firstly by creating increasingly complex characters, and secondly through a shift in narrative structure by implementing long-term storylines across multiple episodes or even the entire season rather than being forced into resolution at the end of every episode. This means that like their life-action counterparts, animated characters not only face repercussions from their choices, but are also able to develop as characters. This in turn helps contributes to the increased "realness" of animated characters.

Age and Escapism

While "cinema is rooted in the desire for distraction, the desire to see something new and improbable, to laugh and to cry, not at your own, but at other people's misfortunes", animation heightens this experience by providing an "other" who only exist within the realm of the screen (Leslie 110). This simultaneously results in an extended distance between subject and viewer as well as a universality. Animation provides a unique means of escapism unparalleled in other film mediums precisely because there are not only no limits to the realm of possibilities within the genre, but also because the lack of real world referent emphasises the break between the real-world and an animated-world. If "[l]ive action copies reality, [then] animation transforms it" (Darley 73). For example, in comparing animation to fantasy or science fiction, there is an actual physical actor that plays the character on-screen. In the case of animation while there is a voice actor, the character as a visual entity exists only in the realm of the screen. Additionally lived reality and animation-reality differ firstly in world logic, but secondly given that what may be taboo in conventional film or television is given a pass if animated, deemed "less offensive" not simply because the characters are not real, but because they are considered "less real" than live-action narratives.

When the viewer-television relationship becomes so intertwined it raises the following question: "Where does the representation of life begin and the reality of life end?" (Diprose and Vasseleu 147). Viewers who engage with content beyond the surface level of entertainment create links between the show's narrative and their personal narrative by relating to the storyline, the characters, and noticing similarities. However by regularly engaging with particular images

or characters, in particular through binge-watching viewers may lose sight of the distinction between the animated reality and lived reality, engaging in what Shrum and Lee call "Cultivation Theory", where "we psychologically fool ourselves into believing that these characters' reality is our own" (Shrum and Lee qtd. in Snider 122).

As a child, animation serves multiple purposes: a babysitter, a distraction, a form of entertainment, a friend or companion, all of which serve to take the viewer 'away' in that moment of watching. As an adult, animation continues to serve many of the same purposes: as with other film or television genres it offers narratives which allow the viewer to enter the world of the story and temporarily relinquish their lived reality. Animation allows for a "fictionalised notion of consciousness, which, if imagined 'real', both recalls the playful and liberal apparatus of childhood and makes concrete the irony and contradiction of the adult sensibility" (Wells, "Body consciousness" 178). What was once reserved as family-friendly fun has since transformed into an unhinged, uninhibited means of not only adult humor but also serious material. Concurrently, and likely unexpectedly to viewers less familiar with the genre, adult animation is increasingly a means to be faced with deep underlying personal issues in an approachable way, acted out by fictional characters and humanized by their portrayals of vulnerability. Adult animation now explores a variety of themes including depression, anxiety, alcoholism, substance abuse, marital problems, family discord, abortion, gender equality, as well as simply trying to figure out one's place in the world. Animated representations which take on these types of topics can then act as a surrogate for confronting one's own personal problems, a far cry from simply considering animation as mindless entertainment.

What distinguishes television from film is its intimacy. Television watching takes place in the comfort of one's home, wearing whatever you want, eating whatever you want, in whatever state you are, with no one around to judge you. It is only the viewer and the characters in the confines of the home. Escapism into television and its characters is a temporary experience, firstly because life continues even during the television watching experience, and because there is not an infinite narrative to get lost in. Therefore, the experience of engaging with a particular program has an inevitable end, either at the end of the weekly episode, or after binge-watching the entire season. The viewer is then left to deal with the sense of loss, namely the separation from the animated world, and the albeit reluctant return to the "real world", even though it is an entirely fabricated bond to begin with. Furthermore, animation can be seen as a

stylistic buffer rendering difficult topics more approachable through its veil of colorful overstimulation. The unfortunate reality is that television is a one-way relationship, no matter how much time or energy is invested in the program and its characters, it is an entirely fabricated relationship.

Technology and Storytelling

Technology and storytelling are both fundamental parts of animation, uniquely contributing both the means and the content. In a traditional film, the actors' movements are broken down by the camera into 24 movements corresponding to 24 frames per second. In animation, the movement is created one frame at a time, collectively contributing to the story, built through the addition of each singular frame. "In animation each frame is a world: animation […] is the multiplication of worlds at 24 worlds per second" (Clancy 258). The conflict found between technology and storytelling stems from the need to prioritize one over the other, or at least rank them. Emphasis on technological innovation predominantly emerges in the filmic context rather than television. The differences between film and television production are vast, but primarily differ in terms of budget and time, in particular that both budgets and timeline are substantially diminished in television production.

The role of technology or the role of form in animation can be broken down even further when considering differences across different types of animation. Animation has increasingly leaned towards digitization and away from pencil, paper, and clay. As independent techniques, each type of animation has largely involved its own technological innovations and evolution. Consider for example how the creation of frame capturing software used in stop-motion is entirely separate than innovations in digital drawing pads as a means of digitizing the cell process. Overarchingly, the principle shift in animation innovation is the increasing use and reliance on technology as a means for increased precision. The debate between prioritizing technology and storytelling is succinctly summed up by Paul Ward's appropriation of the putting the cart before the horse metaphor—the horse in this case is creative practice, whereas the cart is technological innovation ("Some Thoughts on Practice-Theory" 236). Ward then goes on to explain how this metaphor is problematic because "it implies that one thing necessarily comes before the other or dominates" ("Some Thoughts on Practice-Theory" 237). Progressive storytelling in animation requires technology, whereas the existence of new technology allows for progressive storytelling to be actualized. The point of technological innovation is to build on

existing knowledge rather than replace it ("Some Thoughts on Practice-Theory" 236). At the crossroads of animation and technological innovation, Bradbury relatedly asks "is animation a new skill or an old skill?" (qtd. in Ward "Some Thoughts on Practice-Theory" 239). The value of this question lies in the distinct shift in animation towards digitization, with not only a change in techniques taking place but rather the entire conceptualization of the animation process changing. The disconnect in this shift is that it is something that the viewer is ultimately not privy to and consequently takes for granted. The separation between the viewer and the animation process means that the viewer only encounters the end result without an awareness of the work and innovation taking place. Furthermore technological innovation increasingly means a blending across animation disciplines, for example the increasing use of digital touch-ups in post-production in order to remove rigs and clean up shots done in stop-motion.

Within the television context, as well as for adult animation on a larger scale it is not the technique, but rather the content which is the driving force. HBO's *animals.* for example, uses very basic or minimal animation, known as limited animation where there is not even full mouth sync between the visuals and dialogue. Limited animation diminishes the number of drawings required by re-using drawings, holding longer on key frames, and utilizing camera movement to provide the appearance of variation (Furniss 134). In instances such as this, there is a certain level of kitsch or charm that this 'lower quality' animation brings. The distinction between limited and full animation is often a combination of aesthetic preference as well as time and budget constraints, hence it has historically been more common in television rather than film (Furniss 134). Consider the simplicity of *South Park's* cutout aesthetic in which the characters have limited articulation or even the humorously flawed *Robot Chicken* which utilizes everything from toy figurines to claymation with interchangeable paper cutout mouths overlaid on top of the existing mouth of the toy. Instead the goal here is to examine the world that each individual show presents and the narratives taking place. While visuals may cause an initial attraction, it is the storytelling which keeps viewers engaged. Even at the physiological level the brain is able to fill in gaps and overlook errors in ways that the conscious viewer cannot necessarily do with storyline. Not only are many mistakes not necessarily visible to a first time viewer, who is focused on the big picture as well as the narrative, but in the case of stop-motion animation in particular it is the small errors or inconsistencies which make the characters feel tangible in a sense. If anything, the errors present in animation are more representative of a real life than the

façade of perfection. While simplicity in form can be made up for with strong storytelling, in contrast strong visuals paired with poor storytelling results in standalone graphics rather than a complete animated work. While many animators dream of perfection and seamless movement on a quest for the animated real to mirror the lived real, the irony is that the very quest for perfection in animation eliminates its charm of imperfection.

Part 2: Media Texts and Viewing

Forming the Television Viewing Relationship

The integration of adult themes into the medium of animated television provides a space for exploring emotions with the combined comfort of the visually familiar, and doing so within the confines of one's own home. Adult animation is the intersection between childhood naïveté and the potentially crippling reality of adult life, the two coming together in an unexpected but surprisingly authentic package. The success of adult animated television encompasses childhood nostalgia for animation, the element of surprise or the unexpected from the juxtaposition between the contrasting visuals and storylines, escapism from one's own lived experience, limitless visual possibilities, as well as what Goodall refers to as "spectatorship as surrogate participation" (164). Therapeutic in a sense, adult animation opens a space for self-reflection, and confronts the individual with the reality of their own emotional state, however decayed it may be. When it comes to my own relationship with this content, research requires me to shift in how I am receiving and unpacking the content. As a television viewer, my watching habits coincide largely with television as a means of disconnecting from my everyday life, I think of television as a time where I am not thinking (though this is evidently not the case). "Etymologically, research is – as poet and scholar Rishma Dunlop reminds us – a *re*-search, a re-cherce, a looking again *at* and *for* fundamental elements" (Barone et al. in Vaughan 167). The challenge then is in returning to this content from an academic point of view and reconsidering *what* is going on during my own experience of "not thinking" as well as a taking a step back to examine spectatorship of this content in a broader perspective.

There is a universality to the animated character, a quality which renders the character more 'real' than in live action. This universality, or rather character neutrality, allows for a greater amount of projection by the viewer onto the characters, as well as potential for increased diversity amongst viewers. The animated essence of the character overshadows any other

physiological details such as age sex, gender, or even species, which allows viewers to utilize animated characters as emotional surrogates even if fundamentally their identifiers are drastically different. This relatable nature is particularly elevated with animal characters, although this can reasonably be applied to any non-human character, simply because there is a greater disassociation from lived reality. In other words, "it is easier to humanize animals than it is to humanize humans" (Jones qtd. in Wells, "The Animated Beastiary" 108). Furthermore, animated characters are regularly portrayed with extreme or distinct personalities, creating an additional element of separation between the animated and the real given this exaggeration. What this means is that while the increase in complexity of the characters provides a more well-rounded character in terms of emotional depth, the scale is often more extreme than in live action. "[A]llowing a space for characters, or phenomena, to operate on more symbolic or metaphoric terms and conditions invites a greater degree of possibly highly charged emotive or abstract interpretation" (Wells, "The Animated Beastiary" 5). The greatest irony is that the television-viewer relationship is largely one way. "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return" (Benjamin qtd. in Broadfood at Butler 274). It is a false sense of comfort that we find in relating to the characters, because there is not a true connection between the viewer and the animated character, but a communal connection exists horizontally across fans of the same programs.

Sample Group: *BoJack Horseman*, *F is For Family*, *Rick and Morty*, *animals.*

What distinguishes animated shows from each other is that each contains its own world logic which presents a different reality for viewers to connect with. Accordingly the four programs have been selected for a few reasons: firstly because they are all recent shows and are still on the air, secondly because they utilize diverse visual and thematic approaches, thirdly because they cover multiple networks and media sources, and fourthly because of the particular narratives being explored which set them apart as innovators within the realm of adult animation. No matter how different the shows are stylistically or thematically what they have in common, and what situates them within the genre of adult animations is they present "viewers not some stylised fantasy world , but reveal something about *the* world of actuality" (Ward, "Animated Interactions" 114). Topics covered include: the desire for happiness, mental health, success, family, and career among others—the shows cover any topic which reflects the reality of life

both positive and negative. Accordingly the human condition remains universal, even across the multitude of world logics that exist in these programs, the umbrella theme of lived existence.

BoJack Horseman – Raphael Bob-Waskberg (Netflix, 2014-Present, 49 Episodes)

BoJack Horseman revolves around the titular character, a washed-up formerly beloved sitcom star from the 90's who just so happens to be a horse. Between trying to navigate his return to the spotlight, his tumultuous relationships with everyone in his life, his major alcohol and drug problems, and complaining about everything, BoJack has a lot going on. Primarily taking place in Hollywoo[8], the *BoJack Horseman* universe combines anthropomorphised animals and humans. *BoJack Horseman* is as much about finding happiness as it is about the unfortunate reality of the Hollywood dream: everyone, no matter how famous, is ultimately disposable. There is an overwhelming sadness which envelopes BoJack, and appears to be contagious to those around him. Additional characters include Princess Carolyn, BoJack's pink cat agent and ex-girlfirend, Mr. Peanutbutter

Figure 1:*BoJack Horseman* characters: Mr. Peanutbutter, Diane, and BoJack
"Our A-Story is a "D" Story." *BoJack Horseman,* season 1, episode 6, Netflix, 22 August 2014, *Netflix,* www.netflix.com.

Figure 2:*BoJack Horseman* characters: Princess Carolyn and Todd
"Zoës and Zeldas." *BoJack Horseman,* season 1, episode 4, Netflix, 22 August 2014, *Netflix,* www.netflix.com.

[8] BoJack drunkenly steals the 'D' from the Hollywood sign, and the town is henceforth known as Hollywoo, no questions asked. See Season 1, Episode 6. "Our A-Story is a "D" Story".

his "frienemy"[9] rival golden retriever who also rose to fame in a similar manner as BoJack but has since retained his fame, Diane his human ghostwriter and eventual friend, and Todd his human stoner 'roomate' who after a party one night, just never left BoJack's house. Aesthetically *BoJack Horseman* uses consistently bright colors, in addition to a watercolor effect on certain elements such as BoJack's pelt, or Mr. Peanutbutter's fur.

F is For Family – Bill Burr and Michael Price (Netflix, 2015-Present, 16 Episodes)

F is for Family is period-based sitcom about the Murphy family, set in 1973. The family consists of Frank, a short-tempered former Korean War veteran, now baggage-handler for a budget airline. Sue Murphy is a housewife trying to find additional meaning to her life as a part time plast-a-ware saleswoman[10]. They have three children Kevin, a rebellious underachieving angst-ridden teen, Bill the runt who is often picked on, and Maureen, the family favorite and a highly conniving daughter. While Frank cares deeply about his family, having set aside his own aspirations when Sue got pregnant, he struggles to overcome his essential masculinity, has difficulty expressing emotion, instead using intimidation to assert himself within his family. What differentiates this show from the others being discussed is that *F is for Family* exists in the 'real world'. The scenarios reflect very ordinary and common storylines which includes the financial reality and personal sacrifice of raising a family, the struggle to maintain a purpose or individual identity as a parent or spouse, sibling rivalry, family discord, and the overall tumultuous reality of family life, while trying to maintain the idealized façade of the suburban lifestyle. Aesthetically the show uses many warm tones, in a color palate reminiscent of the time period in which it is set.

Figure 3: *F is For Family Characters:* Bill, Kevin, Sue, Maureen, and Frank

"The Trough." *F is For Family,* season 1, episode 3, Netflix, 18 Dec. 2015. *Netflix.* www.netflix.com.

[9] Friend-enemy
[10] Think Tupperware party

Rick and Morty – Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon (Cartoon Network, 2013-Present, 31 Episodes)

Rick and Morty is a science fiction animation show which revolves around grandfather-grandson duo Rick Sanchez and Morty Smith. Rick is a mad genius, self-destructive, narcissistic alcoholic scientist equipped with an inter-dimensional portal gun who drags his awkward, neurotic, permanently-nervous well-intended 13-year old grandson Morty along for his self-serving misadventures. Additional family members include Rick's daughter Beth, a type-A horse surgeon, father of the house Jerry, a naïve, submissive wet-noodle of a patriarch who works in advertising, and Morty's 17-year old passive aggressive sister Summer. Having recently rejoined the family after abandoning his daughter, the Smith family have largely come to accept Rick's absurdist antics, and amorality—he is undeniably more intelligent than all of them, which he is quick to point out largely—due to Beth's fear of him leaving the family again. Aesthetically, *Rick and Morty* is very colorful which helps distinguish the many different environments the characters visit.

Figure 4: *Rick and Morty* Characters: Jerry, Beth, Summer, Morty, and Rick
"Rixty Minutes." *Rick and Morty*, written by Tom Kauffman and Justin Roiland, directed by Bryan Newton, Cartoon Network 2014.

animals. – Phil Matarese and Mike Luciano (HBO, 2016-Present, 20 Episodes)

animals. brings an entirely new meaning to the idea of urban jungle. Each episode consists of a series of shorts which revolve around the lives of moderately anthropomorphized animals[11] including rats, pigeons, cats, dogs, horses, flies, squirrels, and many more all living in New York City, who just so happen to be fluent in human speak. In contrast, the humans are incomprehensible and largely villainized. In *animals.* "everybody has got a little voice, everybody has got a little story. From a horse to an algae, no matter how big or small, everyone

[11] As compared to *BoJack Horseman,* where generally the animals have animal-like heads but are humanoid from the waist down, are bipedal, have 'human' hands, and wear clothes.

has got something to say" (Matarese qtd. in Parker). Each short combines a variety of life problems but spins the scenario into absurdity, confronting many personal crises we encounter in life such as: trying to fit-in to a new environment, gaining our parent's approval, navigating the world of dating, awkward dinner parties, having an existential crisis. Many of the 'problems' addressed in the episodes are on that account quite ordinary, but their potentially uncomfortable nature is neutralized with humor through the depiction of animals and the addition of absurdist elements[12]. While the humans are trying to solve the mayor's corruption or a potential city-wide pandemic, the algae are enjoying life and getting high ("Pigeons. (1)", "Pigeons. (3)", Rats. (3)"). Aesthetically *animals.* uses a muted and quite dark color palate with occasional pops of color. The drawings are the most simple of the group which coincides with the limited animation being used.

Figure 5: *animals.* sample characters: rats
"Rats. (1)". *animals.*, written by Phil Matarese and Mike Luciano, directed by Phil Matarese, and Mike Luciano, HBO, 2016.

The Adult Animated Hero: The Damaged / Anti-Hero

Rollin describes the quintessential hero as a character which "represents not only what we value in the external world, the world beyond ourselves, but what we value in ourselves, in that inner world of our mind and psyches" […] "The hero is less important to us as an individual human being than he is as an embodiment and focal point of our emotions" (xiv-xv). With this definition in mind, the characters from the four shows examined here are rather far from that description. The hero is of course an idealized character, often existing solely in fiction, while lived reality remains far from ideal. With Frank representing the everyday average father, the question remains whether simply being a parent necessarily constitutes someone as being a hero. But even if we accept that notion, Frank remains far from perfect. In contrast, as opposed to the villain, "the anti-hero can be defined as a […] character who does not conspicuously embody any value

[12] Such as a parody of *The Godfather* recreated by cats. See Season 2, episode 7 'Cats (2) Part I', and episode 8 'Cats (2) Part II'.

system except his own private one (which is frequently in conflict with that of his society)" (Rollin xvi-xvii). Rick and BoJack both predominantly position themselves as self-serving characters, with little to no regard or care of the consequences their actions have on others. And yet, there remains a fascinating attraction to their self-serving, self-destructive ways. Frank, BoJack, and Rick, can all be seen as damaged characters: Frank's inability to provide for his family after he is fired leaves him feeling inadequate, BoJack's career spiral following *Horsin' Around*, and the subsequent stumbles as he desperately tries to regain success, and Rick's return to a family after previously abandoning them in addition to his unwavering superiority complex. "At his most active, the anti-hero may be something of a rebel, but a rebel without much of a cause other than his own self-interest" (Rollin xvii). The animated anti-hero then while not ideal is a reflection back on reality: no one is always their best self, and many are in fact knowingly or unknowingly selfish.

Animated Reality: The Animated Human Condition

In her book *The Human Condition*, philosopher Hannah Arendt establishes the basis of the human condition as the inescapable reality of birth and death. Throughout the life process individuals encounter "three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action" (7). *Labor* encompasses the physicality of life, the basic or most natural requirements such as food and shelter; *work* encompasses activities that result in artificial or non-natural entities such as luxury, put differently it is the existence of the universe outside of the self, and *action* is based on relations between man, including the reality that while every individual is a unique entity, because this so-called uniqueness applies to all individuals no one is truly unique (Arendt 7-8). In other words, all humans are intrinsically bound for death with the reality that the universe will continue to exist without them or anyone else (Arendt 8). Theoretically speaking, the concept of the human condition is quite existential, which in part provides a puzzling combination when addressed by entirely fabricated characters. However, the human condition or rather the human reality manifests not only on this higher existential level, but also on a smaller scale day-to-day level. For this reason adult animation exists at the crossroads between existential crisis through themes such as the desire or inability to achieve happiness, self-fulfilment, fear of mortality, and the everyday adult issues of financial stability, family relations, adult friendship, substance abuse and addiction, and career. Nevertheless, these two realities exist in conjunction with each other and not in isolation.

Labor and Work: The Animated Everyday Reality

Careers are a fundamental part of adulthood: they provide financial benefits, contribute to one's self-worth and thus play a significant factor in the construction of one's identity. However careers can also provide a harsh dose of perspective on an individual's value in the bigger framework of working adults, capitalism, and consumerism. In *F is for Famil*y, both Frank and Sue struggle with their careers and subsequent identities. Although Frank has always been a proud and devoted employee of Mohican Airways, the reality is that Frank is not only undervalued, but he is disposable, as seen when he is abruptly and unremorsefully fired on Christmas Eve ("O Holy Moly Night"). For Sue, dedicating more time to selling plast-a-ware provides not only an escape from the confines of housewife duties, but also gives her an additional sense of purpose and validation. While Sue excelled in university, she put aside her personal aspirations to raise her family ("A Girl Named Sue"). Consequently, as she tries to regain her sense of self-worth, she is confronted with the societal pressure to choose between her career and her family. As Sue continues to peruse a career outside of the house, the gender dynamic between Sue and Frank becomes increasingly strained; Frank is devastated by his unemployment and is even more distraught when his wife becomes the primary breadwinner. The financial instability and unemployment sends Frank into a depressive state, as his self-worth is largely dependent on his ability to provide for his family. Similarly, in *Rick and Morty*, Beth (Morty's mother), a highly successful horse surgeon often feels undervalued, seen as a sub-par veterinarian ("A Rickle in Time"). When Jerry (Morty's father) loses his job in advertising, his ego is also deflated and he retreats even more into himself, in particular given that Rick has unintentionally assumed a head of household position with his presence in the family ("M. Night Shaym-Aliens!"). Jerry, like Frank, feels emasculated when he loses his job and is intimidated by his wife's success, which in both cases leads to a strain in their relationships and families, showcasing the impact of career on not just the individual in question.

While BoJack was once regarded as a highly successful television star, his fame has since fizzled, driving him to try and recapture the fame that has since eluded him in order to validate himself. His identity is in a sense stuck with his 90's persona with BoJack desperately wanting to be recognized for something other than "the horse from *Horsin' Around*" [13] ("Downer Ending"

[13] The irony being that there was only one horse on the program, the character was even simply referred to as 'Horse'.

00:24:11). Career and money remain a fundamental reality that all adults must face, it is what they spend the majority of their day doing. For many people, career is a defining factor in their identity, and it also affirms the transition from childhood to adulthood. At the highest level the storyline in *BoJack Horseman* is directly about career, providing a harsh reality check at the disillusionment of Hollywood and the truth that success, money, and fame does not necessarily equate happiness. BoJack tries to use his career as a means of validating his self-worth.

> **Mr. Peanutbutter**: [Y]ou're a millionaire movie star with a girlfriend who loves you, acting in your dream movie. What more do you want? What else could the universe possibly owe you?
> **BoJack**: I... want to feel good about myself... the way you do. And I don't know how. I don't know if I can ("Let's Find Out" 00:18:42).

While BoJack may live a life of luxury in his mansion on top of the hill, unlike the Murphy or Smith family, BoJack is not happier than any of them. If anything his isolation from others simply allows his misery to manifest itself in a larger house. Overarchingly while these characters' jobs define them, they all nonetheless experience some sense of lack of fulfilment. Career may be a defining factor in identity but it is not the sole factor.

Action: The Animated Existential Crisis

While sitcoms have traditionally focused on the strength of family ties, the reality of family relations is inevitably much more complex, and at times much more broken than functional, if not entirely broken. Throughout *BoJack Horseman,* family is shown as one of many catalysts that contribute to BoJack's ongoing misery with the presence of his constantly critical mother as his only family connection. In season four, the show explores the notion of intergenerational trauma highlighting how BoJack's strained relationship with his cold-hearted and critical mother stems from her own experience with familial trauma ("The Old Sugarman Place"). BoJack's often cold nature is in a sense, seen as justified as a result of his upbringing. Furthermore BoJack constantly pushes others away from him as a form of self-loathing defense mechanism, ultimately hurting himself in order to not be hurt by others. Amongst her family, Diane (BoJack's ghostwriter and friend) is referred to as the black sheep due to her intellectual nature in contrast to her family's brash and sports-loving manner, the irony being that her adopted brother is in fact a literal black sheep ("Live Fast Diane Nguyen").

In *animals.* viewers are presented with real family narratives such as pleasing one's parents, sibling favoritism, and the reality that sometimes our parents disappoint us just as much as we might disappoint them. For example, a fly who does not want to grow up to be like its

parent finds that one human day later, it has already happened ("Flies"). In *F is for Family* the show focuses on a singular family unit. Part of the charm of the family is precisely how overwhelmingly normal they are, each member is trying to find their footing, and as a collective unit, they may not be perfect but they all try. It is this reliability of the balance struggle between individual identity within the family unit which distinguishes this program. Their struggle helps validate the inevitable instability that any family unit experiences, for better and worse. Every member of the Smith family is pinning for Rick's attention and also validation, which Rick often takes advantage of. Rick and Morty's relationship is particularly interesting because it is largely based on a sort of codependence. Since each universe has a Rick and Morty, and Mortys are universally sidekicks, Mortys are seen as disposable[14], and yet at multiple instances when Rick has the option to abandon his "real" family, he does not, there is after all a limit to his misanthropic tendencies. Summer and Morty both go on killing sprees in an alternate Mad Max-esque universe, largely holding resentment towards their father's constant moping and his inability to accept the situation and move on with his life ("Rickmancing the Stone"). It is clear as is the case in real life that divorce has effects on all members of the family including the children, but that none of them necessarily handle it in the healthiest way. Similarly, while Beth, Summer, and Morty head off to attend a family therapy session, Rick temporarily turns himself into a pickle in order to avoid joining them ("Pickle Rick"). Here, once again animation showcases serious plot-lines presented in conjunction with animated absurdities, leading with the entertainment factor while underpinning the narratives with deep and even dark plotlines.

The desire to achieve happiness is not only the most challenging aspect of the human condition, but it is also entirely relative. A primary narrative thread in *BoJack Horseman,* is BoJack's longing to find happiness, the challenge being that he is often his own biggest obstacle, plagued by self-sabotage, continually making poor choices, pushing those who care about him away, and wallowing in self-inflicted misery. This desire for unwavering happiness remains a societal fallacy, in particular given animation's shift away from episodic-based resolution. The shift in adult animated television is marked by the reality, that like in real life happiness is not guaranteed: "We may get a happy ending, but we may not" (Gray 60). In discussing this with

[14] There is a storyline that appears in two episodes (Season 1, episode 10 "Close Rick-Counters of the Rick Kind" and, season 3, episode 7 "The Ricklantis Mixup") which questions this assumption with the presence of an 'Evil Morty', who is in fact even more conniving that the Ricks. In a sense validating that while Ricks and Mortys have distinct personalities, both Ricks and Mortys do contain both dominance/submission or good/evil even if it is not always in the forefront of how they present themselves.

BoJack, Diane puts it: “That’s the problem with life, you either know what you want, and you don’t get what you want, or you get what you want, and you don’t know what you want” (“Later” 00:20:56). Similarly, many of Rick’s antics and his disregard for consequences to anyone or anything around him stem from his own deep seeded sadness caused by his dissatisfaction with life and consequently his feeling that he has nothing to lose. The existence of the multiverse enables Rick to be in constant transit, taking and doing what he wants not even limited by physics and space and with minimal consequence, but the vastness of space only amplifies the echo of his sadness.

For both BoJack and Rick, their self-loathing manifests in overconsumption of alcohol and assuring themselves of their superiority over everyone around them, only isolating them more. BoJack and Rick are the standout characters of their programs in part because of their extreme characteristics, their sadness has manifested into aggression which they knowingly use to keep everyone around them at a distance, “fetishiz[ing] […] [their] own sadness” (“It’s You” 00:06:24). While viewers may engage in similar practices by binge-watching these programs, the extreme nature of these characters acts as a reassurance that at least their situation is not as bad as these characters. The irony here is that the viewer who solely relies on television to work through their own personal issues engages in a similar practice, by relying on the material, or rather, *immaterial*, instead of legitimate relationships. These programs showcase exactly how sadness or more precisely dissatisfaction is universal, but achieving happiness includes great varying degrees. For some, like Jerry living in a sense of uninformed ignorance is perfectly satisfactory, but for Rick the road to happiness seems unfathomable. In *animals.* many of the vignettes feature the animals trying to find some meaning to their life, providing the comedic relief of rats questioning their existence, or fleas contemplating their ephemerality or the size of the universe (“Rats. (3)”). The absurdity of the visuals casts a veil over these long discussed questions and the inability to answer them. “Although humor does not change the seriousness of the situation, it decreases the tension” (Morreal in Johnson 550). Humor does not diminish the serious nature of these programs but rather provides a counterbalance, the ability to laugh at the situation reminds viewers of its universality.

For the Murphys, each family member is trying to make something of their extraordinarily ordinary lives, and happiness is quite relative to their individual journeys. For Frank and Sue, happiness largely coincides with their careers; after losing his job Frank begins to

display depressive behavior, whereas Sue starts to gain confidence as her business grows. For their three children happiness is not as existential, Maureen wants to study advanced science, Kevin is overjoyed when two seconds of one of his band's songs is used for the local radio station's weather jingle, and for Bill, he finds relief after his bully is sent off to a military academy ("Night Shift, "A Girl Named Sue", "Breaking Bill"). While happiness is of course relative, it is not always based in an existential crisis; While BoJack may be waiting for some 'aha' moment of happiness, happiness for the Murphy family and many of the creatures in *animals*. is primarily based on the 'little things'. For the viewer, while the *BoJack Horseman* or *Rick and Morty* universe may be more escapist-oriented, the normalcy of the Murphys reflects back on the reality of everyday, good and bad.

Given that each universe in the multiverse has its own iteration of Rick and Morty (as well as a citadel for intergalactic Ricks and Mortys) the duo are not only faced with their own insignificance, but also their own mortality given that when their own universe becomes 'Cronenberged' (riddled with David Cronenberg-esque aliens) they seek out an almost identical universe where that Rick and Morty have just accidentally killed themselves, burying the bodies of their seemingly identical selves and taking their place ("Close Rick-counters of the Rick Kind", "Rick Potion #9"). The choice is simultaneously simple and complex: either accept imminent death or avoid it for as long as possible. In *animals.* for the various critters, death is not only an inevitable reality, it is the great equalizer, the ultimate conclusion and harsh reality of the human (or human-esque) condition. "The vastness of life is impossible to comprehend, especially since we are just animals built for reproduction. More life is the point of life, and that will keep you sane" (Cobb). With all the chaos and complexity in life, the various plotlines of *animals.* remind viewers that if one simply overlooks the plot point of literal animal characters, in actuality the show is a reminder that in order to have an existential crisis you have to actually make it through the day.

Within the animated context depictions of particularly sensitive issues such as mental health or substance abuse provide the additional challenge of not undermining the topic with humor, while taking advantage of the affordances that the animated medium provides. That is to say, not creating too much distance between the content and the viewer, given that the primary goal of television always remains entertainment above all else, which requires viewer engagement. Grotjahn notes that "the animated figure works as a 'symbol' that transcends

materiality, but makes material impact" (Grotjahn in Wells, "Animation: Genre and Authorship" 50). In particular when engaging in binge-watching, the emotionally poignant undertones of adult animated television presents viewers with the characters' unresolved issues, all the while triggering their own personal experiences which they may not be prepared to confront (Snider 123).

Comedy and Intertextuality: Unpacking the Adult Animation Genre

Creating a tangible definition for the genre of adult animation remains an elusive practice, in that, as this research shows, the genre is constantly in flux. If a genre is dependent on viewers' expectations based on the familiarity of certain codes and conventions then this new wave of adult animation is certainly challenging this perspective. Although some animation scholars such as Paul Wells have argued that animation cannot be a genre in and of itself, adult animation television challenges this by converging viewer expectations with progressive storylines ("Animation: Genre and Authorship" 41-45). There are of course adult animated programs which still focus primarily on comedy and popular culture, and comedy still remains a key part of all adult animation, in particular when considering that *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* are all still on the air. "Comedy's essential, even in a dramatic film, it oils everything. It's the sugar you give the audience to make the medicine go down easier. Other times it lowers their guard and lets deeper things sneak in through the side door" (Haertzfeld qtd. in Wells and Hardstaff 63). Comedy then acts as the exterior shell to unpacking the genre but what lies underneath the surface is evidently much darker. As Grey discusses in his own research where he interviewed viewers of *The Simpsons* regarding the significance of the program as a means for social and political parody, respondents tended to open their examination of the show with its role as a means of entertainment and as a comedy (144). Even though these viewers were aware of the serious elements, they were not the primary reason for watching the programs (Grey 144). Accordingly, adult animation continues to navigate with a comedic or entertainment baseline with interjections of serious content, a sort of humor façade.

Adult animated television also regularly engages in meta-analysis by commenting on television itself. The significance is the multiple roles that television plays in the lives of viewers and the simultaneous reality of the work that goes in to making that happen which viewers have the privilege of ignoring. There are not one but two episodes of *Rick and Morty* which feature intergalactic cable as the primary storyline ("Rixty Minutes", "Morty's Mind Blowers"). BoJack

and his counterpart Mr. Peanutbutter's identities are defined because of their former roles on television. For the Murphy family, purchasing the newest most expensive television set represents the pinnacle of status, only for it to be destroyed by Bill's experiments with magnets. "I spent $700 on a TV so I could watch a family be happy", a double entendre in that television provides an outlet for Frank from his own life as well as the unhappiness that he feels amongst his family, in addition to the viewer using this program as a means to temporarily disengage from their own life ("The Trough" 00:23:35). Consequently, television plays a therapeutic role for the characters featured, and viewers of the shows alike. After Morty explains his previous antics with Rick whereby the pair buried their deceased dimensional variants of themselves, Summer is frozen and shocked. Morty's response to the situation is poignant and straightforward: "Nobody exists on purpose. Nobody belongs anywhere. Everybody's gonna die. Come watch TV?" ("Rixty Minutes" 00:18:00).

The question remains just how much effect these programs are having on viewers. In other words: "We are more comfortable describing how the devices work than how they affect us as viewers" (Gunning "The Play between Still and Moving Images" 38). This is certainly an area for further examination as the genre increases in popularity and the lines between animated comedy and dramatic television are increasingly blurred. The fact remains that there are no limitations in animation, literally anything is possible and can be justified. It is only a matter of how much makers are willing to push the boundaries and if viewers embrace this new colorful generic gray zone.

Part 3 – Research Creation and Making

Situating the Work

By partaking in research creation, a central element has been ensuring that the research component and the creation component do not exist as two distinct separate entities. Part of what makes research-creation unique is the ability to pivot between the written and creative elements, working on them independently while simultaneously weaving them together. Accordingly, in planning this research, it was a strategic decision to undertake the entirety of the research component in addition to the majority of the writing prior to beginning production. While it is one thing to create a standalone film, incorporating animated filmmaking with research requires that the creative decisions be influenced by the academic elements being explored.

Consequently, I see my film and the story it tells emerging as a creative expression of the themes explored earlier in this paper. While I have made animated short films before, what sets this one apart was the groundwork laid down by the initial research which forced me to be hyperaware of the direction that the work took. What I did not anticipate was the level to which I would be reflecting back on those earlier principles throughout production as well as how much of a factor they would be while making the film. Furthermore there was an evolution to the film which took place during pre-production as the academic groundwork was solidified. However, the challenge remained in reconciling my creative aesthetic, the time and resource parameters in which this film was made, and ensuring an ongoing dialogue between the film and the written component.

Instinctively my films reflect my personal aesthetic; crafty, quirky, handmade, whimsical, utilizing a variety of materials, and thematically revolving around some type of journey. As the film is made up of three distinct techniques – cutouts, stop-motion, and rotoscoping, the patchwork nature is reminiscent of the assemblage and diverse theoretical perspectives that animation studies draws upon. The decision to use three techniques also reflects the diversity of styles that the four television shows discussed utilize. Additionally this mixed animation allowed for exploration in terms of the possibilities and limitations that different animation techniques offer, a point which I had to consider when conceptualizing the film's narrative. Visual choices were made on the basis of aesthetic preference as well as based on the materials I could find, and combining them in a way that I thought was the most visually impactful and appealing. Furthermore, given the personal nature of animation and the research process as well as this project representing the culmination of my studies but more specifically my filmmaking experience I did make a conscious decision to insert certain "Easter eggs" – simply put, additional referential elements that may not be apparent to all viewers, such as my past films or personal items. Ultimately the film is the creative expression, or accompaniment to this larger examination of adulthood, television, and animation.

Logistics, Process, and Perfomativity

The first part of the film, made with cutouts, is the midpoint between digital and hands-on manipulation. Production involved a four step process: firstly I constructed the pieces out of various types of cardstock and paper, secondly I photographed the pieces in front of a green screen background, thirdly the images were brought into Photoshop and the background was removed, lastly they were brought into Final Cut Pro X and animated, largely using motion paths

where a start and end point are selected in conjunction with a duration for this movement to take place. For the second part of the film I used stop-motion animation. First I fabricated all the props from a variety of materials, then after physically setting up the scene I gradually moved the elements while taking pictures. In order to facilitate this process, I ran an image capture software whereby the camera is connected directly to a laptop and is controlled by the laptop rather than the buttons on the camera in order to minimize movement from touching the camera and provide a larger viewing screen. Furthermore, the use of the software allowed me to use onion skins in order to have a shadow of the previous image while moving the props into their new position. Additionally, three of the shots in this section were done with traditional video largely because of the type and complexity of the particular movement. For the third part of the film, which features rotoscoping, I initially filmed myself acting out the various motions for the shots. This footage was then imported into the computer and digitized using digital drawing where I traced over the live-action footage.

Research Creation is simultaneously about the process of creation as it is about the end result, namely the finished work. Although you have a vision in mind, creative works change along the way for a multitude of reasons such as time constraints, inability for the puppets to perform certain actions, technical difficulties, and adjustments to the overall vision, in particular in maintaining a connection between the creative work and theoretical framework. "During this creative process, the artist […] may re-arrange a number of ideas, beliefs, and conceptions, and thus advance her or his knowledge, understanding and insight" (Mäkelä 160). Consequently the meaning and significance of the film exist in its fullest form when accompanied by the research which helped shape it. The production process is a unique experience which therefore makes it challenging to explain to those who have never experienced it. In particular with animation, the filmmaking experience can be seen as a microcosm for life:

> "[P]uppets are chipped and broken and always in a visible intermittent, intervallic movement that stutters and starts anew, reminding one […] how difficult it is to be animate, to be alive, to struggle against entropy and inertia. […] in real life – human life – to be animate is not merely a continuous and plasmatic given. […] We encounter friction, obstacles; we are forestalled; we experience fatigue, desire, and secretly seek not more momentum but less" (Sobchack 390-391).

Here we see that while the viewing process may allow for decoding and interpreting the work, during the production process, lived experience and struggle is encoded into the film. Animation not only requires physical and emotional investment but it is a particularly self-reflexive process,

forcing the maker to confront their own flaws, limitations, and motivations. In her own creative process arts-based practitioner-researcher Kathleen Vaughan describes an unexplainable "stomach pang" that she feels when faced with inspiration (167). It is a challenge to unpack the adrenaline, nerves, and self that the animator puts into the film, more so for viewers unfamiliar with the production process. In this sense, while viewers may connect with the struggle that the characters face, it remains unknown if they can sense the struggle that went in to producing the work. Sullivan describes "dialectical practices" as "forms of inquiry whereby the artist-researcher explores the uniquely human process of making meaning through experiences that are felt, lived, reconstructed and reinterpreted" (50). Accordingly, dialectical practice can be seen as reconciling the various stages of the animation process, the multiple players and their varying experiences, emphasizing that the impact does not rest solely on the finished product.

Thematic Exploration

Developing a concise story out of this research led me inwards, reflecting on my own relationship with television, animation, adult animation, and how those elements coincide with stress, anxiety, and other personal issues in my life. As Vaughan describes it, combining research and creative work should be seen "*less* as creating new knowledge and *more* as calling forth, pulling together and arranging the multiplicities of knowledges embedded within" (170). In this sense, the desire to explore the human condition is not new, nor is the use of television as a form of distraction from the everyday. Rather this research exists at the intersection of collective catharsis and an acknowledgement of the significance of the production process as a contributing factor to the overall viewing experience and not simply a means of creating it. The choice of animation as the style reflects back on a fundamental principle associated with communication studies, namely Marshal McLuhan's expression "the medium is the message" (7). In the case of this short film, while the subject matter may not reflect on adult animation in a literal sense, I have utilized animation as a practice in conjunction with the notion of the human condition, in particular the tendency to get caught up in one's own anxieties and the relationship between television and the viewer. That is to say, while the film does not directly address animation thematically, animation remains at the center of the work because the narrative is explored *through* animation.

The short film entitled *Channelled*, explores the journey of a young girl who while watching television finds herself on an unexpected adventure. Throughout the journey the lines

between television, reality, and daydream are blurred. Television is the catalyst by which the girl retreats into her own mind, but as the film concludes so does the illusion. Television, and in particular animation have been a primary means of escapism and a method for working through my own personal issues, which is to an extent where this research emerged from as well as the basis for the film's narrative. However, not only is animation thematically a means of escapism, but so is the animation process itself, as an all-consuming one which involves a great deal of investment of time and effort which is also a form of escapism. The character is intentionally modeled after my own appearance, this is particularly evident with the distinct long auburn hair. This is in part because the animating process is a very personal one, and central to this research is how animation forces us to turn inwards and engage in self-reflexivity in a unique way, making it an obvious choice for a narrative which included me in literal sense. The film does not address a particular issue but rather takes a broader approach of working through anxious or uncomfortable situations with the intention of leaving it open for all viewers to connect to some part of the experience, in the same way that the characters discussed earlier in this research have a generality which allows many types of people to connect with them.

The Subject as Real: Agency and Technology

When I introduce my research I often jokingly begin by saying that I play with puppets, which incites a sort of uncomfortable laughter. *Pareidolia* is a phenomenon whereby humans are naturally inclined to see familiar shapes—in particular faces— where one does not exist, for example the knots in a tree resembling eyes and a nose (Holliday 249). While the girl in the film does not have a face, I nonetheless strive at giving emotion and personality to even the faceless in an effort to emphasize our intrinsic desire to connect on some sort of level to the things around us. More so, fabrication requires makers to see life in everyday lifeless objects, visualizing steps ahead at their reconstitution and combination, visualizing not only the life but also the story that these materials contain, and the characters that they will be transformed into. It is here where the viewer can take for granted the animated character as "alive" within the context of the finished product, whereas it is the animator who has methodically mapped this life out. Additionally this reinforces from a different perspective that complexity—in this case in terms of ability to emote—is not required for impact. "Anthropomorphism is a representational strategy of accessibility, continually revived by animators to pique spectator recognition, interest, empathy and compassion in the animated figure being observed (Holliday 248). The question then arises

whether the character agency or life force that the viewer experiences is intrinsic to the character or based on transference on the part of the maker. The notion of "posthuman" or "hyperhuman" coincides not only with the nonliving subject's autonomy but also in legitimizing the relationship between the maker and the subject, as well as the viewer and the subject (Cholodenko 105). It is not only the creation of life but also the humanizing of the animated subject which legitimizes and strengthens this bond, fostering a space for discussion of these sensitive issues and self-reflexivity.

When examining the different techniques used for this film, the existence of a physical manifestation of the paper version of the girl, but in particular the puppet version created an illusion of a relationship between myself and the object. "[T]here can arise out of a creative practice 'a very specific sort of knowing, a knowing that arises through handling materials in practice'" (Bolt in Smith and Dean 6). While this may be the case as a maker, as a viewer of animation the presence of a physical referent is less relevant. Instead the relationship centers around the character rather than the literal existence of the character.

Technology within the context of animation is not only a means to facilitate the animation process but it also a means of expanding the possibilities of it, in turn creating more opportunities to be presented as more complete entities. While the animator may have a particular sequence in mind, the actualization of this idea is not only dependent on the physical movement of the animator but also the physical limitations that are set in part by the reality of physics, gravity in particular, as well as the physical limitations on the puppet. In this vein John Bell discusses the notion "of letting the object determine the action" highlighting that the power in the relationship is not strictly held by the maker (qtd. in Holliday 251). In this sense when working with physical objects in animations, the relationship between animator and subject is not uni-directional but rather based on a call and response system whereby the animator pushes the subject to its physical limits, in turn emphasizing that there is indeed a limit. In other words, although animation revolves around an extensive amount of planning, and the desire to control as many factors as possible—lighting, framing, motion, and flow—there is no perfect formula. The integration of computer technology inevitably changes this dynamic, with a distinct power shift in favor of the animator, in particular in terms of secondary manipulation in post-production. The range and complexity of motion is expanded through the addition of rigs which stabilize and hold up characters—making both simple movements such as walking easier, in addition to

complex movements such as jumping possible—with the ability to digitally remove the rigs from the shots in post-production. Furthermore, the ability to verify shots along the way, and the ability to "fake" elements altogether by creating them entirely in a digital context but in likeness with the rest of the film also contributes to the expanded possibilities. However, this striving for perfection or the smoothest possible motion is not a definitive approach to animation as seen by the variety of visual styles and techniques across the discipline. I reiterate once again that smooth animation does not automatically equate "better" animation, but rather the movement in relation to the story and character development remains the key determining factor in emotional resonance.

Reconciling Roles: Maker-Viewer-Researcher

A key distinction that I make is that I do not call myself an animator but rather a maker, or animation practitioner. Perhaps there is a bit of underlying imposter syndrome, but *who* can be considered an animator remains a sticking point beyond myself. Animation is the primary means by which I engage with storytelling, but it is not the only one. Furthermore my relationship with animation emerged circumstantially within the context of academia, and I am also self-taught, having developed skills by creating other short animated films during my undergraduate degree. With the continual progression and role that technology plays in animation, criticism of it increasing the accessibility into animation simply rehashes the debate of animation as a "new skill or old skill"—given its lengthy history but also its drastic progression—in particular with technological advancements linked with commercialism rather than craft (Bradburry in Ward 238-239). In this framework the viewer is not of primary concern, a point which detracts from the relationship between makers and viewers rather than animation being entirely maker-centric. Additional misconception and judgement on the diversity of animation is also a contributing factor: "people tend to label limited animation as relatively bad because it looks 'easier' to do than full animation, the perception of worth being tied to a work ethic, or the value of labour" (Furniss 136). Moreover, unlike the shows discussed which rely on collective labor, in the case of my own work, I was solely responsible for all aspects from pre-production, fabrication, production, editing, and sound.

From the initial collection and assemblage of materials, or the first few lines, to the viewer sitting in their living room, the animation process contains multiple degrees of separation. As a result, this creates a misconception that the creator and viewers' experiences exist in total

isolation from each other with the animated text the sole linking factor, when in reality it is a mutualistic relationship. As a fan-researcher, fan-maker and researcher-maker it remains crucial to be aware of the evolving process taking place in studying animation from a multi-perspective view and approach to research. Additionally, makers of animation are, at their cores, fans of animation, otherwise they would not engage in the practice. But as a maker one can easily get caught up in a selfish relationship with the work and forget who the work is intended for besides themselves. If '"the artist intuitively adopts the dual roles of the researcher and the researched' in 'a reflexive process'", then it is both the person and their process which merit consideration and not simply the finished media, but rarely are the people who make the television programs a focal point, in addition to considering the complex dynamic of team labor across multiple roles all contributing to the finished product (Sullivan in Smith and Dean 28). Contrastingly while fans may take the finished work for granted, there is also a level of expectation built into genres, which is why innovating and expanding the genre is a complex process.

Wearing multiple hats throughout this research process has made me increasingly aware of the different values that each role has and how these values and expectations vary depending on which perspective or perspectives one engages with at a given moment as well as the immense challenge in reconciling these roles. "[P]ractice-led research that is supported by critical reflection and reflexive action can be seen to invert the research process because it encourages working from the 'unknown to the known' and it is purposeful yet open-ended, clear-sighted yet exploratory" (Sullivan 48-49). My film, my process, and my role in creating the film are all equally valuable assets for research as no text or experience exists in isolation from outside influences or commentary, but the viewer likely remains focused on the finished text. As a maker, my films are not made solely for myself but rather to be engaged with by others, where perhaps other viewers may make connections or connect with themes exterior to my own, expanding the limitations that encompass my own feelings and thoughts towards my work. Given the intense amount of labor and emotion that goes into the production process, it should ultimately come as no surprise that the finished product provided to the viewer is filled with emotional depth.

Making a short film in conjunction with research about television has been a journey which has required me to be hyperaware of all the parts at play at a given time. The tendency to focus on television as a finished product, the tendency for creation to be selfish, and the

difficulty in quantifying experience all represent sticking points. Conversation across these three roles is required in order to truly understand the significance of these texts as well, their impact on the viewers, and the constant desire for television content to evolve.

Conclusion: Connecting the Dots and Lines

The results of this research present two conclusions with two paths for further explanation. Firstly within the domain of animation studies on the whole, it remains incredibly challenging to reconcile theory, viewership, and practice, in that at different parts of the process it is easy to take each role for granted as an isolated and independent experience. To an extent this is somewhat inevitable, each of the three sections of this research has required a different skill set and mentality on my part, while constantly keeping in mind that the other two parts simultaneously existed and what their impact on the current section was. While the work was contextualized, it is nonetheless based on my own personal experience with the shows discussed, as well as in using my experience of researching the theoretical framework of the genre in conjunction with my viewing experience in order to generate a creative iteration. I knew that these shows had done something for me in terms of working through adulthood as I have experienced it thus far, and that others around me feel the same way. Accordingly, as the genre increases in traction and academic potential, adding more voices to the conversation will only help to validate the possibilities of the genre as something more than mere entertainment.

While the animator, animation, viewer, and researcher are all part of framework which surrounds adult animated television, taking on all three roles within the context of one research project has forced me to see links that otherwise can easily be ignored. For researchers, it remains crucial to not examine adult animation as an *isolated* entity precisely because it is reflective of a larger shift in television entertainment in terms of the increased production value and consequential conversation around television programming. “The singular text, by itself and studied in a vacuum, cannot truly help us, for ‘the text itself’ is an abstract, yet ultimately non-existent entity, wished into creation by analysts” (Gray 3). Furthermore, with streaming services now a significant player in the market, this impacts both how makers create shows in an annual batch for mass release instead of progressively for television airing, as well as how storylines are preconceived and less flexible to change during production. Additionally the way viewers are now interacting with television given the advent of binge-watching means that viewer

engagement with television is also shifting. Thematically, the storylines in adult animation do indeed largely exist in live action television. Consequently, the point here is to consider the potential reframing and positionality that animation allows, as seen in the programs discussed earlier in this research. It is about revisiting potentially provocative or emotionally raw content in an entirely new context "create[ing] new knowledge, […] by making use of a series of inquiry practices that are theoretically rich, conceptually robust and provoke individuals and communities into seeing and understanding things in new ways" (Sullivan 62)

Adult animated television sits in a unique position: "as an object of experience, the creative product is as important as any knowledge embodied in it" (Scrivener and Chapman 2-3 qtd. in Mäkelä 159): it provides a developing field rich for future research, it provides a means for makers to challenge themselves, generic conventions, as well as audiences. The intersection of research and creation within the context of animation requires consideration of the value of production labor and not simply the finished product. From a maker's perspective the physical disassociation which animation allows provides a broadening of what is possible. In the push for researchers to consider makers, makers however must constantly have viewers in mind in that their continued success is largely based on the reception of the work. "Animation's distance from reality allows […][viewers to take] a few steps back, and with that, allows the writers [to take] a few steps forward, and beyond what their live action counterparts are capable of" (Gray 67). What remains crucial in making adult animation is pushing boundaries without isolating the viewers.

In this research-maker-viewer relationship, viewers maintain the upper hand, largely because they have nothing to lose other than the time they spend watching the shows. Viewers simply enjoying the final product, often without considering the many people involved in the process and labor that has gone into the output of the finished product. As a standalone viewer, awareness of the production process does not contribute to the viewing process other than by providing additional information. "The animated image has thus two faces: on the one side, invisible for the viewer, there is an open interval of manipulation; on the other side, a visible image moving inexorably at 24 frames per second" (Shcaeffer 464). This in turns presents a gap in the relationship which is ultimately unavoidable.

Secondly, further examination of how the genre is expanding the conversation related to specific subtopics such as substance abuse, mental health, etc. will highlight animation's ability

to make these difficult topics more approachable. This research has taken a broad approach to adult themes through the framework of the human condition in part because of the newness of this field. Given that the thematic limitations for adult animation are largely nonexistent, the genre will continue to provide both an entry point to discussing sensitive adult topics, but also a foundational one in that no topic is off-limits. For viewers, the ongoing relationship with animation stems from their childhood, just as they have evolved and grown up, so have their cartoons, the familiarity of the genre resonating with them in that the same programs which once talked about friendship and self-acceptance now cover the realities of adulthood. “Thus animation may move towards a capturing of the movement of the world, but may also return us to the wonders of transformation and magic” (Gunning “The transforming image” 66). In establishing a definition Phillip Denslow asks the following questions “what is animation if not the desire to make real that which exists in the imagination? (4). As adult animation continues to show, animation is no longer simply about bringing the imaginary to life but rather bringing life to the everyday issues that viewers are faced with, reversing the narrative of animation portraying the fantastical and impossible, instead providing a very real account of everyday adult reality.

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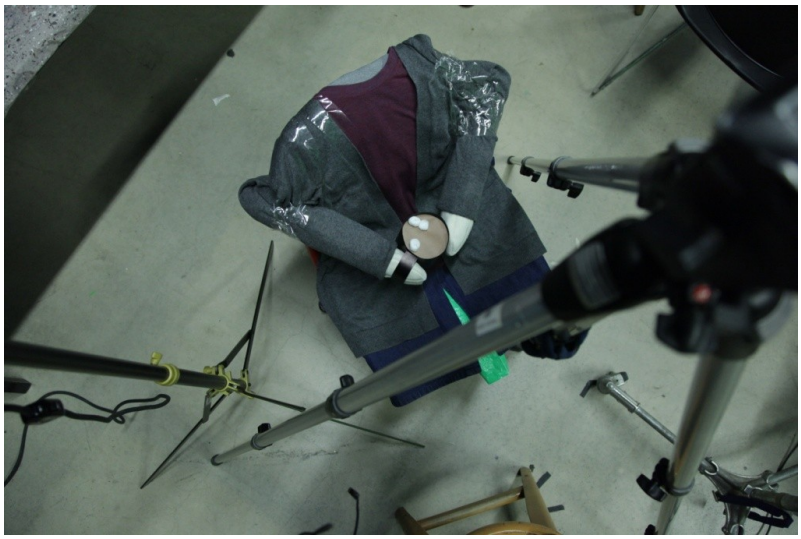
Appendix: Sample Production Images

Occasionally I used hand-made rigs to help hold up the character in certain shots.



The close-up on the character's hands was actually done with a larger scale stand-in with my clothes, paper towel tubes in the arms covered in "mitten hands" draped over a chair.

Close-up of "mitten hands".

Lying on an exercise ball to mimic floating, with preliminary animated stars overlay.

Me with my paper and puppet counterparts in our matching outfits.