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The shifting role of the animation critic in a new media, socially connected world

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The Shifting Role of the Animation Critic in a New Media, Socially Connected World.

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Abstract

The social internet environment has given rise to new ways of engaging and critiquing animated video. In this democratic environment, criticism is no longer exclusive to a few select recognised professional critics and there is no real distinction between professional and non-professional critics. The co-existence of both types of critics within the same space results in more dynamic engagement with the subject and creates the conditions for learning. Developments in technology which include cellular phones in particular but also include other devices such as tablets have allowed viewers and potential critics to access online video from any location, broadening accessibility and the scope for critical engagements. The development of new online tools and increased internet connectivity have resulted in an explosion of animated video and critics are needed to cater to the ever growing demands in criticism. This situation requires that a greater significance be placed on self-proclaimed critics and even opinionated users of the web. New online tools and increased internet connectivity have resulted in an explosion of the animated video and critics of all kinds are needed to cater to the growing demand for critical engagement. This suggests that greater significance needs to be placed on self-proclaimed critics and other opinionated users of the web. This paper sets out to examine and assess the value in criticism by the new expanded audience of non-professional critics. It explores interactive social tools in detail, including blogs, twitter and particularly video-based websites to understand the manner in which they affect the reception of animated videos as well as the subsequent criticism of these videos. The main question to be addressed is whether or not valuable and relevant criticism can be accessed from various online social platforms attached to newly accessible sources for animation.

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Introduction

This paper sets out to explore how the criticism of animation and in particular, animation as a stand-alone medium has been and continues to be influenced by the interactive tools which are readily available on video-based websites such as *YouTube*, *Vimeo* and *Daily Motion* as well as through other social media tools such as blogs, Twitter and other online forums. For this reason, the focus will be confined to criticism within the web space. The first and most notable observation is that the web space and its interactive tools are directed towards the end user or "reader" who are represented by a diverse, ever increasing population with a global reach. So, while traditional print media has long had a mass audience, the opportunity for interaction has been limited to "Letters to the Editor" which has limited appeal and the impact relatively small. The interactive online forums make it possible for people with various levels of education and life experience to publish and distribute their own thoughts as well as engage with others in this interactive community and their views. This allows for a wide-ranging set of opinions for major animation works and the offerings produced by mainstream animation studios with wide public distribution (theatre, DVD, Television release) but also those animation works that may never have otherwise received and critical attention or reception.

While a broad spectrum of views and critical input will compete for attention, all criticism in relation to animation can still be analysed against the conventions of animation criticism - conventions that have achieved a level of academic support and endorsement. From a technical standpoint, the success of an animation piece depends on how successfully the twelve principles of animation[1]are applied. The focus of all these principles is on kinesiology[2], with its emphasis on human movement. The online environment however, provides a wide audience of individuals with differing areas of knowledge and levels of expertise, and technical animation terminology and theory is not always applicable. Therefore mass audience feedback of this kind is generally more simplified and catered for general viewers. (Examples of this can be seen in the appendix 1 a-c.) For the most part, animation features can be assessed in much the same way as conventional films where other elements relating to broader film studies including composition, colour, reception, and message are important criteria for all cinematographic and animation critiques. This is not to say that the voices of the more knowledgeable, technically-minded as well as professional critics do not exist in this space. (See examples 4 a-d in the appendix).

The position taken in this paper is that in order to understand criticism of animation in the context of the web space, it is important to explore and evaluate conventional animation criticism, including the technical and academic criteria, but also to encompass those valuable and even unconventional criticism available on the internet, generated by an audience comprising of a much larger range of viewers of what might be described

[1] The Twelve Basic Principles of Animation is a set of principles for aiding animation creation that were introduced by the Disney animators Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas in their 1981 book *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation*. These principles include:
1. Squash and stretch. 2. Anticipation. 3. Staging. 4. Pose to pose. 5. Follow through and overlapping action. 6. Slow in and slow out. 7. Arcs. 8. Secondary action. 9. Timing. 10 exaggeration. 11. Solid drawing. 12. Appeal. – (*The Illusion of Life*)
[2] The study of human movement.

as self-appointed critics who may have as much to contribute even within the conventional frame of critical assessment as those 'experts' who have achieved their status and authority by conforming to a traditional way of analysis but may exclude those valuable contributions of an audience well versed and as committed to the advancement of animation as a relevant and important art form.

In order to effectively engage with animation and the medium as a viable, dynamic and growing art form, it is important to take into consideration the format and tools available on the various digital social forums that determine the type of criticism possible in relation to animation features published on specific sites. Different video-based websites attract different audiences in much the same way as traditional media forms in its various guises attracts different audiences. In the animation scene however, these differentiations become more apparent through the provision of different tools for interaction and consequently critical engagement. For instance, while some websites permit extremely limited interaction, others allow for a deeper evaluation, and therefore generate more intensive and varied critical responses. This forum (essentially, the interactive tools) can affect responses to the material being critiqued as a result of a community that feels empowered to comment on and contribute towards an animation offering and as a result has the potential to introduce elements into the critical mix not previously considered. This informal but very powerful critical community forms the basis for re-evaluating the critical environment available to creators of animation and specifically animation with an artistic premise.

The proliferation of video-based websites throughout the net provides ever-increasing access to animation. For the medium of animation, this is particularly significant as animation as a stand-alone art form, with recognized conventions and a well-developed body of criticism, is currently an undeveloped field. Despite its struggle to gain recognition within the greater art world however, it is an artistic expression that drives the increased "democratisation" of concepts explored within art as a whole. I argue therefore that despite reservations on the part of traditional (and traditionally employed) arts critics, the scope of traditional criticism needs to be expanded to permit the introduction of more dynamic and interactive processes which necessitates the use of different and but none-the-less relevant criteria.

Theoretical Applications to Online Animation Criticism

To engage properly in the role of criticism in relation to animation as an art form, it is necessary to establish what it meant by criticism. In his essay, *The Art of Criticism in the Age of Interactive Technology: Critics, Participatory Culture, and the Avant-Garde*, Ryan Gillespie sets up a scheme of distinctive categories of how art can be considered and discussed. He distinguishes between feedback, reviews, and criticism, but acknowledges that these distinctions aren't always as differentiated as the distinctions suggest and can themselves be rather fluid.

Gillespie's distinctions in criticism are categorized as follows:

- *Feedback* is the process whereby a consumer gives his or her opinion to the producer of the work. This may be via "Like" buttons or scoring "out of 10" facilities;

- *Reviews* are sometimes written by people who viewed the art post and formulated their own review or extended opinion of the work in question by simply giving an opinion with the intention of informing other audiences about what they consider the quality of the art or shortcomings to be. Therefore reviews are that commentary provided by the audience of the artwork with the intention of informing other audiences.

- *Criticism* according to Gillespie, citing a passage from the work by Campbell is done by a third party, that is, one who is not the general audience but someone who helps audiences see art in a new way, developing terms or even concepts to help understand not only the art work itself but to contextualise it within a trend, placing it in a historical context or indicating its relationship to society or even using it to inform the reader something about humanity itself. (qtd. Gillespie 62)

(61-62)

While the distinction between feedback and reviews is an easy one to make, the distinction between reviews and criticism is not always clear. Gillespie says that this blurring arises since critics in the mass media also write reviews. For Gillespie, this is a problem. For him the conflation of reviews and criticism, collapses the distinction between consumption and evaluative judgment. I am of the alternative opinion that that this conflation of roles is not of detriment to criticism and there is sufficient support for the view in the literature that this blurring of the critical boundaries has the potential to enhance the development of animation as a relevant and recognisable art form. This is because valuable criticism can be derived from all three of these sources. I am however of the opinion that these categories are helpful in identifying the work of professional critics.

The essay *Some Thoughts on Practice-Theory Relationships in Animation Studies* by Paul Ward provides an enlightening foundation to achieve a better understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of animation as a medium. This principally secondary text draws on a variety of theoretical sources from both within and outside the animation studies field and collates them succinctly, providing a coherent framework. It also offers a resource directly relevant to the dynamic interchange between the animation artist and the potential audience for his/her work.

Mike Wayne's[3] essay entitled *The Problems and Possibilities in Developing Critical Practice* also cited by Ward, suggests that the typology employed by Wayne, refers to cultural practitioners in general and not to animation specifically. Its central arguments can consequently be easily applied to animation. Wayne names and discusses the variety of approaches adopted by the different types of cultural practitioners.

The *reflexive* practitioner for instance, is primarily concerned with the production process.

The *theoretical* practitioner conversely focuses on the *text* (in our case: the animation) as a place where meaning can be drawn.

Finally, the *critical* practitioner interrogates "the politics of representation" (qtd. in Ward 234) and is probably the most relevant form of practitioner for my purpose, as in the words of Wayne, they "think through the implications of what they do and place it in its social, historical and political contexts". (234)

The dilemma faced by animation as an art form is neatly described in an important text by Mark Langer also cited by Ward - *The End of Animation History* regarding the context of alternative media studies and animation. In essence, Langer's essay describes the fragile line that distinguishes animation and other visual media such as live action. This fine distinction, he maintains, has become so translucent, that animation becomes less of a critical category which as a result loses out to the broader set of debates relating to other media. Langer maintains that "the entire nature of the relationship between the real world spectator is something that is being renegotiated by technology, but that renegotiation is being ignored by scholars in animation studies in specific and film studies in general… This is not to say that it is being ignored by scholars elsewhere." (qtd in Ward 242) It is this "elsewhere" that is the focus of this paper.

Paul Ward argues that learning animation as a *craft*, "tends to close off some of the more interesting critical avenues". (230) He asserts the opinion that animation, seen as a craft, and not as a stand-alone art form "becomes too easily 'attached to' or placed in the service of particular paymasters."(230). I concur with the view that in order to create a more dynamic and relevant framework to assess animation, the medium of animation needs to take into account the qualities against which other related art forms including film are

[3] A professor and guru in television and media studies who wrote the text *Problems and Possibilities in Developing Critical Practice*, from the *Journal of Media Practice*

assessed. This permits a richer analysis and understanding of the medium, which in turn can drive the potential to enhance the standard of animation offerings. It also affords the opportunity for a critical framework through which artwork and specifically animation as an artwork can be evaluated or critiqued. Ward states that in order for animation "to flourish as well as it can… one must be alive to every possible theoretical (as well as practical) possibility." (230) This is a position I wholeheartedly support. (Comments 2 a-f in the appendix are examples of responses that introduce other art forms and fields of study as language for criticism.)

Ward also argues that the differences to be found within the scope of the studies[4] of animation enable us to learn a lot more about the medium. "Despite their differences (and indeed I would maintain, *because* of them) there is a lot to be learned from a critical dialogue between them." (232-234). The type of critical exchange could not be more varied than on websites such as Vimeo, YouTube and Daily Motion. As such, they become the perfect platform to search for and evaluate the wide range of dialogues between these studies. That "there is a lot to be learned", suggests that there is value in taking cognizance of these potentially discordant views and not to simply dismiss them out of hand as a critical resource. Criticism from the diverse viewers of these websites attracts a wide range of differing opinions. This is crucially important because as Ward writes: "What is certain is that it is in the process of actively engaging with different contexts that one learns anything. It therefore follows that knowledge about something is produced by constantly critically (re-)evaluating what that something is, and how it relates to its (many) contexts".(234)

The challenge is how to set and keep a process of dialogue in motion so as to build up a body of work that is appropriate to animation as a medium. Ward cites, with approval, a section from a text extracted for the work written by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger about "legitimate peripheral vision"[5]. The central theme concerns the tension between new and established critics of animation, a tension that in itself could result in new insights, and learnings in this field. Ward takes this view further by suggesting an approach to this tension: "For Animation Studies (and a good many other knowledge areas, not least Film and Media Studies), the weakly classified route seems to be the most fruitful one to explore" (242). For him, "the central dilemma to be addressed is how a strong classification mindset tends to reproduce particular hegemonic discourses and practices." (242). "Weakly classified" could refer to the offerings and 'criticism' of viewers less well versed in the conventional criteria of animation studies. Since criticism from these sources may prove "more fruitful", it will be part of the aim of this study to analyze the impact of these sources. This is an important consideration because it could also influence, directly or indirectly the criticism arising from viewers or traditionally orientated critics well versed in the "Animation Studies" discourse.

[4] These studies include that of film, art, pure animation, theatre, even medicine and other scientific studies. In other words, the peripheral studies that animation is involved with.

[5] Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of the community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. (29)

Lave and Wenger's central argument as described by Ward is that "all learning is a social activity and we therefore need to grapple with social context in order to understand this." (231). Many of the online social forums, particularly within the video-based websites studied in this paper, have vibrant (if not unconventional) communities. Essentially, these communities are linked through video criticism. It is therefore worthwhile in my view to discuss how and to what extent this learning affects the viewers' criticisms. Ward's own contribution to this debate by comparison can appear to be somewhat trite. He writes that "for actual learning to take place there has to be some *critical reflection*" (231). While there is merit to this view, it negates the possibility that ideas and concepts can be engaged with and challenged and new insights learnt through the offerings of an audience less constrained by academic or 'accepted' protocol.

A video's context has direct consequences on the reception by viewers and consequently has a powerful impact on the criticism thereof. As a result, context forms an important aspect of my study. When I refer to context, I examine context in terms of both the context of the viewer and the context of the video within the website's interface. As discussed, both types of context play important roles in video criticism.

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* describes how in order for learning to occur, the learner must be situated within a social community. This social environment offers a forum where masters in the field are present to interpret which offers the learner the opportunity to participate in the practices of the critical community and in so doing he or she becomes more enabled until a status is reached where they could become a full participant or master him/herself. ''Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call *legitimate peripheral participation.* By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community.'' (Lave and Wenger 2)

Although Lave and Wenger's examples of legitimate peripheral participation are far removed from the topics of this paper, the theory notions they expose can successfully be associated with the online social forums under discussion. The comments sections of video-based websites, including the interactive sections of blog posts, twitter etc. are arenas for the developing internet critic and represent the "the social community". "Learners" are in a sense untrained critics and through participating in the "practices of this community" i.e. are involved with criticism, they move towards full participation (become better critics).

"Peripherality" suggests that there are multiple, varied, more- or less-engaged and more and less inclusive ways of being located in the fields of participation defined by a community. Peripheral participation is about being located in the social world." (35-36) Peripherality within the web space is particularly broad. For example, a member of the social group might be engaged more prominently as a recognized (certified) critic who may create lengthy blogs couched in academic language. On the other hand there is scope for a less engaged critical offering which can take the form of a single statistic that has the role of adding to the tally of star

ratings or up votes. Since “peripheral participation is about being located in a social world.” (36) The true (professional) critic and the amateur and self proclaimed critic as well as the more and less engaged participants exist in the same social capacity and are able to connect with one another and have the potential to influence one another or even develop a more recognized or important critical view.

Lave and Wenger suggest that within these communities, members construct identities in the process of becoming a “full participant”. However, they note that this is part of the learning process. “As an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person.” (53) The situation where a learner or newcomer (non professional critic) attempts to fit the role of a professional critic by adapting his\her identity or constructing his\her character is a more than common occurrence on online social spaces such as comments sections and has important implications for the quality and impact of the criticism for the art of animation.

Although it is often the case that the results construed from these constructed identities are false, there is definitely some degree of learning that occurs in the process of constructing these identities and this is certainly beneficial. ” To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities.” (53) People construct their identities according to the social environment they identify themselves with. At the same time, this social environment in turn crafts their identities. “These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relations among persons. The person is defined by as well as defines these relations” (53). A hypothetical example of this is a scenario where an animation viewer\critic attempts to create an intelligent comment adopting the style and systems of academic presentation in an area he\she is not familiar with, but using the license of their constructed identity. In order to construct this identity however, this self appointed critic is required to pick up animation specific terms by involving him\herself in the social community and by following the accepted protocol and format. As in the previous quote, this is one way “the person is…defined by these relations”.

“A learning curriculum is essentially situated. It is not something that can be considered in isolation, manipulated in arbitrary didactic terms, or analyzed apart from the social relations that shape legitimate peripheral participation. A learning curriculum is thus characteristic of a community. In using the term community, we do not imply some primordial culture-sharing entity. We assume that members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity, and hold varied viewpoints.” (97-98) Community members are made up of individuals with a disparate range of backgrounds and experience and consequently have unique responses to the work and as a result have something different to bring to the (criticism of art animation) table. Their respective values to criticism might be drawn from very divergent influences. “We assume that members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity, and hold varied viewpoints.” (97-98) An important component to this is to bear in mind and make provision for the inclusion of

other dominant forms of art into the consideration of the art of animation. This is a vital consideration because other fields of study such as film, psychology, religion, philosophy etc. may enter the critical discussion, which has to potential to enrich the quality of the criticism of animation, just as the criticism of animation has the potential to affect the scope and impact of these other art forms. Animation does not exist within its own domain, nor is it impervious to the influence of critical thinking in relation to other art and as a result, it is potentially refreshed, invigorated and inspired by all forms of art and indeed critical thinking in relation to these endeavours.

As evidenced by the following quote Lave and Wenger suggest that the cornerstone to legitimate peripherality is made possible through the practice of allowing the "newcomers" full access to the community, which includes all of its powers and tools. 'The key to legitimate peripherality is access by newcomers to the community of practice and all that membership entails.' (100-101) The availability of online social platforms for criticism described in this paper already provide newcomers (amateur and self proclaimed critics) with full access to the "community of practice" and its membership, as long as they have internet connectivity. There may be resistance to allowing access to newcomers into the critical arena for fear of diluting the quality of the criticism within tightly held academic frameworks, but I hold the same opinion as Lave and Wenger that in order for a community to progress and for learning to occur, this access is required for newcomers. "But though this is essential to the reproduction of any community, it is always problematic at the same time. To become a full member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity… resources, and opportunities for participation."(100-101)

To demonstrate the value of this view, the comments sections that follow the animated videos, provide the ideal environment for newcomers to be able to participate in and influence the world of the contemporary critic without having to involve themselves completely. YouTube comments also can be short and succinct and hardly compare in length to a critic's article or written blog review. The option of other features such as pseudonyms also allows commenters the ability to distance themselves from their engagements. "To be able to participate in a legitimately peripheral way entails that newcomers have broad access to arenas of mature practice. At the same time, productive peripherality requires less demands on time, effort, and responsibility for work than full participants" (110)

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's study looks at the communities of midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers and Alcoholics Anonymous members as examples of the apprentice/master relationship, and I am of the opinion that the apprenticeship situation can easily be adapted to fit my example of professional and amateur critics as well. Newcomers are apprentices and the untrained, amateur and self-proclaimed critic of which I have elaborated on above, make up this portion of the internet audience. It could be said that as basic or undemanding as a comment or critique is, it is still valuable. "In all five cases of apprenticeship, however, it is also true that the initial, partial contributions of apprentices are useful." (111) "Even the A. A. newcomer, while reinterpreting his or her life, produces new material that contributes to the communal construction of

an understanding of alcoholism." (111) Similarly, the contributions of the common (YouTube)[6] critic as menial as they may seem always hold value.

I maintain the opinion that any time criticism occurs some degree of learning also takes place. As I view the process of learning as highly beneficial to the members involved and linked to criticism, I have chosen to look closely at Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's study because hopefully using its learning centric theme I am able shed some light on the value of the rise common internet critic and the possibilities of the online community he\she is engaged in as a space for knowledge gain.

[6] I put YouTube in brackets because this could be any video website or video blog.

The Internet as a New Medium for Viewing Animation

As is the case with print media, traditional means of broadcasting such as television will have to adapt to the impact of the internet and the media organisations involved will need to evolve in order to cater to these new technologies. "Traditional platforms for animation, such as broadcast television or cinema, are rapidly becoming obsolete as a new type of spectator demands more choice, the ability to interact with animated content and access to global distribution for their own user-generated work."(Hosea 24) More importantly, broadcasting on more versatile platforms such as on those discussed elsewhere in this paper and on developing ICT's such as mobile devices needs to be considered. "Television is changing in ways that make it increasingly difficult to consider linear broadcasting in isolation from other modes of distribution to audiences, such as the internet and mobile." This notion of a diversified media platforms is so prevalent now that it is has even become the norm. "With growing use of the internet and of multi-media devices, and with more and more media content now available on multiple platforms, it is widely accepted that convergence has actually arrived. Across the media, many organisations have responded to convergence by migrating towards a diversified multi-platform approach to production and distribution of content." (Doyle 434)

It is hard to predict with any certainty the trajectory of change, but media trends point towards the need for broadcasters who feature certain animation videos as part of their offering to consider restructuring their systems in ways that work with these new media technologies and trends. A case in point is the example of Disney's *Paperman* short, discussed more fully elsewhere in this paper, which was released by its distributers exclusively on more conventional film cinema and now home DVD and movie spaces. The implications of Disney not adjusting to the more accommodating and modern broadcasting methods have been detrimental to the studio and the film's audience.

Gillian Doyle however, points out in her paper *From Television to Multiplatform: Less from More or More from Less* that many media organisations have already responded to this multi-media environment brought about by internet convergence. She provides the example of the famous broadcaster BBC: "One outstanding example of this is the BBC iPlayer[7], an online catch-up service, which, since being launched in December 2007, has become quickly accepted and heavily used by viewers (BBC, 2010)." (434)

Television broadcasting is still a very popular, but the opportunities made available by web broadcasting are now becoming increasingly attractive. "Research conducted by, for example, UK regulator Ofcom, confirms that although broadcast television remains dominant in popularity, audiences are embracing the additional choice, control and opportunities for participation offered by the internet and mobile connectivity (Ofcom, 2008b: 118)." (434) "Opportunities for participation" is key to this discussion. Through participation, the opinion of the audience is significant and the media companies are obliged to pay attention in order to

[7] The BBC iPlayer is a website or app if you are using certain devices where one can watch BBC television (now radio as well) streamed from the internet.

maintain market share and to capture new (customers) audiences. Viewers are able to communicate and respond to material directly and critically to the media as well as amongst themselves, in a virtual space. This ease of access has previously been unavailable with conventional linear broadcasting. The term "mobile connectivity" is also absent in the conventional broadcasting methods. The relevance of "mobile connectivity" is discussed in more detail elsewhere in this paper but also provides viewers with an equally if not more accessible way of accessing online media through the use of mobile technology devices. The benefits to those viewers of animation having access to content online and not just through conventional broadcasting organisations are significant and many of those benefits and the accompanying effects have been discussed in other chapters. With the growing multimedia and internet convergence, we are likely to see more changes with regards communication and connectivity in the future.

Broadcasters, once the gatekeepers of the content commissioned, selected, curated and even rejected content can no longer exclusively play this role. The internet provides the opportunity for a wide array of creators of content to self-publish and distribute their material and it proves to be an incredibly versatile medium. There is a growing trend for content providers to choose the internet as their first outlet in part because of ready-made audience and also because the forum allows for feedback and the content provider is able to gauge the kind of responses from a broad based audience which allows them to adapt their content and target specific markets. This is just one indication of the powerful influence of the critical community that is the internet. The other important consideration is that those creators of content, particularly those of animation and in fact art in general are able to find an audience and appropriate critical response across the internet reach and they don't necessarily have to tailor their animations to fit within the confines or profile of the broadcasters. This suggests that artists have access to a larger audience and that they don't necessarily have to be sanctioned by any political or economic agenda. This also has relevance for the audience who can in greater numbers be exposed to art animation and the context with which it is engaged.

Aardman Animation, the production team behind the famous *Wallace & Gromit* series and the recent animated features *Arthur Christmas* and *Pirates: Band of Misfits*, took a step in the right direction by recognising the power of the marketing potential of the internet when they created the YouTube Aardman channel in 2007. YouTube Director of Partnerships for Europe Middle East and Africa commented: "We are proud to see one of the largest independent animation studios embracing the YouTube platform." (Aardman Turns to the Darkside with Youtube) The channel publicizes itself as follows: "Watch classic animations from Aardman's Oscar-Winning studio, including world-renowned *Wallace & Gromit*, *Creature Comforts* and *The Amazing Adventures of Morph*." (YouTube, Aardman Animations) That the studio is willing to release top shows such as *Wallace & Gromit* on this platform is testament to the fact that they really respect this platform for reaching an important audience. Since its launch the idea has expanded and Aardman has created more YouTube animation channels. These include channels now dedicated to *Wallace & Gromit*[8], *Shaun the Sheep*[9],

[8] http://www.youtube.com/show/wallaceandgromit

their commercials[10] and a further more alternative channel called Aardman's Darkside.[11]

Aardman's Darkside is a particularly interesting, as it is aimed at adults. Aardman's other animation series' such as *Shaun the Sheep* and *Wallace & Gromit* are directed more at children. Aardman's Darkside presents as the name suggests more mature-themed pieces. The channel describes itself as: "A weird and wonderful compilation of animation from the 'darker side' of Aardman, including episodes from *A Town Called Panic*, *The Adventures of Jeffrey*, *Angry Kid* and other short films." (YouTube: Aardman's Darkside) The "darker side" denotes that the film collection is not light hearted and not necessarily suitable for younger viewers. This results in an audience that is not only more mature, but one that is generally more sophisticated. This is not too say that younger audiences do not offer valuable criticism, nor that adult themed pieces are inherently more intellectual, in fact much of the *Rex the Runt* series verges on crude slapstick entertainment. Within some of the channel's offerings however, are many *Aardman* award-winning short films such as *Boxed In* and *Loves Me, Loves Me Not* that have garnered complex and engaging commentary and criticisms.

The Aardman approach to utilising YouTube's service to enhance their reach in these rapidly changing times has been very effective. Patrick Walker summarizes this relationship very successfully: "Aardman brought to life some of the most memorable characters in the history of animation, and now YouTube users can enjoy Aardman's videos again and again. The community tools on YouTube will also give Aardman valuable feedback from around the world, helping them determine what to upload next based on user demand." (Grant par. 6) "Feedback from around the world" is an attractive concept to a company like Aardman whose television shows have been generally quite localized as by reaching a wider audience, they are able to benefit significantly from the marketing potential which also is important in sustaining the growth and development of animation and in particular quality animation which challenges and informs as well as entertains.

Effective response to audience's feedback is becoming a very powerful tool. Aardman's partnership with YouTube has proven to be a successful endeavour in many areas. The most obvious benefit being that it has an increased fan base as a result of being accessible to more people. The aforementioned *Rex the Runt* series for example has "found a much wider audience on the web" (Western Animation: Rex the Runt) than it ever did during its 90's BBC television cycle. Other benefits that have been discussed include ease of access, mobility and adaptability, publicity and most importantly, audience participation. In conclusion it would be hugely advantageous to the animation scene around the world if other big studios and broadcasting companies followed suit. Creating an official channel on a video based website such as YouTube is a very effective manner in which to prepare for the new age convergence of hyper connectivity, multi-platform and fast developing ICT convergence.

Internet audiences are no longer just spectators, they are active participants. "Internet technologies are

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9 http://www.youtube.com/shaunthesheep

10 http://www.youtube.com/user/aardmancommercials - (this particular categorization is useful because it separate's the studio's entertainment and art films from those that serve a purely promotional and commercial agenda.)

11 http://www.youtube.com/user/aardmansdarkside

emerging to address this demand for active spectatorship and enable communities of interest to evolve their own alternative distribution methods." (Hosea 24) This phenomenon of viewers acquiring the ability to become active participants is intensified by the liberation of the modern internet age. "The Web 2.0 world is one that, implicitly, celebrates the erasure of boundaries between producers and consumers." (Gillespie 58) These online communities have the ability to comment directly about the media they observe through the comments section, or are able to create their own blogs and initiate their own online discussions. Ryan Gillespie provides pertinent examples to illustrate this point: "Don't like that story in *The New York Times*? Forget writing a letter that only the newspaper staff will read and who then may or may not publish it; post your comment directly below the article for the world to see. Think *Rolling Stone* is too mainstream in its arts and entertainment focus, or that *The New Yorker* is out of touch? Start your own music (or film, or art, or television) blog." (58) These technological advances present participants with the opportunity of becoming creators of media themselves. Bridgette Hosea's idea takes this concept even further because it points out a direct correlation between what the audience observes and what is broadcasted. In other words, the active spectatorship of the online community, which mostly involves criticism, results not only in what is produced but also how it is distributed.

Methodology

Constructing a methodology for such a new and developing field of research can prove very problematic. Due to the nature of this research, very little is actually documented in published books. Therefore, the main sources for research and literature include online journals, articles and essays, and their selection and processes of analyses will be discussed. The majority of data used in this dissertation was collected empirically in an effort to limit the number of biases involved with its collection and analyses. This data comprises mostly of online comments from various video-based websites and blogs.

Using a journal catalogue proved to be a very valuable alternative to physically published literature. This resource, which catalogues databases for thousands of journals, allowed me to access the most up to date research in participating fields of study and therefore was my primary source for research. Online journals were particularly useful because new investigations are conducted regularly and they present the most current and up to date research. Subsequently, this research better suits the themes of this paper that are constantly evolving with time and can quickly become out of date. As a result, journals explored in this paper have a publication date of no earlier than 2010 in an effort to keep the research relevant.

Journals were originally discovered by searching within the broader context of the field of criticism. The selection of journals for this paper ran concurrently with the selection of data and the investigation of theory. This enabled fresh links to be drawn between each set of research, and resulted in the exploration of more specific journal topics relating to particular ideas presented in these other research sets.

Online articles and essays were another valuable secondary resource. Essays such as Paul Ward's *Some Thoughts on Practice-Theory Relationships in Animation Studies* investigated in this dissertation have been checked as reliable academic sources. Paul Ward for example, of the Arts University of Bournemouth is president of the Society of Animation Studies. Many of these articles referred to other texts such as *Situated Learning: Legitimate and Peripheral Participation* by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. Books such as these were further investigated for their application of theory to the arguments investigated in this paper or their relationship to the data collected and analysed.

Articles and journals were not chosen specifically for their ability to validate certain arguments presented in this paper. Instead, texts often offered alternative positions to the ones I maintain. For example, Ryan Gillespie's article titled *The Art of Criticism in the Age of Interactive Technology: Critics, Participatory Culture, and the Avant-Garde* maintains an opposing view to that exemplified in this paper. These texts were particularly interesting because they solicited further investigation and stemmed valuable discussion. More importantly, they offered different angles of analyses to the data collected

The 1940 article titled *Yes, But is it Art? A Long Haired Discussion is Provoked by Disney's Novel Fantasia* from the *New York Times* marks the earliest article reference of this dissertation. It was located by searching the *New York Times* online archives where a high resolution PDF could be downloaded. It was included to compare the differences to criticism brought about by web 2.0 interactivity compared to the more limited accessibility of the time of *Fantasia's* release.

The appendix section of this dissertation comprises of comments collected from various online animation videos and is referred to in various places throughout my writing. Since much of the focus of this paper is targeted at opinionated common-user feedback in the web space, much research and collated data will be derived from non-academic sources. The views pertaining to this data, particularly with regards user comments, may lack credibility, as much of it is based on personal opinion. As it is the goal of this paper to legitimize the view of the common person as valid and worthwhile criticism however, this data has been collected in such a way as to include a wide range of opinions. Collection and implementation of this data can be described through three main processes.

The number of online animation videos is vast and the videos as sources for data had to be limited and chosen carefully. Comments were selected primarily from the video-based website *Vimeo,* because user discussion and criticism from the other websites discussed in this paper have been explored in-text. The primary process describes the way by which comments were found. Animation videos were not chosen for their high popularity and\or critical acclaim, as I felt that such videos had already been critically explored or had a well documented status and would subsequently inhibit the viewers' freedom in producing critical opinion. Therefore, these videos were chosen on the basis that they appealed to me personally, and were likely to garner similar criticism from other viewers. The animations were also chosen to represent a diverse range of styles and techniques, ranging from 3D digital animation to 2D cell animation.

The secondary process involved sifting through the comments on each of these videos. Comments were selected for their effectiveness in engaging on relevant critical topics. These comments were extracted and their date of access noted. I positioned myself as a non-professional, common critic in the process of arriving at these comments. This meant that I had a mind-set similar to those viewers whose comments were chosen, allowing a more honest and truthful selection. At the same time however, a degree of analyses occurred at this stage, since each comment was chosen for their application to the theory and literature being read concurrently.

The third process involved analysing these comments further, summarising their function and discovering associations with the theory and various arguments in the paper. Upon discovering their associations, notes were made alongside the literature explored so that various arguments could be demonstrated in the final text. Consequently, compiled comments are arranged under their associated video titles together with an explanation recounting each response's relevance in the appendix of this dissertation.

In-text comments examples include comments derived from YouTube videos. Many of these videos were arrived at through a network of hyperlinks and were thus chosen as a result of their associations with certain critical blogs discussed in this paper. This process of travelling through hyperlinks and navigating through embedded media and comments sections follows a very similar route to how general commenters themselves arrive at these places and in a sense, this process can be seen as an emulation of their journey towards contributions of criticism on certain topics.

YouTube comments relating to Walt Disney's animations were selectively chosen for relevance to particular arguments and critical engagements discovered in my analysis. All comments presented in this paper were chosen because they further articulated and demonstrated particular arguments and points of view set out in this dissertation, meaning that data selection was deliberate and not randomised. The reason for this selectiveness is discussed more fully in this paper, but in essence is justified by the aim of this paper, which is to demonstrate that valid and worthwhile criticism *can* be found in the voice of the common critic rather than that every comment is valid and worthwhile. In this respect, the data chosen provides a valid source of critique since it is evidently linked to the arguments presented in this dissertation as well as provides further insight into the academic texts explored.

A Comparative Analysis of Web Based Video Sites in the Context of Video Animation

YouTube is by far the largest video based website, and as a result of its dominance, receives the most attention from the general public compared to other video-based websites. There are a number of other video-based websites that have a more specialized focus as far as content is concerned and consequently can have a more "curated" look and feel. These more specialized websites provide a basis to analyze the differences between the various sites, more particularly as they provide an opportunity for alternative criticism styles.

The differences between these websites are, just as any other type of traditional media, different by virtue of the subscriber and audience base. For example, the premise behind Vimeo is as follows: "From the beginning, Vimeo was created by filmmakers and video creators who wanted to share their creative work, along with intimate personal moments of their everyday life. As time went on, like-minded people came to the site and built a community of positive, encouraging individuals with a wide range of video interests. We hope that you feel inspired to show us both your creative side as well as your friendly side." (Help Center: Vimeo Guidelines) In other words, Vimeo attracts a group of creatively driven filmmakers and artists wanting to engage with others within an artistic community. Consequently the criticism by the Vimeo community is similarly framed. By contrast, YouTube attracts a broader based audience with a wide variety of skills, motivations and interests. This is not to say that one cannot find the same or similar videos on both sites, however it does to some degree influence and even determine the type of criticism arising from each respective site. When contemplating a video from YouTube and one from Vimeo, even an identical one, the viewer's mindset is different. I propose that these differing responses are driven, to a large extent by the character of the website and the expectations of their viewers. As such, the role that expectations play in formulating criticism becomes important.

The comments section is a good starting point for evaluating the criticism pertaining to the various sites. This is a space where the voice of acknowledged critic and common person hold equal standing. More often than not, respondents do not go by their real world or given names. This allows for anonymous feedback and can promote an environment where commentators are free to speak their mind in an authentic way. While anonymous comments can generate far more feedback of little value or be simply a means for people to give vent to whatever prejudice they cannot normally disclose, this opportunity for anonymity can also lead to a more direct, sincere criticism that gives voice to potentially difficult or repressed issues. Moreover, this criticism can become multilayered as it offers the forum where comments are created in response to other comments. This dynamic interchange is interesting because it facilitates a flow of conversation between viewers that encourages more strongly opinionated views.

Since the advent of internet video streaming, multiple technologies and programs have been developed to make internet videos more accessible. One such advance is the facility to embed videos and watch embedded videos. An embedded video is a video that is displayed on a certain website (which otherwise is generally not

video based) such as a blog, forum or Facebook, but is actually linked by html code and played through another website such as YouTube or Vimeo. Embedded videos make for very interesting topics of study because for each website into which a video is embedded, an entirely new context, interface and online presentation is created. More importantly for the purposes of this paper, it provides animators with a new set of commentators.

Essentially, the embedded video is identical to its source video. It features the same player as its source, and in most cases one can be linked to the video's true location. The only difference between an embedded video and its source in its original location is its surroundings on the page and accordingly, its presentation and context. Presented this way and with additional captions, one can dramatically alter the viewer's original perception of a particular video. At the same time, the space and context, as well as historical background associated with the certain blogs or pages that these videos may appear on, all influence this perception as well. In essence, a video's meaning can be influenced through the embedding process. In many cases, videos are rendered more informative through this process. Unlike text-based media which automatically generates its own tags or meta-data and therefore rendered searchable by search engines such as Google or Bing, video when simply posted to video websites such as YouTube has a very bare-bones descriptive feature system. This, without tagging or metadata, means there is not much in the way of video uniqueness, much less the ability to locate it on the web. By contrast, a video embedded in a blog for example, has the potential for a long descriptive passage about it with a dedicated post. It will also inherit the associations attributed to that blog and may be accompanied by other media such as pictures, other videos and clips, texts etc. that could further enrich it but also make it searchable. This way the video will become more informative, unique and generate a following based on its tagging or meta-data.

A good example of embedded animated video can be found at Under The Gun website located at *http://www.underthegunreview.net/2012/08/27/the-short-cut-an-interview-with-director-bo-mathorne/*. This website publishes online articles on current entertainment news. Included on the page are two embedded videos. The one is the full length animated short: *The Backwater Gospel*, and the other is a brief 'making-of' the work in question. They are both YouTube videos (this can be seen by the YouTube logo on the bottom right corner of each video), so one can verify that they are associated to a separate audience on YouTube already. The presentation of the videos on this more specialized website means that the video receives a different audience as a result of its specific location. A significant difference and a factor which differentiates the respective audiences is because Under the Gun is an article based website and is therefore unlikely to attract the type of person looking simply for videos. Consequently, the comments and responses are likely to be very different across these platforms. Accordingly, different responses to the work and the criticism thereof can be evaluated examining these different locations, even though the videos are identical on each site.

A very important property of the embedding process is that for most videos there no restrictions on whom or how many people may embed videos into various webpages. This creates the possibility for a particular video

to appear on countless customized blogs. A personalized blog is particularly interesting because an embedded video provides the forum to produce a highly opinionated view, while at the same time allowing the potentially conflicting or alternative views of others to be expressed in the comments section under each blog post. “Blogging is content created from a personal point of view, in a personal voice.” (Duffy 121) In summary, each blog is essentially an open platform for criticism.

CASE STUDY: CARTOON BREW

Cartoon Brew is a blog started in 2004 that aims to publish “the latest news, trends and ideas in animation to over 25,000 different artists, entertainment execs and cartoon aficionados” and “covers a wide range of topics, from cutting-edge computer animation and visual effects for both television and film, to classical techniques like hand-drawn and stop motion. It also covers trends in commercial animation, interactive apps, blockbuster Hollywood features, crowdfunding, and independent filmmaking.” (About Cartoon Brew)

Cartoon Brew scours video websites, particularly Vimeo for new well produced animated shorts to feature on their website. Simultaneously, eager animation practitioners link Cartoon Brew to their uploaded videos in the hope that they might get featured and subsequently receive exposure. The website’s invitation reads as follows: “Feel free to send us links to sites, artists or news stories that you want us to check out, whether it’s your own or somebody else’s. You can contact both of us via our news suggestion form.”Only items suggested via this form will be considered for the site; please do not contact us individually. We look at every suggestion we receive, but due to the sheer number of submissions, cannot respond to everybody individually.” (ibid) As a result of this invitation to animators, both amateur and professional, Cartoon Brew attracts a large community dedicated to the advancement of animation, and is a “go to” place to find animated short films online. This is further supported by Cartoon Brew’s own Vimeo channel which is advertised on every page.

The Cartoon Brew Vimeo channel functions as a channel featuring compilations of the short animated films featured on their website. The way in which the rating and commenting functions within Vimeo work are elaborated elsewhere in this paper, but it is important to note that the Cartoon Brew Vimeo channel has a completely separate comments section and rating system to that of the actual and original website. Indeed, they are mutually exclusive. This means that followers of the channel might not actually visit the actual website very often. This has implications for the monitoring of criticism as it becomes necessary to monitor two different locations which complicates the process. It is fair to assert that it is more likely that viewers will go to the Cartoon Brew website which is rated prior to seeing an animated video. This is because they can be assured they will find a well considered article about the film they intend watching. This written submission may contain more information such as background stories and production issues and may also include the opinion of a prospective expert who may be fairly knowledgeable in the field and whose opinions are generally respected often in an informative and well-written format. It is worth pointing out that Amid Amidi – the editor in chief, is also an award-winning author and historian and the expectation is that his writing, research

and opinion are generally of a high standard. (Cartoon Brew)

21 Years and 7 Minutes by Caroline Torres

Caroline Torres' *21 Years and 7 Minutes* is one such example of a film that appears on both the Cartoon Brew Vimeo channel and the Cartoon Brew blog site. *21 Years in 7 Minutes* is a particularly relevant post for Cartoon Brew since it was the video that was selected to launch the 2012 Cartoon Brew Student Animation Festival. Cartoon Brew's page on the animated video[12] provides a short description and review of the piece and it then goes on to provide a full in depth interview where Caroline Torres discusses what motivated her ideas and the programs and tools she used in making the piece. She then goes on to discuss the whole production process. She details the challenges she faced, the lessons she learned and the inspirations that she drew upon in creating the piece. This information provides a wonderful context with which to analyze the subsequent criticism of the film.

The *21 Years and 7 minutes* short film is also embedded into the webpage. It is a Vimeo player, which means that it is directly linked to the channel, and therefore the website blog is the more informative location, and accordingly provides deeper and more insightful comment in terms of quality criticism. For instance, it contains the opinions of the editors of the post, including the responses of the Editor-in-Chief, whose reputation has already been recognized, describing the piece as being "confident and original" (brewmasters par. 2) as well as "fast-paced"(par. 2). It further elaborates on the evaluation of the piece by describing how it uses "simple line work" to evoke a "quirky animation style" (par. 2). These insightful contributions impact on the viewers own response to the material. Whether by choice or not this will ultimately have an impact on their (the viewer's) own critical evaluations. Likewise they might read the next section of the post and discover Torres' criticism of her own work in response to a discussion of her own film and as a result be guided and primed to receive the material in a specific way. Furthermore, in sections like "Challenges" and "Lessons Learned", this criticism is more overtly and consciously expressed with the accompanying influence on the viewing experience.

The next level of critique available to the viewer is the comments section. This is probably the most engaging variant of all three since it is the one where the viewer has the possibility of direct engagement with this critical community.

User Marbles makes an interesting comment about the film:

> **Marbles** • 9 months ago

12 http://www.cartoonbrew.com/brewtv/21years-65727.html

> "I love, love, LOVE this. It manages to be prickly and sweet at the same time, and the timing is absolutely hilarious. Great character designs, too---simple and cute, but very funny." (CDTV Student Fest 2012)

The majority of this comment is praise for the film, but the use of the word *timing* is intriguing because although it probably relates to the way suspense is held before each gag is revealed, the commenter might also be talking about the principle of animation[13] - this is an animation blog after all. We are also able to deduce that this film has a humorous impact as a result of this timing. Just as the editor proposes, this simple line work resulted in characters that were interpreted as "simple and cute" yet as a result of the timing, still managed to be comical.

A blog has an audience so long as its topic sustains attention. Members of its audience need not be experts in the field or critics put forward by that blog and postulating views in line with their agenda. As a result, criticism obtained from the comments section that is fuelled by this audience might not contain any material pertaining to any advanced animation theory, practice or academia. Instead, these critical responses are more likely to be globally understood. This is not to say that they are invaluable, which forms the premise of this paper – perhaps this alternative more global source of criticism is something that can be explored further since it speaks to a much larger audience.

Jonah Sidhom's comment neatly illustrates my point.

> **Jonah Sidhom** • 9 months ago
>
> Wonderful film, great job!! The 9/11 part struck a chord for me, I'm glad you had that dream. :)
>
> I really, really like what you wrote under "Lessons Learned." Thanks for the inspiration! (CDTV Student Fest 2012)

Again the comment starts off with some praise. Jonah goes on to mention the 9/11 depiction in the film and how this "struck a chord" for him. These are descriptive terms that designate emotions that are universal. As a result, most people should be able to in some way relate to Jonah's comment rendering it useful. Therefore, the emotional impact of an animated film is valuable area for exploration when considering the contribution of criticism of the common person.

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13 Timing is the 9th principle of 12 from Disney animators' *Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston* revered guide to animation: *The Illusion of Life*. Timing describes the movement and space in time with *in-betweens* between poses of animation.

"I'm glad you had that dream. :)" (CDTV Student Fest 2012) is a specifically referring to Torres' Inspiration section in her own analysis of the film where she wrote:

> For example it always bothered me that the father of these kids that I used to babysit died in 9/11. I had a dream this year that was like "You're douche bucket if you don't put 9/11 in your animation." (CDTV Student Fest 2012)

This is especially interesting because the viewer is responding directly to what the artist said - the comment is so specific it almost enquires on a personal level. The viewer is in a sense having a conversation with the artist.

There are countless other animation examples that include written pieces by their artist themselves published on blogs all over the internet. Under the Gun's coverage of Animation Workshop's[14] *The Backwater Gospel as* mentioned previously is just one of countless examples where the artist is able to speak about his/her work. The blogger can introduce themes and opinions that may spark debate, the comments section provides the open floor for discussion, and the animated video there, embedded into the page, is available to be watched and interpreted according to the viewer's own agenda and influences.

The beauty of a blog is that it has the potential to become a digital space where multiple dynamic conversations can occur simultaneously. The blogger can communicate with the artist and the followers of the blog and in some sense with the movie itself. The artist in turn can communicate with the bloggers and their followers. The followers can reciprocally communicate with the blogger, the artist and other followers as well as with the video itself. Criticism regarding the animated video can occur at all of these points of communication.

THE 11 SECOND CLUB

The 11 Second Club: http://www.11secondclub.com, is a website dedicated to critique of animated video. The website features its own player and does not make use of embedded video from other sites. The whole idea of the website is to host a competition every month where subscribers can upload animated video clips for criticism and review by the same audience that they are part of (members of the club). The winner gets to have a professional eCritique[15] from Animation Mentor (http://www.animationmentor.com), which is regarded as one of the top online character animation schools in the world. Every month The 11 Second Club releases an eleven second audio clip (the motivation for the name of the site). Members are then invited to

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14 The Animation Workshop - Center for Animation is Denmark's leading animation institution with activities within the areas of education, culture, communication and business. The Animation Workshop is an independent management unit under VIA University College, and has a strong network of international companies, artists and educations. (http://www.animwork.dk/en/about.asp)

15 "The eCritique Tool is an innovative key element in the Animation Mentor program. Each week, a professional mentor will provide their students with a newly recorded video critique on their weekly animation assignment.This provides valuable insight, feedback and suggestions on ways to improve students' weekly assignments and animation skills. In addition to viewing their own critiques, students may also view the critiques of their peers, learning from their mistakes and successes as well." (http://www.animationmentor.com/resources/11-second-club/)

create eleven seconds of animation to match this clip. After the upload, members then vote on a starred rating of 1 to 10 stars from “poor” to “excellent” on each other’s videos. (Frequently Asked Questions)

The 11 Second Club is interesting website for the purposes of this paper because it is a place where the producer and critic amalgamation is obvious. Two critiquing options are available. The star rating system mentioned earlier, as well as the comments section. In order to either submit an entry or rate and or comment on a video however, one must be registered to the website. The registration is anonymous which means that although it is possible to manufacture a fake identity, the website uses your real world name and information as a means to identify the commentator. This identification is used to tie individuals to their submissions and as a result, animators will go by their real names. Most importantly, it poses the question as to whether it is possible to be anonymous as a critic. Commenters names are published alongside each comment and by association, their information is also available due to the extent to which information can now be searched. A fake registration is possible but since this website is about bettering one’s own professionalism within the animation sphere, it would not make much sense to do so. Secondly, a fake identity is unlikely to receive any substantial recognition from a critic/audience and as a result any criticism made by such a user takes the risk that their submissions might not be taken seriously.

This limited anonymity has the potential drawback that the nature of criticism becomes more restrained as a result of users being held accountable to the comments that they post on the site. On the other hand, this accountability may result in more thoughtful criticism and less “trolling”.[16] Critics are producers as well and the competitive nature surrounding competitions made available by The 11 Second Club engender an environment where rich criticism becomes possible and even encouraged. This is because the competitive natures of these sites stimulate a climate of competitiveness where critics try to outdo one another with their respective animation expertise which is then judged and analyzed by the community from which it is drawn.

When navigating the voting process, the website opens up a pop-up window with a very modest interface. It consists of a few video controls such as a scrubber, play button and a forward and back button allowing the viewer to go back and forth frame-by-frame. Below the video is a comment box where the viewer can leave a comment relating to the video. Of vital importance, it does not reveal any comments given by other viewers. This is crucial, because other people’s opinions can affect one’s own response to and subsequent critique of the work in question. This feature was probably excluded in an attempt to filter out biased criticism. The FAQ on the site suggests, “it is acceptable to leave comments such as "Nice work!" or "This is funny," but we encourage you to provide constructive feedback saying what you like about the piece, or what you feel could be improved.” (Frequently Asked Questions) This provides the viewer with vital information regarding the baseline standard for contributions because would-be critics are encouraged to provide informed criticism as opposed to the more common praise comments that only serve as to show where an animated piece succeeds.

[16] The word to “troll” and its derivative “trolling” are internet slang used to describe the process by which internet users aim to provoke arguments, discord and upset, usually by posting inflammatory and provocative comments and responses within online social communities. (Internet Trolls)

Perhaps if there were more sites like this one that encouraged constructive feedback as part of their model for criticism of animation, video websites would provide a far more reliable and thought provoking source for animation criticism thus promoting the quality and use of the criticism which in turn has implications for the creators of the works in question.

Because The 11 Second Club provides the audio and accordingly, much of the story to the animators, the main focus of this website is purely to gauge the effectiveness of the various animation specific techniques employed by its creators. By this I mean how effectually an animation utilizes the principles of animation. These principles are discussed elsewhere in this paper. Indeed much criticism does relate to other elements of film, such as story, composition and framing, mood etc., but for the most part the emphasis is directed towards elaborating on how and whether these elements are achieved using the animation principles.

Since this form of animation criticism is very technically orientated, it is designed for a very specific audience that already have a base knowledge in animation practice. For this reason, the scope of this criticism will also be specific and as a result limited in its agenda. This is not necessarily problematic, but for purposes of this paper we would like to include the feedback from a more inclusive audience in order to achieve a broader and more inclusive spectrum of criticism.

Interestingly, where The 11 Second Club fails to be more accommodating with regards its user base, it succeeds by providing an engaging system for learning designed for the user base it relies upon. As discussed in more detail elsewhere in this paper: anywhere criticism takes place, a degree of learning also occurs. Whether it is the producer having learned something after the critique, or the critic having learned something in the process of formulating his/her criticism; or merely an observer of the whole process – receptively absorbing what they find useful.

The 11 Second Club makes use the eCritique device. This form of criticism comes in the form of a video clip. eCritique videos feature an established animation professional, knowledgeable in the technical elements of animation who responds to and gives feedback on a selected animated video clip. What is crucial about the eCritique is that it is accessible to any member of The 11 Second Club, and therefore provides a valuable resource for anybody wanting to learn animation. The eCritique example is also particularly interesting because it is presented within a form of criticism that is unusual, yet viable in terms of its mandate. Essentially it is a video created in response to another video, and while the internet might be saturated with such videos[17], when presented with a video criticism as well considered and as effective as this, it adds impetus to the learning environment for any number of potential animators and critics alike and is clearly something that can be implemented very effectively.

[17] One not need look at all the parodies, compilations etc.

Criticism in a video format can offer enormous benefits as a source for learning. One huge advantage over written text criticism is that one is able to better hear the critic's tone of voice and often interpret intention and meaning easier. Nuances of opinion can also be read more immediately and understood more readily by watching facial expressions and listening to voice pitches. For animation in particular, that is inherently so performance orientated, there are vast benefits to video criticism.

As mentioned previously, The 11 Second Club positions its content towards the technical aspects of animation. It is therefore crucial for uploaded videos to playback in the correct fashion. For example, during the critiquing process, viewers will scrub through frames individually. This means that video artefacts such as missing frames, ghosted and blurred frames are a huge disadvantage to the uploader and need to be avoided. Some video properties are crucial and videos need to have the correct video compression settings to cater best for the animation criticism of this website.

As in the example above checking the correct fps (frames per second) and timecode settings of the encoding might be the solution. At the same time properties such as resolution, bit-rate, and audio quality are secondary, as they do not have as large an impact on determining the quality of the animation performance, since they are more picture quality based settings. In fact, members of The 11 Second Club are generally less interested in the picture quality of their animations since it does not serve their primary purpose of portraying quality character animation. This can be seen by the manner in which video clips often leave out dressing, backdrops, textures and other elements that don't add to the story or advance the animation. On occasion, clips are even in playblast[18] format.

Having the video play correctly locally does not necessarily guarantee that it will play as intended once uploaded to the website. The html code of the video player within the website reinterprets the video, often by which time it might be recompressed, if it is not compatible immediately. To avoid this, The 11 Second Club has an FAQ which is aimed to help guide users to encode and create the most compatible videos for the website player. These guidelines also provide all the restrictions per upload, which is crucial. These include the size limits, which if exceeded, will result in the video being cut short. Large video sizes will also be to the producer's detriment since they will take longer for the viewer to stream. Video sizes that are too low might often have bitrates that are too low, and will suffer from lack of picture quality and thus a balance must be achieved between the two. Fortunately the website also provides a guide on how to prepare the best version of the video clip upload. (Helpful Hints) The page is a step by step guide that starts by linking you to a free video encoder, then providing an encoding preset for this encoder which can be downloaded that applies all the correct compression settings and makes it much easier for those that might find the

[18] A Playblast is essentially a very crude video created from the viewport of the 3D software package (Maya), although is now a generic term for most preview animation clips, generated for preview purposes. Its crude visuals are as allows it to be processed very quickly yet retains perfect animation fluidity providing the animator with a very useful reviewing tool. "Previews the current animation. When you playblast an animation, the **Playblast** outputs a series of individual frames in the format specified in the **Image format** settings of **Render Settings** window. See Render Settings: Common tab for more information. The default **Playblast** image formats are the following: .avi (Windows), .iff (Linux), and .qt (Mac OS X)." (http://download.autodesk.com/global/docs/maya2013/en_us/)

encoding/compression process difficult. It then talks one through aspect ratios and checking the output. This is a useful feature because a help system like this might result in fewer videos that contain artifacts[19] and as a result we are less likely to receive criticism that relates to the technicalities of the video or alternatively criticism of these technicalities mistaken for animation and filmic errors. Moreover, viewers and critics are less likely to respond to a clip that does not playback correctly and cannot be analyzed easily and effectively as a result of technical inconsistencies. This last point runs in conjunction with the principle that the more accessible and pleasing the viewing experience is for the audience, the greater the reception of the video is likely to be, as audiences have a low tolerance for frustration and due to the availability of other websites, viewers may not persist if too many obstacles are encountered. It is for this reason that a website like The 11 Second Club draws a substantial number of viewers as a result of the accessibility of the site and the pleasurable viewing experience it offers which in turn explains its powerful critical following.

[19] Digital artifacts are undesired effects introduced through a digital process or technique. These include the introduction of colour banding, pixilation and jaggies to name a few.

The Interplay of Context - The Impact of Web Tools, Browsers and the Technology Context of the Audience

It is worthwhile to explore the relationship between the viewer and the mechanisms through which animation can be viewed as this can dramatically affect a viewer's experience and consequently his\her criticism. The technical manner in which a website functions also has bearing on determining its audience's response. There are many different ways in which the viewer can navigate to a particular video. In the case of YouTube for example, a specific video can be accessed through a number of means all of which incorporate YouTube's interface. This process can include arriving at the video through a hyperlink[20] (the most direct form of navigation), or by searching through a search engine (again through a number of means). It can also be embedded, in which case the viewer has been looking at similar material on a different page, or by means of a *similar videos* column. These are just some examples available to the animation audience. The question of what viewers are exposed to and experience during this process of navigating is vital, as it affects their preconceptions for the video, which inevitably influences the viewer's criticism thereof.

One of the more significant differences affecting the form of criticism relates to the specifications required by each site. In order to upload a video to YouTube for example, the video has to be in the correct format (FLV before 2008 and H.264 or MPEG4 AVC after) and up until as recently as late 2008, the maximum resolution for each video was 480x360 pixels, which in modern standards is not much at all. By contrast, Vimeo offered a much more generous HD video upload option as early as 2007. This factor should definitely be a consideration for critics assessing animation works pre 2008 and is just one example of how artists would be swayed to one video website over another but more importantly exemplifies the manner in which developing technologies can affect the viewers\critics experience and consequently criticism.

Another advantage Vimeo users had over other sites including YouTube is that creators of animation were not restricted to a maximum video length which was in contrast to YouTube's meagre 10 minutes maximum video duration. Many animation shorts exceed 10 minutes, making YouTube's offering far less attractive to animation artists whose work did not necessarily fit within the specified time constraints. It was only very recently that YouTube increased their maximum video length and this is a very significant considering the availability of Web 2.0 tools to artists and critics up until this time. The research conducted for this paper supports this position and demonstrated that there are distinct consequences that flow from these restrictions, which, in turn, has profound implications for artists and critics alike. For example, the clipping of films to fulfil the space/storage requirements often does a huge injustice to the creators of these works of art as often these are not artistic decisions made by the artist in question in the service of his/her work. To fulfil the time constraints the work is then corrupted by technicians who don't have artistic license or possibly artistic sensibility. This has profound implications for the art work and as a result degrades the quality of criticism.

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[20] A hyperlink points to a whole document (in our case an animation video) or to a specific element within a document. Hypertext is text with hyperlinks. A software system for viewing and creating hypertext is a *hypertext system*, and to create a hyperlink is *to hyperlink* (or simply *to link*). A user following hyperlinks is said to *navigate* or *browse* the hypertext. (Wikipedia.com)

Similarly, the receiving device through which these video sites can be accessed also affects the videos themselves. The software needed to run a YouTube hosted video off a desktop or laptop system is different to the software required to have it running on a cell phone or tablet (such as an iPad). YouTube and the majority of other video based websites require the Adobe Flash Player plugin (a video encoder) to be installed on the web browsers of desktops and laptops. It was only as recently as January 2010 that an HTML 5 version of YouTube became available for browsers running on devices that did not have or did not have the capability to run the Adobe Flash player. (Watch this YouTube Video without the Flash Player). Accordingly, the wide or broad-based access to these videos from cell phones and alternate devices, which do not generally run Adobe Flash Player, is a relatively recent phenomenon. To illustrate this point, the HTML 5 option is still undergoing trials (beta) and not all videos that are accessible via Adobe Flash Player are similarly available via an HTML5 browser. (Youtube HTML5 Video Player)

There are two significant conclusions one can draw from this, both involving the accessibility of videos. Firstly, since not all videos are available with the HTML5 option, one can be compelled to use the Flash Player route in order to view a video. This means that at times, accessing certain videos from a desktop or laptop computer is the only option. This has particular implications for those environments where these types of computers are less accessible than smaller mobile devices. Secondly, the quality of videos is significantly affected by software constraints and this would have direct consequences on the video's reception and criticism.

It is worth interrogating the impact that certain forms of compression have on videos before they are viewed. This is however a dynamic environment – Google has now released various YouTube apps dedicated to making the process of viewing its videos even easier and more engaging when using these devices. (New YouTube iPhone App Preempts iOS6 Demotion) Companies like Apple have even gone as far as to partner with video based websites to build applications and functionality into their operating systems. For example, the YouTube app was preloaded on Apple's mobile devices before iOS 6, thereafter the Vimeo app was preloaded. (Ibid) Compression affects the display of videos in a number of ways. The video goes through a number of changes in appearance as a result of compression from its original source. The mechanics of compression happens via an algorithm or a pre-determined set of instructions. Most video compression is lossy[21]. For this reason, all videos on the Internet suffer somewhat visually when compared with the original. The negative effects of compression are apparent in a number of ways and often have more profound effects on animation video than on other forms of video. One such example is frame dropping. This can occur when videos are converted to accommodate certain framerate restrictions and in order to match lower framrates a video will have to lose a certain number of frames every second.

Key poses[22] are particular to the process of animation and animation studies. Frame dropping can have dramatic effects on the look of an animation– particularly if this occurs on a key pose. This can affect the

[21] Lossy refers to a compression type that loses information in the compression process.
[22] Key poses are created to establish timing and placement of characters and props in a given scene or shot. (Wikipedia)

fluidity of the animation but also has an effect on the subsequent criticism. While an audience experience may not have been a positive one when viewed subsequent to the compression algorithm intervention, that might not have been the critical response to the original and more fluid animation contained therein. I take the view that compression has very significant consequences on animation criticism. Compression is just one aspect: pixellation, bit-rate changes, colour compression, frame blending, filtering, and (anti) aliasing are other changes resulting from hosting and thereby distancing the work from its original form. That the criticism of the work is subsequently affected is not debatable, what is in question is the degree to which each technical compromise effects the viewer's experience.

The other context to which I have previously referred, relates to the viewer's own individual context. Context effects understood in this way is a broad topic on its own as it affects the criticism of all kinds of artistic endeavour and the way an art work is received and perceived is filtered through that particular viewer's own agenda, background, political ideologies and religious and cultural orientation, amongst others. For the purposes of this paper, I will restrict the exploration of this type of context to that which has a more direct influence on *animation* criticism.

Animation on video sites can be accessed wherever the internet is accessible. The rise in the use of web enabled cell phones and other portable devices means that videos can be available wherever there is enough signal. The *New Media Consortium Study: The 2010 Horizon Report* for example shows that "well over a billion new phones are produced each year, a flow of continuous enhancement and innovation that is unprecedented in modern times. The fastest-growing sales segment belongs to smart phones — which means that a massive and increasing number of people all over the world now own and use a computer that fits in their hand and is able to connect to the network wirelessly from virtually anywhere." (Johnson. J et al, 9). Cisco, a manufacturer of networking gear and routers, products which are the backbone of the internet, estimates in its annual white paper published and entitled *Cisco Visual Networking Index: Global Mobile Data Traffic Forecast Update, 2012–2017* that global mobile data traffic grew by 70% in 2012, reaching reached 885 petabytes per month at the end of 2012. Mobile internet traffic was twelve times the size of the entire global internet in 2000 and that mobile video traffic was 51% of all traffic by the end of 2012. It also predicted that global mobile data traffic will increase 13-fold between 2012 and 2017 and that two-thirds of the world's mobile data traffic will be video by 2017 with the Middle East and Africa growing at the highest rate of any region at 77% growth per annum. (Cisco Mobile Data Traffic Forecast)

A study made in 2005 suggests that "video downloads and messaging will also become more popular as video-enabled handsets increase in uptake and 3G networks increase their client base." (May. H and Hearn. G, 196) Since 2005 there has been a huge increase in the popularity and acquisition of smartphones and particularly phones capable of accessing and surfing the internet. Conjunctionally, cell phone towers and networks, even in developing countries, have been significantly upgraded to cater for these technologies.

Recently, on a trip to Manguzi, which is located in a remote and rural area in KZN, South Africa, close to the Mozambican border, I tried to do some research and was surprised that I was able to use my smartphone as an internet hub and managed to stream animation videos without any hitches. Manguzi has only one main road running through it and all its other roads can only be navigated by 4x4 vehicles. This struck me as astonishing for such a rural and to some degree and inaccessible section of South Africa. It is significant that in South Africa, the internet is accessed more through cell phone devices rather than computers. "Boldly presented theories and predictions on the newest technologies (in particular the internet) performing wonders for the social and economic situation of 'low-income' economies are common…Rather, it is the cell phone (or mobile phone), whose unique strength in offering information and communication mobility has been almost overlooked in the predictions, that is the ICT[23] that is showing the strongest signs of sustainability in the context of low income countries." (Harvey and Sturges 148) A study performed in 2010 revealed that: "the mobile market today has nearly 4 billion subscribers, more than two-thirds of whom live in developing countries." (Johnson et al. 9)

In many developing and Third World countries, the majority of people have access to cell phones despite many of them living below the poverty line, as this is the most effective form of communication. A study in The Gambia revealed: "The cellular technology has effectively replaced its traditional counterpart, the fixed-line telephone, as a more effective and reliable communication instrument." (Harvey and Sturges 151) Consequently, it is possible that the cell phone might replace the computer as the preferred method of accessing the internet in countries like South Africa. "In regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, which has a well documented history of inadequate communication infrastructure, the wireless feature of the cell phone is indeed very attractive. In fact, cell phones are more widely diffused in Sub-Saharan Africa than any other ICT." (149) My stay in Manguzi also confirmed that even in rural areas the mobile phone has a lot of influence – I often noticed people from incredibly humble backgrounds and homes that carried with them surprisingly powerful smartphones. The Cisco white paper stated that although smartphones represented only 18% of total global handsets in use in 2012, they represented 92% of total global handset traffic. Further, in 2012, the typical smartphone generated 50 times more mobile data traffic (342 MB per month) than the typical basic-feature cell phone (which generated only 6.8 MB per month of mobile data traffic). (Cisco Mobile Data Traffic Forecast)

Zwelli Mokgata writing for the Financial Mail regarding the growth of the South African animation industry quotes Paul Meyer, MD of animation studio Luma as saying, "Free-to-air television is in the final stages of phasing out analogue signals. These are due to be switched of from 2015, and replaced by government's proposed digital terrestrial TV. This will result in clearer pictures and space for more channels, as one analogue channel takes up the bandwidth of eight digital ones" (par. 2) He estimates that currently R1bn is spent per year on animation in South Africa and sees potential for substantial growth "Animation is always going to

23 Information and communication technology.

grow," he says. "The more screens we have, the more animation is needed" (par. 4) Mokgata goes on to quote Bridget Scarr, Group MD for Hummingbird who says, "The hope is that local broadcasters will look at animation as a commercial business. Studios will create new models to suit market requirements" (par. 5)

At the moment however, data packages in low-income countries are still proportionately expensive. Video streaming itself is also a very expensive procedure with regards bandwidth. Currently, the best offering is probably the unlimited internet bundle packaged with Blackberry contracts that provides unlimited internet connection for the purposes of BBM[24]. Nonetheless, the technology, infrastructure and client base is indeed ready and it is possible to postulate that before long, many of these cash-strapped communities could potentially have access to the internet on a large scale and bypass the requirements of having to purchase conventional and expensive computers.

In developed countries other internet capable ICTs are becoming increasingly more popular. Smaller devices such as Apple's hugely successful iPhone, and its competitor's devices as well as the ever-growing tablet market and everything else that fits within the 'handheld' category, are now replacing the more traditional desktop computer as the preferred method of accessing the internet. A recent study in conducted among United States youths illustrates the public's reliance on these new ICTs as new media substitutes. "My phone doesn't have internet so I can't do anything with it. I can't read books on it. I can't check the weather on it. I can't look up things on Google. I can't check my Facebook. I can't check Myspace. Or my email... I haven't been on the computer, since I've had this [smart phone]... it was just always with me. (Study participant, age 17)" (Squire and Dikkers 446) Accordingly, these devices are also now becoming obvious receptors of online video. "Along with these features and the mobile's new fundamental capacity to send words, audio and images from anywhere on the move, their status as a 'new information medium' and the convergence of media and ICTs are becoming increasingly established." (May and Hearn 196)

Research has also revealed that most tertiary education level students have cell phones. "Virtually all higher education students carry some form of mobile device, and the cellular network that supports their connectivity continues to grow." (Johnson et al. 4) Kurt Squire and Sean Dikkers' study: *Amplifications of Learning: Use of Mobile Media Devices Among Youth* provides some useful insight into the usage of mobile devices as media platforms. "Most dramatically, youth use these devices to consume an average of 7.5 hours daily, including an average of 3.5 hours per day in which they are multi-tasking using more than once device (Rideout et al. 2010). Youth are spending substantial time consuming and participating in media through music, video, games, social networks, websites, instant messaging, twittering, and increasingly using applications that span across them." (446) Since the majority of tertiary level students have mobile devices, the potential educated populace accessing this media form has increased and an increased and more sophisticated audience has implications for the art of animation. Therefore the possibility for educated video criticism is also improved.

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24 Blackberry Messenger

This same research study also indicates that of the time spent using a mobile device, as much as 44% of it is spent on internet and streaming. As much as 7.5 hours plus an extra 3.5 hours are spent on these devices on average per day, per person. This is an extraordinary amount of time dedicated to browsing the internet and streaming. Streaming includes that of audio and\or music, but it could also include the streaming of video off the internet. Thus, considering the time spent streaming, the potential for online animation viewing is enhanced. Interestingly, this study was initiated as a result of this new ICT outbreak phenomenon which wanted more information relating to the reception of videos through the various video based websites.

One of the key factors of this phenomenon is mobility. Effectively, an online video can be viewed anywhere there is a Wi-Fi or 3G network signal. This has further implications for context because as this paper indicates, context is by nature fluid and cannot be controlled. For instance the environment in which a video is viewed can affect the experience and even alter the intended meaning. One viewer might watch a video in his/her quiet living room in a relaxed setting while another might watch the same video on the way to work on the bustling train. The environment one is in undoubtedly plays an enormous role in how one experiences a video. In other words the context of the viewer is more variable than one thinks and cannot be ignored. The obvious process of actively going to one's desktop computer to play a video off YouTube could be less attractive than using a more than capable device in your pocket.

Indeed, the devices mobility also means that it is susceptible to drastic variations in bandwidth. "Mobility further complicates the situation in that a mobile device can travel from an area where bandwidth is high, due to a low volume of use on the network for the area, to a high volume area where bandwidth is low. Thus, depending on network volume (i.e., load) and the mix of voice and data services being used, a customer could see network speeds drop to a low of 9.6 Kbps and go to a high of 153.6 Kbps a moment later." (Heppner et al. 1865) As a result viewing experiences could be compromised by interruptions for buffering, whereas a fixed PC will have a far more consistent connection.

The radical increase in popularity of these new ICTs as mobile internet and video streaming devices is not necessarily an altogether negative phenomenon for the animation market and for animation as an art form. The most obvious benefit is that media and specifically animation can be distributed much more effectively and the possibility arises that animations can be received by a larger and broader audience that may not have had the opportunity to engage with this kind of art and the subject matter it is inspired by in more traditional settings. This has potential benefits for the audience who is exposed to concepts and ideas and image making which was previously unavailable to them. This exposure also has positive implications for learning and education. The artists in turn are able to reach and engage with a broader audience and their work could be enhanced by the feedback from unconventional sources which in a more globalised world may become more necessary. "Multi-platform digital distribution opens out numerous possibilities for public service broadcasters to offer new sorts of services and output to audiences." (qtd in Doyle 434) A recent study conducted in Japan

shows that contrary to what one might expect, “mobile internet use is a ‘time-enhancing’ appliance while the traditional anchored down PC increasingly becomes a ‘time-displacing’ device.” (May and Hearn 205).

Animation Tools and Web 2.0 – a Symbiosis in Making Serious Art, Online

Many factors have led to the rise of animation within the contemporary media landscape. Some of this can be attributed to the wider availability of the tools required for rendering animation, however the modern global accessibility to the internet and the ability to effectively publish and distribute animation features quickly using Web 2.0 tools is the most significant. High speed internet is commonplace and videos can be watched concurrently while they are being streamed. This factor has made web videos far more accessible and has significantly contributed to the rise of animation in modern media culture. The ever-increasing bandwidth speeds is just one example of systems geared towards efficiency and ease of use. “Viewing animation online has become increasingly accessible with the mass adoption of broadband and the emergence of new file formats.” (Hosea 24) Even on slower broadband connections, which is all that is available in some of the more under-developed parts of the world, (at speeds such as 514 kbps[25] which is regarded as an entry-level broadband connection), streaming videos without interruption is possible.

Modern bandwidth speeds coupled with the fact that, as Hosea points out, file formats are becoming progressively more efficient and compact, make online videos increasingly more accessible to a larger audience. Indeed, the lower bandwidth requirements of many animation features and clips make animation a far better medium for distribution on the internet than digitized film. Since so much independent animation is in the form of online video, this is a significant factor in eliciting animation awareness. The developments of more efficient codecs and compressions have allowed videos to be transferred, downloaded, uploaded and manipulated much easier. Flash video in particular has been enormously popular, particularly in the animation scene, where its small file sizes and vector-based rendering system in the .swf[26] format have resulted in the conception of websites such as Newgrounds.com, an exclusively flash-based animation destination. Because of Flash videos incredibly resourceful file size and its compatibility with actionscript (a form of code), it has also been embraced in non-entertainment forms. Countless advertisement banners and interactive popup window promotions utilize this format, all with some sort of minor animation being used. It is true that this example does not demonstrate much in the way of artistic merit, which could be the subject of critique, but it is still possible to take cognizance of the prolificacy of their animators and the possibility that this tool could allow for something different and meaningful and certainly dynamic.

[25] Kilabits per second – describes the amount of data in units per second transferred.
[26] Shockwave Flash

It is significant that the tools for making animation have not only dramatically improved in recent years, but have also become more accessible. Previously, the process of animating and creating animation has been a very specific and intensely time-consuming process requiring a particular type of person with a certain skill set and the required tools. Today, many of these previously specialized tools of the trade are freely available to the public and this access means that anyone with access to a computer and the internet and can produce reasonably high quality animation. Therefore these modern tools do not only facilitate the animation process, but also simplify it and make it easier. One such example is Adobe Flash Professional. This program allows users to let the computer tween[27] animate an object over a section of frames, which essentially allows the computer to do much of the animating for you. Another feature of this program which aids the simplification process is the "onionskin", which enables users to see ghost frames of the frames before and after. This feature was included into the program in an attempt to match the traditional animator's prodigious ability to flip between drawings between his/her fingers. There are countless other streamlining features of this program that make it one of the most utilized 2D animation creation tools available. Consequently, programs such as Adobe Flash Professional have attracted many would-be animators and have created an animating community which did not exist in such large numbers until recently. This in turn has been a significant factor leading to an increased popularity of the animated art form. Talented individuals trained as artists, not as technicians, that did not have access to these tools now do, and the technical skill required to manipulate or use these tools is less of a barrier.

It is necessary for the purposes of this discussion to highlight the progress of 3D and computer generated imagery. Since the early experiments in the 1980s, this form of animation production has progressed exponentially to the point where considerable sections of contemporary films are actually all rendered in CGI[28]. Films like *Avatar* (2009) which could be argued is actually an animated movie, have changed our perceptions of what is possible in relation to this medium. One also cannot overlook what Pixar has done for the traditional animation scene by bringing 3D computer animation to the setting. The 3D animation scene that was originally dominated by Pixar with specialized computers and software is now a highly competitive 3D package marketplace. The various 3D software packages available are numerous; the majorities of which can be run on standard PCs[29] and all have features that make the animation process simpler. These programs range from the enormously popular Autodesk Maya to the free Blender and Google Sketchup. Despite several of these programs retailing in excess of $3,600 (Autodesk: Buy Maya), which might be out of reach of many, the fact that these feature film capable programs are available for common use on standard PC hardware is definitely a contributing factor to the advancement of animation. For those that cannot afford these programs, there are trial versions and student versions and (as much as it is illegal) it is also commonplace now through the

[27] "A tween in Adobe Flash Professional is an animation that is created by specifying a value for an object property in one keyframe and another value for that same property in another keyframe. Flash calculates the values for that property in between those two frames. The term *tween* comes from the words "in between."" (Flash Glossary: Tween)
[28] computer generated imagery
[29] personal computers

accessibility of the internet to download cracked versions, thereby broadening the potential 3D artist scope. Alternatively, other similar programs like Blender are also available as freeware, with just as capable features.

It would be a mistake to think that these simplification tools detract from the skill involved in animating, and that these features are actually in contradiction to the argument of animation as an art form, however this would be incorrect. Essentially, all animation can be critiqued and evaluated by the same criteria as all art, of which the craft is a central importance. Good solid animation can always be separated from sloppy mechanical animation. It needs to be acknowledged that the mechanical qualities of the animation in question form only one part of the critique of an animated film and that many other factors come into play such as story, design and sound.

The history of animation is one of struggle to be recognized as a serious art form. Animation is now more widely regarded as having an important role to play within the broader artistic arena. This recognition, one could argue, has developed along with the emergence of Web 2.0. This is because consumers have been able to demand a greater awareness of the artistic merits of animation through discussion threads on various platforms. Animation artists have clearly embraced this new environment by posting their work on this forum. We have seen an explosion of animation productions on the internet. Practitioners upload their videos for the purpose of reception. By uploading a video one is essentially intending to gain publicity and get one's work seen. The internet provides a free, potentially limitless audience for animation practitioners. Simultaneously a direct link of communication is made possible between the artist and his\her audience\critic. (This can be demonstrated by the examples 3b and 3d in the appendix.) By the same token, this ready-made audience negates the possibility of priority access to 'selected' individuals. The change from the formal publication/release protocol and procedures prior to the Web 2.0 world is dramatic: from the moment of upload, a critic will be subjected to the same experience as anyone else viewing the same video through the same internet space.

What role then does the critic offer to the Web 2.0 age? Undeniably the argument that, "we need critics more" (Gillespie 56) in the Web 2.0 age has proven to be of merit. Despite the avant-garde, old school, press-type critic not taking centre stage in the area of critical engagement with animation, this has not resulted in the degradation of criticism in favour of personal preference, but as a result of the media outputs exponential expansion and the manifestation of Web 2.0 a more expansive critical community has emerged. Gillespie himself made the point that "given the ease and cheapness of access to artistic and entertainment technologies and tools and the possibility of a global platform, the proliferation of stuff is practically exponential. One cannot even keep track of all the reviews of the music, film, photography, comedy, etc., out there, let alone the objects or performances themselves" (Gillespie 71). So, even mere reviews (as opposed to formal criticism) play a vital function.

The role that art critics can and should fulfil needs acknowledgement. It is clear that the advent of Web 2.0 or social media has changed the nature of the role. Cultural psychologist and writer Adam Waytz writes that the privileged position once occupied by art critics has "fundamentally changed". This is undeniably true but unlike Gillespie, I take the position along with Adam Waytz that this is not to be lamented but celebrated. "The internet has dramatically changed the role of the cultural critic." (par. 3) One example would be the way in which "critics no longer have exclusivity, priority, or even, necessarily, expertise." (par. 3) In the past, critics had more 'exclusivity, priority' and more knowledge in the area under critique. The internet in a sense neutralises all these advantages and consequently the critic has no more power than the common person. One could argue that the cultural critic is more likely to have more 'expertise' and knowledge in their particular area of interest. As Adam Waytz points out in his article *Whither Cultural Critics?* "Expertise requires that, compared to the average person, one has a deeper understanding of a topic, a more well-researched opinion on the topic, and privileged information on the topic." (par. 4) In today's Web 2.0 world however, these criteria are increasingly superfluous. Waytz points out that "with a fast wireless connection... research is easy." (par. 4) This is particularly true when free information sites like Wikipedia are just a click away. I agree with the position that critics have been made less distinctive precisely because they have stripped of their priority access. "Music and film piracy means that priority access has become a thing of the past." (par. 4). This is true for animation critics as well. It illustrates the impact of the immediacy provided by the Web 2.0 and the space it offers to all its subscribers by allowing them to play the role of critic if they desire. The piracy component might not seem that significant, particularly in light of the fact that internet video animation is for the most part dominated by small-scale independent productions that are not bound by heavy distribution and copyright restrictions. Even for those animated films that are protected by copyright restrictions, like Disney's *Paperman,* piracy essentially eliminates the priority access that critics would have had.

It may appear correct to argue that the meta-review system would discourage intelligent critical engagements. Gillespie uses the example of the iTunes online music store to illustrate this point: "There is nothing that prevents iTunes from having more critical writers and readers; but it is structured in a way as to discourage this, and, more importantly, when analyzed according to the end of participation, it is wildly successful (just look at all the participation!)." (Gillespie 64) It is true that the meta-review system is primarily concerned with a figure, be it the total of the number of likes or the star rating or where number between 1-10 is provided, however online video websites and even iTunes for that matter (where comments\ reviews can even be arranged according to their helpfulness) generally include an accompanying comments section, and there is nothing to discourage critical writers and readers from making a richer contribution here.

It could also be argued then that the emphasis of the critic in the Web 2.0 is not to actually provide accurate and informative and thought provoking reviews, but rather to offer guidance. This is in fact one way Waytz recommends writing good criticism. "The actual accuracy of experts seems secondary to their purpose: to provide guidance." (par. 2). I concur with his views regarding what he refers to as the "crowdsourcing" of opinion. "Crowdsourcing" is the process whereby one obtains information from a large group of people,

typically an online community.[30]. The opinions of a mass of people *can* be very informative however and can even provide useful feedback in even in relation to marketing and opportunities for publicity.

This paper recognizes the potential dangers and concerns highlighted by Gillespie, but takes the view that the impact of a mass feedback or interactive loop enabled by Web 2.0 cannot be dismissed. One particular concern is that any evaluation is now inevitably influenced by the evaluations on social media that have come before. Waytz provides a hypothetical situation to illustrate this point. "A barbershop with a one-star rating on Yelp as its first review is subsequently more likely to accrue more negative reviews—and that same barbershop, were it to receive a four-star rating on Yelp as its first review, would be more likely to accrue more subsequent positive reviews." (par. 7) What is interesting here is that the barbershop analogy suggests that actual quality is somewhat negligible since customers are likely to make reviews based more so on other people's responses than on their own experiences. It may also be useful to consider an interesting experiment conducted by Matthew J. Salganik from the Department of Sociology, Columbia University and Duncan J. Watts of the Santa Fe Institute, in New Mexico entitled *Experimental Study of Inequality and Unpredictability in an Artificial Cultural Market* the summary of which was published in Science Magazine (10 February 2006 Vol 311 Science http://www.sciencemag.org). The experiment proceeded from the observation that "hit" songs, books, and movies are many times more successful than average. Common sense would suggest that the hits or the best of these art forms are qualitatively different from the rest of them, however they found that success was also only partly determined by quality. The phenomenon described above is a difficult constraint to overcome in achieving balanced criticism, particularly within the video website area where mass opinion and reviews are generally always available.

Like anything else, the emergence of new platforms and the internet as new media format does not sweep away some of the more enduring problems criticism encounters and the vital role that it plays in the development of animation. Reading an article written in Dissent Magazine[31] online discussing the book entitled *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism by* Evgeny Morozov, an argument was made with considerable merit, that what we have come to understand as "the internet" is not a stand-alone thing but a "socially constructed concept" whose "various parts" ought to "be studied in their own right." (qtd in Shullenberger par. 4) Essentially then Morozov is asserting that the internet "is not a natural, given object but a contingent product conditioned by its context as much as it conditions the world around it." (par. 4) I continue to propose that the internet does not exist within a separate realm, but that it is simply a new and useful tool for artists and provides a valuable space to exhibit their work and an opportunity for varied feedback and evaluation of their art which they might not have achieved had it not been for the opportunities provided by Web 2.0.

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[30] "Crowdsourcing - the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and especially from the online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers" (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crowdsourcing)

[31] "Dissent is a quarterly magazine of politics and ideas. Establishing itself as one of America's leading intellectual journals in 1954, it has since published articles by Hannah Arendt, Norman Mailer, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Ellen Willis, Richard Wright, George Packer, and many others." (About Dissent Magazine)

A Brief Analysis of the Contemporary Critic and the Impact of Web 2.0

To address the question of the role of the contemporary art critic, it is important to explore notions of what now constitutes 'criticism' and the 'critic'. Gillespie sets out to challenge what it means to be a critic in this age of ubiquitous interactivity in his paper: *The Art of Criticism in the Age of Interactive Technology : Critics, Participatory Culture , and the Avant-Garde*. He discusses whether it has become possible in this interactive age for anyone with internet access to become a critic and then deals with the more enduring question of what constitutes good criticism. Gillespie takes, in my view, an overly sceptical position on the possibilities presented in the criticism of art by its 'consumers' (as he refers to them) as this position potentially excludes wide range, diverse and valuable views, opinions and contributions towards to development and promotion of animation as an art form, however his discussion provokes a fuller and therefore useful reconsideration of the terms 'critics' and 'criticism' in the "Web 2.0" world.

It is necessary for this paper to describe what constitutes a professional critic. Daniel Mendelsohn, who is a well-known literary critic and frequent contributor to the *New Yorker*, makes it clear that a critic's desired attributes are not about erudition but about taste and temperament: "Nor are those who have tremendous erudition but lack the taste or temperament that could give their judgment authority in the eyes of other people, people who are not experts. (This is why so many academic scholars are no good at reviewing for mainstream audiences.)" (par. 12). He elaborates further by proposing that, "In the end, the critic is someone who, when his knowledge, operated on by his taste in the presence of some new example of the genre he's interested in—a new TV series, a movie, an opera or ballet or book—hungers to make sense of that new thing, to analyze it, interpret it, make it mean something." (par. 12). In an essay published in the Columbia Journalism Review in 2009 http://www.cjr.org/essay/condition_critical.php?page=all. David Hadju a professor of arts and culture journalism at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, states that "The higher mission of critics in all realms of the arts, formal and informal, popular and not-so, is, of course, to subscribe neither to pro-forma positivity nor negativity, but to confront the work intelligently and honestly, and to stir readers to thought and to feeling" (par. 18).

It is worth analysing what we mean by a Web 2.0 world. While there are good reasons to dismiss the idea that Web 2.0 means anything distinctive, it has nonetheless developed into a commonly understood meaning. Tim O'Reilly, the founder of O'Reilly Media, a USA based publisher of computer user manuals, an online publisher and a conference producer and on whose company website, describes itself as a technology transfer company that changes the world by spreading the knowledge of innovators (About O'Reilly) O'Reilly claims the term Web 2.0 world first arose in "a brainstorming session" between him and Medialive International, a company that produces technology tradeshows and conferences. During 2004 O'Reilly intended to organize a conference about the web, and they were wondering what to call it. At the time there was considerable scepticism about the web due to the bursting of the internet investment bubble just a few years earlier. The initial choice of the terms "the web as a platform" was scrapped due to the fact it was considered to be too

constricting and so the term Web 2.0 was adopted. It may be useful to examine the technical attributes of what we mean by Web 2.0.

In a paper prepared by Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein of the Kelley School of Business in Indiana, USA and published in Business Horizons 2010 issue 1, vol 53 (p59-68) (Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media) they describe what is meant by a Web 2.0. They confirm that it was a term first used in 2004 to describe a new way in which software developers and end-users started to "utilize the World Wide Web; that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion" (61). The authors note that although Web 2.0 does not refer to any specific technical update of the World Wide Web, certain functions are necessary for it to exist. These include Adobe Flash[32], RSS[33], and AJAX[34]. This then allows for User Generated Content. (UGC). UGC itself has a definition Kaplan and Haenlein cite from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2007), a definition in which UGC needs to fulfil three basic requirements: 1) it needs to be published either on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site accessible to a selected group of people; 2) it needs to show a certain amount of creative effort; and 3) it needs to have been created outside of professional routines and practices. These same authors note that while UGC preceded Web 2.0, it is "the combination of technological drivers (e.g., increased broadband availability and hardware capacity), economic drivers (e.g., increased availability of tools for the creation of UGC), and social drivers (e.g., rise of a generation of ''digital natives'' and ''screenagers'': younger age groups with substantial technical knowledge and willingness to engage online) make UGC nowadays fundamentally different from what was observed in the early 1980s" (61). From this basic understanding, the authors then go on to give their definition of "Social Media" which "is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content." (61)

For Gillespie though, the "Web 2.0 world is one that, implicitly, celebrates the erasure of boundaries between producers and consumers. The critic was also a boundary, and in two senses: 1) that she (the critic) was, like the media companies, a gatekeeper: Only certain things get through, are celebrated, condemned, etc., and 2) because she was, like the producer, in a very privileged position" (Gillespie 58). Gillespie therefore holds the more pessimistic view that Web 2.0 consumer culture is of detriment to quality criticism. This, he argues, has resulted in the loss of the avant-garde. "…criticism is easily conflated with consumerism, forcing two consequences: the relegation of judgment to mere personal preference, and the potential loss of an avant-garde." (56)

[32] A method for adding animation, interactivity, and audio/video streams to web pages
[33] Really Simple Syndication, a family of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated content, such as blog entries or news headlines, in a standardized format
[34] Asynchronous Java Script, a technique to retrieve data from web servers asynchronously, allowing the update of web content without interfering with the display and behaviour of the whole page

Gillespie argues that prior to the advent of electronic and interactive media (Web 2.0), a position that still applies in traditional mass-media, critics were privileged by relatively large platform allowing them to criticize art for the public. Their opinions, he argues influenced the direction of an art form itself. Their authority derived in no small part due to the strength of the publications for which they wrote, but he maintains that their role went further: "throughout the 20th century, there were examples of critics helping to connect audiences with experimental, exciting, and generally avant-garde works, as well as helping to *create* audiences for those works—through the invention of grammars and concepts. An insightful critic can create an understanding and deeper appreciation for a work" (56). In short, Gillespie's argument asserts that while critics have helped us to understand works of art, they play a bigger role in the development of the *avant-garde* – they have helped connect audiences with new, experimental and challenging works as well thereby creating audiences for these types of art.

Gillespie describes critics of the past as "authors with a relatively large platform, writing mostly for mass-produced publications, and their role was, largely, to criticize art and artefacts for the public (or at least their readers)."(56) According to Gillespie, these are true critics, they have "the backing of their publication" (64) or are "hired by a newspaper and they bear that supporting endorsement; and they are recipients of (at least some of) the ethos of that publication." (64) On the other hand the credibility of online critics cannot always be verified. Gillespie suggests that: "online, the reviews are posted by anyone with an internet connection and are not endorsed or backed up by the website." (64) and this has profound implications for accountability or the lack thereof.

Gillespie first conclusion, namely, that Web 2.0 sees the relegation of judgment to mere personal preference, can be challenged. Hadju states that that the audience for intellectually engaging criticism - as opposed to reviews with a service function has long been on the wane. He ascribes this to the "expansion of consumerism in arts journalism has occurred in a climate of ingrained anti-intellectualism and laissez-faire economics" (par. 6). Gillespie does concede that the traditional critic operating from the perspective of traditional mass media or respected publications still operate. Their "endangered" status, I would argue is a function of the declining revenues and viability of the traditional print media industry rather than from their role as critics in the context of a Web 2.0 world[35].

My own view would then be that critics in the traditional sense as described above, are potential victims of the poor economic prospects which confront the majority of publications for which they write, but that they will continue to play a vital role within conventional parameters and that they will as a result continue to exert their significant influence on the medium. It is difficult to find an argument outside of the economic

[35] The traditional print media is in the process of undergoing a substantially difficult period due to the loss of traditional forms of advertising due to the influence of the internet. This has come into sharp focus recently, with the purchase by Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, of the storied US newspaper, the Washington Post and whether his strategy might save print journalism. The declining circulation and therefore advertising revenues of local South African newspaper titles is the subject of much discussion in media circles here.

constraints facing print media to suggest that journalists as a profession are no longer needed. Although the publications for which they have worked have lost advertising revenues to the online world, putting several publications and consequently their employees at risk, journalists are not an endangered community or a profession and they are learning ways to adapt to the changing landscape of their work. Likewise, the role of traditional critics are not necessarily undermined by Web 2.0 but rather by the same economic challenges faced by print journalists. Hadju for his part, comes to a similar conclusion, but employs a somewhat different context for his argument. He says that it is too easy to blame the internet, "since some of the damage seems to be self-inflicted" (par. 6). He quotes Alisa Solomon, director of the Arts and Culture Program at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism as saying, "I think that newspapers that are shrinking their arts pages are hoisted on their own petard….because so many of them have made criticism merely consumer reporting, they've made their arts pages obsolete." (qtd. in Hadju par. 7) Hadju elaborates his position by arguing that the difficult economic climate and the recession of recent years has had further consequences for journalists and art critics in particular. "Arts critics are now focused on not losing their jobs and recognising a dwindling market for art become overly uncritical using boosterism[36] as a form of arts advocacy, doing this in the hope of increasing the amount of money in circulation for the arts in an effort to prolong the existence and importance of their own profession" (Hajdu). Therefore, even if one takes a dim view of the Web 2.0 consumer culture, I believe that online criticism runs in conjunction with traditional criticism and not as a complete substitute for it and that traditional criticism will continue to exert its influence, even on the informal critical community.

My argument is based on the premise that traditional critics and the interactive Web 2.0 user comments operate in essentially different domains. The work of traditional critics, while taking into account the influence of online users, can continue to generate commentary regardless of what occurs on Web 2.0. Consequently, the traditional critic is not threatened by the emergence of Web 2.0, but that the internet in general has undermined the financial viability of the mass distribution media formats for which these critics have traditionally been employed. This then has the effect of opening up the field of criticism in relation to animation as art, which in turn will have an impact on the medium - either positive or negative, but by opening up the debate, the potential to generate more interest in animation bodes well for the development and sustainability of animation.

Furthermore, having an audience's opinionated response even if it is as basic as a "like" or "dislike" can be enriching and is certainly, I would argue, a better outcome than not having any audience or user response at all. Moreover it is just as well to bear in mind that the mass critique opportunities available as a result of Web 2.0 systems might actually be better than the opinions of just one or two critics. Indeed, as with the study performed by Adam Waytz whose work has already been introduced in this paper: he refers to work done by behavioural scientists from as early as the 1970s that examined how ostensible experts often make suboptimal

[36] "the keen promotion of a person, organization, or cause:" (Oxforddictionaries.com)

judgments and that aggregating the decisions of a group of people outperformed the predictions of individual experts. (par. 1)

Gillespie's other objection to the influence of Web 2.0 and what he describes as the "loss of the avant-garde", can also, in my view, be challenged. Gillespie is of the opinion that viewer participation and expressivist-type feedback such as those found in the comments section or the review processes through the rating systems designed for these certain websites is detrimental to the progression of "The New": He argues that "Another consequence is that the Web 2.0 mentality of participation and all opinions as equally valid transforms criticism to simply expressivist-type feedback of 'I like it/I don't like it' judgments—that is, as a matter of mere taste. This thereby reduces the possibility for The New to be nurtured and furthered." (72). Mendelsohn describes the orientation of the critic to his work. "The serious critic ultimately loves his subject more than he loves his reader." "To set interesting works before intelligent audiences does honor to the subject. If you only write about what you think people are interested in, you fail your subject—and fail your reader, too." (Mendelsohn par. 21) Here, Mendelsohn describes how and why a serious critic would not be swayed and influenced by the opinions of the audience, but I believe these examples can be used as a means to identify good criticism and not necessarily have to be confined to just serious critics. In other words, by examining an example of criticism such as that of a YouTube comment, one could deduce how effective a piece of criticism it was by assessing how much the commenter loves the subject, how they are invested in it, whether he/she treats the audience a 'intelligent, whether or not they use the traditional parameters of 'serious' criticism.

At the same time Mendelsohn proposes that "the role of the critic, I repeat, is to mediate intelligently and stylishly between a work and its audience; to educate and edify in an engaging and, preferably, entertaining way." (par. 23) So is it perhaps not good enough just to engage with the subject intelligently? One would have to engage in such a way that is also entertaining for the audience for it to be of an effective critic's level.

My own view is that such traditional criticism in relation to animation is not supplanted by Web 2.0; they are mutually exclusive. Additionally, there is nothing stopping such authors of avant-garde criticism from creating their own blogs and using the available Web 2.0 tools, which offer enormous publication outreach and distribution potential. Criticism of an avant-garde nature is not always accessible to a broad range of people and attracts a very niche audience .The Web 2.0 offers a platform for 'serious' criticism to people outside of this limited audience. The relegation of the comments section or the like\dislike functionality of the Web 2.0 scene to "mere personal preference" is therefore unnecessarily limiting and not always strictly accurate. This argument only has some relevance in cases where anonymity is possible, but even for sites where viewers participate in anonymous environments; the situation is far more complex. For instance, there are several instances where acclaimed and recognized critics publish their own blogs and credibility is not an issue. Examples of this self-publication are explored elsewhere in this paper, but I would argue that when a situation occurs where an author's credibility is not available, a very interesting dynamic occurs whereby 'true' critics

and those that are not, are able to have conversations[37] and speak comfortably to one another within the same digital space and the possibility to advance the quality of the criticism as a result of this interaction, comes into play.

Therefore in the same way that amateur participants are influenced by the opinions of others, the traditional critic is no longer immune from social influence as he writes. Another important element to consider in relation to this argument is the time frame for which, in the past, "reviewers had first access to film, TV, and music, now they must inevitably write their reviews after being exposed to the opinions of the masses who have already consumed, or at least previewed, the object of the review." (Waytz par. 9) So, previously, critics initiated the social influence bias process, now, "this process precedes them". "Thus, whereas critics used to guide tastes, they often now function as mirrors of public opinion." (par. 9) It therefore becomes possible that critics could adjust their opinions to garner a greater audience. The elimination of critics' exclusivity and priority also means that critics no longer determine the initial rating, which as we have seen, is so decisive. The challenge this places before cultural critics is to revive their legitimacy by "reviving objectivity, and giving people an informed opinion rooted in legitimate and honest contemplation". (par. 10)

This then begs the question about the kind of role of the 'true' critic and serious criticism ought to play given the fact that their traditional outlets, the mass media, particularly in print, is either under threat or no longer exists. My own position is an optimistic one. Web 2.0 has the potential to deepen the discussion about art in general and animation in particular and increase the public access to the arts. Indeed, Web 2.0 can become a tool for placing art closer to the centre of modern social, cultural environments. There are a variety of ways that this can occur. For critics, professional and amateur alike, the opportunity currently exists to interact directly with their audience via interactive tools including custom websites, blogs and more notably Twitter. In the area of animation there are a multitude of critical conversations but due to the proliferation of Twitter, millions of people have the opportunity to listen in on these conversations through the exchange of short 140 character[38] interactions. Twitter plays another important role, namely the ability to widely distribute written work. Twitter users can post or retweet[39] links to reviews or comments on a video. In this way, well-written or insightful reviews can become viral – potentially circulating amongst an audience of millions. Consequently, better-written criticism can reach a wider audience and raise the bar or standard of critical contribution. The wider the circulation, the more accurate an indicator of public opinion.

The concern that a critic's post will get lost amongst the mass of other comments or posts on the same topic is negated if the critic structures his/her comment very carefully and cleverly as his/her comment might remain at the top of the stream. This is where Mendelsohn's position on the function of the critic rings so true. The most successful and entertaining comments are likely to garner the most likes, and sub-responses, resulting in

[37] Conversations – dialogues with one another either through successive blog posts, comments, and media responses.
[38] "At the heart of Twitter are small bursts of information called tweets. Each Tweet is 140 characters long" https://twitter.com/about
[39] To retweet is to repost post another person's tweet. Often retweets start with the letters "RT" to indicate that they are retweets. (FAQs About Retweets)

them remaining at the top of the comments section. This also supports the view that the comment or opinion becomes more successful by honouring the subject, treating the audience as intelligent and by educating and engaging the audience in an entertaining way.

This optimistic perspective allows for critics to go back to the fundamentals of their craft and hone their tools to engage in a meaningful way with this diverse audience provided by social media. Mendelsohn recalls analysing the various critics he used to read when he was younger: "By dramatizing their own thinking on the page, by revealing the basis of their judgments and letting you glimpse the mechanisms by which they exercised their (individual, personal, quirky) taste, all these critics were, necessarily, implying that you could arrive at your own, quite different judgments—that a given work could operate on your own sensibility in a different way." (par. 11)"For all criticism is based on that equation: KNOWLEDGE + TASTE = MEANINGFUL JUDGMENT. The key word here is meaningful. People who have strong reactions to a work—and most of us do—but don't possess the wider erudition that can give an opinion heft, are not critics. (This is why a great deal of online reviewing by readers isn't criticism proper.)" (par. 12). The video site is a space that offers the same environment for the equation and with it the possibly of even more varied and meaningful judgments that become possible as a result of the broader spanning audience base. In the same way that traditional critics would impose their own individual sensibilities, each member of an online audience may seek to differentiate themselves from the next person, resulting in a rich amalgamation of interpretation. Mendelsohn in his own erudite way states,

> "Two phenomena related to the advent of the Internet have transformed our thinking about reviewing and criticism in particular. First, there has been the explosion of criticism and reviews by ordinary readers, in forums ranging from the simple rating (by means of stars, or whatever) of books on sites such as Amazon.com to serious longform review-essays by deeply committed lit bloggers. For the first time, ordinary readers (or ballet fans or architecture aficionados) have been able to express their opinions about books (or ballet, or architecture) publicly. This development inevitably raises questions about the role of the traditional critic." (par. 15).

The essential interactive nature of social media will inevitably change the way in which serious criticism occurs. This is not necessarily detrimental. Critics can now be called to account to justify their opinions and actions as much as artists and institutions must be held responsible for theirs. In this way we are not so much rejecting the ability and indeed the role of the critic to be deeply critical or even negative and dismissive, we are merely altering the frame so that the critic's opinion is not perceived to descend from some imagined realm of Platonic objectivity "on high" and therefore out of reach of all but a limited number of like-minded people, but rather from a subjective experience predicated on real human biases. This subjective experience is, necessarily, deeply embedded in the artistic ecosystem and should be treated as such. Horowitz reminds us: "Let's not forget that the word *critic* comes from the Greek word for "judge". It would be foolhardy to abandon the traditional model of criticism in sole favor of the embedded model or to neuter the critic, stripping him/her of the ability to pass judgment." (Horowitz par. 35). As menial or trivial as a rating or critique

may appear to be, one cannot dismiss it as not being criticism. The likes\dislikes function is an example that fits into this category. Consequently I hold the opinion that criticism can be something more than just a review of a certain text[40] and includes all of the aforementioned characteristics that take it beyond mere critique and judgment yet maintain that this need not be a qualifying factor.

The conclusion one can draw is that new ways of evaluating work (like/star ratings) can enrich the process. The tools provided by Web 2.0 and the emergence of social media, I have argued has allowed animation to become more widely recognized as a serious medium that is now getting a critical reception. While it is true that everyone can now be a critic (albeit with mixed results), social media tools provide an opportunity for serious criticism of both traditional and emerging to find a wider audience. Animation as a serious art form is in many ways a child of Web 2.0.

40 "text" is being used in the broader sense of the word and incorporates all things that allow for criticism and include music, film, video and all forms of literature.

A Critique of the Critic as Gatekeeper in the Context of Animation as a Serious Art Form

The particular position of animation as a serious art form provides perhaps the most serious counter-argument to Gillespie's view of the traditional critic and indeed his lament at their declining influence in the Web 2.0 world. While Gillespie speaks of the loss of the avant-garde traditional critics, I would argue, that this group of critics have been guilty in adding to the struggle animators have encountered in their quest to get their work accepted as serious art form. The traditional critics, I argue, have acted as gatekeepers preventing the emergence of the "new" – in this case animation as an art form or to use Gillespie's own words, prevented "The New to be nurtured and furthered." (Gillespie 72)

While animation is a relatively new art form when compared to the expansive history of film and its associated discourses, animation scholars and advocates have long been trying to argue animation's place as a distinct and valuable art form. It has been relegated to the margins in most arts however, and more specifically, film discourses. It is my view that animation has struggled with its status for reasons that include the lack of critical reception or acclaim, which is due in part to its failure to achieve the status of more traditional or highbrow art forms. Gillespie's concerns about the loss of the avant-garde might have its merits and the avant-garde deserves its place within a broader context of animation critique, but the medium of animation, which is not seen to have an avant-garde status, should not be entirely regulated and assessed by criteria determined by the avant-garde. Indeed, the traditional critic's view on animation may have prevented the emergence of a more complex and potentially dynamic body of serious criticism that could have had implications for animation as an art form.

Animation scholars argue that animation predates the photograph and many other forms of art. Some would argue that animation originates as far back as the early cave paintings which were narratives resembling what the modern mind would understand as animated sequences. There are a number of commonly held misconceptions and misunderstandings about animation have done much to diminish its identity as a true art form. These include the notions that animations are: 1) cartoons for children, 2) less expressive than film, 3) form part of a genre and not a stand-alone medium.

These misconceptions ought to be briefly addressed. With regards the prejudicial view that animation is only a genre suitable for children, television channels such as Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network in the Western world are aimed exclusively at children and this reinforces this view. In the cinema world as well, Pixar together with other studios produce animated films that are aimed primarily at children, with some additional appeal so that they can be tolerated by adults. On the independent circuit however, films such as the highly acclaimed and multi award winning *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) have done much to debunk this notion. *Waltz with Bashir* deals with the accounts and memories of Israeli war veterans and is a fine example of a film that actually functions better as an animation than it would have done as a film as animation is better suited to recreating the dream-like quality represented in the reflections of the veterans whose memories may be hazy

as a result of the trauma they experienced. At the same time, countless other independent short animations are now available on the web, using Web 2.0 tools which are aimed at adults and which fully harness the range of animation techniques available to produce animations that address and highlight serious commentary on complex social and political themes.

The tempestuous history of Disney's animated *Fantasia* (1940) is a good example that supports my assertion regarding the value of a dynamic and diverse criticism in relation to animation. Fantasia illustrates my argument well because it predates the invention of the World Wide Web. It has also amassed a significant critical response from the time of its first release and continues right up to the present day. As such, it is easier to compare the clear discernible differences between its early critical receptions, to more recent considerations that are now primarily derived from online sources. The result of these changes to critical engagement is that *Fantasia* now enjoys a different regard from its current audience to what it had upon its original release.

While the whole of the film in its entirety is not available on any video website due to copyright restrictions, *Fantasia* is made available in sections, which are divided according to the various orchestral pieces. *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* for example, is available as a video on YouTube[41] and functions well as a self-contained piece.

As a result of being released during the Second World War, this film was not available to European audiences upon its release. Disney's inclusion of grandiose composers such as Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky (1882-1971) and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) as the inspiration for and indeed the driver of his animations was believed to have alienated his audience that was used and primed for the more cartoon-like and light-hearted sentimentality of his previous films. "For Mr. Disney, who has heretofore kept himself and his works on a fairly plebian plane, was blithely invading the precincts of an aristocratic art" (Crowther 1940). At the same time many music aficionados criticized the film for its repertoire selection.

Bosley Crowther, a significant writer for the New York Times working at the time of *Fantasia's* release, wrote an article called *Yes but is it Art? A Long Haired Discussion is Provoked by Disney's Novel Fantasia.* This was written subsequent to his review of the film a few days earlier. It serves as an artefact for examining the critical responses to the film around the time of its release. The Crowther piece also falls neatly within the "criticism" category framework described by Ryan Gillespie. Crowther builds the framework of article by discussing the broader implications of *Fantasia's* impact at the time and "placing it in a larger historical context or indicating its relationship to society" (Gillespie 62). The article is helpful because instead of focusing on the film's merits or faults, of which Crowther had already done in his review, he challenges the audience to revaluate the various mixed reactions to the film presented by the critics and media and this way motivates us

[41] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHTnJNGvQcA

to take a look at the film differently. “Criticism is less about alerting consumers or even audiences to a product’s quality or shortcomings, but rather helping audiences see the object in a new way.” (62).

Fantasia, which was Walt Disney’s third animated feature, was a film of many technical breakthroughs. For Disney, cinema sound needed to develop further if he wanted to reach his true vision with *Fantasia.* Accordingly, Disney pioneered a stereo sound system to be used in theaters called Fantasound, and as a result, *Fantasia* was the first motion picture to be screened with stereo sound. (Crowther 1940) Fantasound would give the illusion that the orchestra was playing in the theatre as a product of 8 audio tracks and multiple speakers. Many of these established processes are still used in cinemas today.

It was radical at the time to match original visuals to the music of master composers, which Crowther describes as “a perilous thing to do!” (1940). For many film critics *Fantasia* was a revolution. Many praised it as a “notable advance in the artistic uses of the screen” (1940). For numerous music aficionados however, it was a disgrace, as in their opinion the matching of the music to animation robbed the music of its integrity by distracting its viewers. Crowther attributes the aforementioned problems to Fantasound.

> “Apparently the idea is to control and place the music in such a way as to maintain its impression on the senses even during the most visually dramatic moments. And that is a problem, indeed; for too potent or exciting imagery tends to sublimate the music which it is supposed to accompany. At that point, presumably, artistic marriage becomes incompatible; the visual content asserts itself.” (1940)

The fourth piece in *Fantasia: The Rite of Spring*, composed by Stravinsky, was visualized by Disney as the birth of the Earth and life’s beginnings. This section of animation includes tumultuous volcanoes and rampaging dinosaurs. Disney tried to match Stravinsky’s work to this primordial violence by heightening the music’s dynamics. The problem with this and with many of the other reinterpretations of the classical works is that they did not impress many music critics. Disney’s imagining for example is quite different to Stravinsky’s original intention for the depiction of *The Rite of Spring* as a ballet, describing the Pagan celebration of spring.

> “Now, a person who is highly cultivated in the appreciation of good music is likely to be much more exacting of “Fantasia” than one less refined in his tastes. The same thing goes for the more rigid in his demands. Thus, when Mr. Disney envisions Stravinsky’s vigorous “Rite of Spring”, for instance, as a massive, dramatic pageant of this world’s creation - a vivid picture of volcanic turmoil, geologic construction, amoebic growth, the development of prehistoric animals, their battles to survive and their eventual doom – a person familiar with music may take exception to the imagery. A fellow who doesn’t know it - or doesn’t care – may discover the concept a thoroughly satisfying one.” (1940)

Crowther describes Disney’s darker segments such as in the *The Rite of Spring* explained previously and *The Night on Bald Mountain* by Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky (1839-1881) as Disney’s least successful segments in *Fantasia.* Of further interest, is that at the time of its release, many parents refused to pay the full ticket price claiming that these scenes frightened their children.

> "Mickey Mouse passing extravagant miracles and getting himself in a typical fix in Ducas's 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice,' and the superb caricature of ballet devised for Ponchielli's 'Dance of the Hours' are more in the cartoonist's line than the heavy, fearsome tossing about of rocks and wild cavalcading of fiends which illustrates Mussorgsky's 'Night on Bald Mountain.' Mr. Disney, we've generally observed, has been least attractive when dealing with the forbidding aspects of a theme." (1940)

Interestingly, the less than favourable responses to these segments at the time of *Fantasia's* release, contrasts dramatically to the present day responses and critical reception.

Intriguingly, audience reactions to the frightening elements of the film remain intact to this day. Comments extracted from *The Rite of Spring* YouTube clip illustrate this:

Sarah Nicholes4 weeks ago
The music alone is frightening, and when they added the T-Rex biting the head off of the stegosaurus....O.O

KumoriShichiyou7 months ago
Me: Hmm, I wonder if that T-rex is still as terrifying to me now as it was to me as a small child. *watches video* Me: Yep.

Elegant Cat1 month ago
that effing t-rex haunted my dreams when I was a kid. And hell if I loved that
(The Rite of Spring (Stravinsky) - Fantasia)

But for most contemporary viewers, the terrifying nature of some of these scenes is not regarded as a negative feature. Most viewers regard these scenes as being the most memorable of the film. Many contemporary viewers see it as Disney transcending his cartoon sentimentality and taking animation to a new and exciting phase.

Technology has dramatically changed the way we view this film today, however my focus will be on the web versions of this film and more specifically on the video website versions available. Some of these technologies have driven developments such the emergence of self-proclaimed critics as a result of the 'everyone is a critic' phenomenon, the loss of the press-type critic as well as provided other elements which have impacted and indeed transformed the way in which the film is now viewed and received and ultimately critiqued.

With regards to sound, technology has advanced far for us enough to hear stereo audio through most devices – certainly the majority of the ones accessible through the web. Although it is impossible to recreate the exact sound of one would have heard in the original Fantasound cinema, the online versions of the film have stereo audio tracks. The modern audience is also far more likely to be accepting of the classical composer masterworks to animation amalgamation of *Fantasia* than the music critics of 1940 as this marriage has been made effective countless other times in film, animation and theatre since then. This can be illustrated by a

remark by Zachery Snowden, a YouTube user, about the *Rite of Spring* segment, which shows how affecting the music can be.

Zachary Snowden1 month ago

There is something so deeply unsettling about this music but I think that's why I like it so much. (The Rite of Spring (Stravinsky) - Fantasia)

The audience at the time of the film's release was also limited and as mentioned before, this was as a result of the film being released during the Second World War. The contemporary situation however, with the far-reaching possibilities provided by the World Wide Web, means that *Fantasia* now has a global audience. This is significant because now that criticism is no longer the domain of the press professional, it has also been expanded to include wider audiences than originally intended. At the same time, this audience spans a greater accumulative knowledge. Contributors in other fields may also bring valuable arguments to the table that may not be specifically related only to animation or film. Aspirant palaeontologists might argue about the portrayal of particular dinosaurs at certain time periods in the *Rite of Spring* dinosaur scene for example.[42]

The biggest change in the criticism of *Fantasia* however, is not actually the result of the criticism itself, but rather the manner in which it is critiqued which as discussed previously which is largely as a result of the advancement of technologies which makes an expanded audience online possible. While there has been a critical re-evaluation of *Fantasia*, it is not to say that the positive acclaim that the film now enjoys is without a more balanced evaluation of the film. Indeed, some criticism written at the time of *Fantasia's* release still echoes in the comments sections of the online platforms; it is just presented differently: "Netdeco's" YouTube comment echoes the music critics of 1940:

netedco2 months ago

I agree with Stravinsky when he said that he was disappointed with this. It neither matches the music nor its meaning.

However this time around we get to follow a conversation not possible with the critics of 1940:

---

42 **Marcus Kennett**3 months ago

Just so people know, it's not a T.Rex, it's an Allosaurus, T.Rex does not appear in the fossil reord until the Late Cretaceous, the Stegosaurus is a Late Jurassic, creature. More obviously the Allosaursus had three 'fingers', the Tyrannosaurs all had only two.

Jacob Wheeler2 months agoin reply to Marcus Kennett

Not necessarily. Although an Allosaurus would have made more sense with the fauna in the sequence, it really was intended to be a Tyrannosaurus. I'm not sure if Disney knew about the 80-million-year separation between them, but it was common belief back then that T. rex had three fingers. (Complete skeletons hadn't been found yet, so assumptions were made based off of other species which, indeed, had three fingers.) Even after the arms were found, he said people wouldn't want a two-clawed rex.

(The Rite of Spring (Stravinsky) - Fantasia)

Inti Qilla2 months ago in reply to netedco

Well..... I still like it, in my opinion, they made a really good job....plus, Fantasia is a masterpiece

(The Rite of Spring (Stravinsky) - Fantasia)

The huge developments described in this paper in relation to Web 2.0 have transformed the way *Fantasia* is critiqued in the present day. *Fantasia* serves as an example to illustrate this effect. These developments have sparked changes both in the outcome of the criticism and in the manner in which it occurs. Thus, it would be fair to say that animation, as a stand-alone medium and not a mere genre, ought to have the same diversity and expansiveness as film, including within it, the highbrow. Moreover, it needs have broad following and well-developed discourse in order exist as an entirely different medium from film rather than as a minor and subsidiary form to film and film studies. It is my contention that all these elements have long existed, but animation has had to exert its position through a wider critical acknowledgement as a result of the medium enjoying increasing worldwide popularity.

Conclusion.

With regards the future of animation criticism within the interactive world of the modern internet age, I conclude by restating my support for Gillespie's position that this space opens up a platform for a new and diverse breed of critics with the potential to enhance and promote quality animation and to garner a thriving audience committed to the advancement of animation. While he also asserts that "the loss of the popular-press type critic with influence would be a real loss to art and entertainment, especially in the interactive media landscape in which new and exciting things are happening in all areas and avenues." (Gillespie 72) this has to my mind limited merit, because although these traditionally orientated critics do on the whole adhere to a high standard of critical engagement, it does not follow that there can be no alternative forum to creating criticism that offers valuable feedback and insight, imperative to the development of animation as an art. I have argued that by opening up the space for the common man, whether they are an animation enthusiast, a professional animator; technical or creative, or both, or even an occasional and unsophisticated viewer, the animation community has the potential to be invigorated by a broad range of critical responses to animated works.

"Animators are artists as well as entertainers. They continually explore ways to use the medium to give us a new window into the world of our existence. Animation can be used to inspire, educate, inform and entertain whilst showing us the world in a way that we didn't perceive it before." (Larson, 32)

Animation is a rapidly growing art medium due to its vibrancy, immediacy and accessibility to an ever-expanding audience. As a result, animation could be described as the democratization of art. Consequently, the scope for criticism is limitless. It is my belief that this research into web animation video and the factors that impact the critical reception of animation is necessary to make sense of this dynamic art form, therefore relevant to all involved with the production of animation, as well as the formal and informal responses it evokes

Despite Gillespie's jaundiced view on the value of 'every man is a critic', he does acknowledge the potential of the internet to grow and support animation. It is my view that it is impossible to ignore the power and influence of the online community and that by embracing it as a worthy voice, animation has the potential to develop thereby ensuring its place as an important and relevant art form. Due to its reach, the internet community has the potential to offer new and far reaching criticism with diverse views from all sections of society. This engagement allows for important feedback that can but only be of service to animation. By expanding the barriers to entry of critics who have previously been excluded, traditional critics now have the opportunity to engage with a larger audience which has benefits both for the recognized critic and the new diverse breed of critics. Adam Waytz summarises some of these benefits effectively: "Cultural critics now have an opportunity to provide a real service by reviving objectivity, and giving people an informed opinion rooted in legitimate and honest contemplation." (par. 10)

Many factors such as accessibility to tools, and increased connectivity around the world as a result of Web 2.0, has left a huge space open for critics of all kinds in rapidly increasing numbers. This need to fill this space cannot be met through established and recognized critics alone. Self-proclaimed critics and even opinionated users of the Web 2.0 consumer base now play imperative roles in filling that space and accordingly play a vital function.

Walt Disney was quoted in 1955 as saying: “We are not trying to entertain the critics. I'll take my chances with the public.”(Walt Disney Quotes) Disney so eloquently and succinctly expressed the central theme of this paper and since he is so often regarded as the father of animation, his voice still rings true today. He was able to recognize the value of the feedback from his audience whilst making animations that had critical acclaim within traditional criticism forums.

APPENDIX
COMMENTS

The following section includes selected comments extracted from the comments section beneath animated videos. They have been copied as is without alteration except added is the date of each post enclosed within parentheses. Comments are also accompanied with short descriptions substantiating their values. The videos the comments refer to are each identified to by their names and complete information about a certain video can be accessed in the *Works Cited* section of this paper.

1.

These comments highlight the varied responses to animation that are easily accessible to a broad audience who may not necessarily have sophisticated backgrounds in relation to animation.

a.

Although 'pacing' can be a very technical animation term, its context here refers to the manner in which the narrative unfolds over time. These comments could easily have been written by a viewer not necessarily educated in filmic discourse, however the quality of the criticism serves to provide remarkable insight into the film. These comments refer to the film's narrative and " loose narrative structure" and "well paced" refer to devices from film and literature canon used to retain the viewer's interest. (https://vimeo.com/67051688)

Hae-Joon Lee Plus 4 months ago (28 May 2013)
What a beautiful film.
Love how the loose narrative structure of this film really allows it to breathe and flow.
Though I've said this to you before, congratulations, Sean!

Tony Johnson 4 months ago (28 May 2013)
That's a ton of hand colouring...
Great work Sean and incredibly well paced. Congrats!

b.

This is an example of a more generalised comment. It praises the film *Another* on its design. The design of the film could be referring to a number of things, but the general audience is able to interpret this comment in multiple ways. For example, when I watched the film again after having considered the comment relating to the design, I became more attuned to the character designs, of which the bear stood out. I noticed for instance how the geometric box-like snout contrasted against the roundness of the bear's mass in a pleasing way.

"Timing" is another animation specific term. However, it is used here in such a way as to make it available and understood by a general audience. The respondent goes further by joining it with the word, "music" and in so doing, makes a connection to another art form. An astute observer is provided the opportunity to discover what is meant by animation 'timing' by gaining insight into these technical qualities through music, and to become aware of the relationship between link movement and time. This then allows for possibility of learning something specific to the animation procedure in the process. (https://vimeo.com/67051688)

Eleni Dinaki Plus 4 months ago (June 15 2013)
Brilliant design!!! The animation and movement well timed to the music !!! :-)

c.

Sarahiously's comment is interesting because it does not relate to animation or film technique at all. It is purely an emotionally driven response. She proclaims to be a psychology enthusiast and this is crucial because it reveals that a viewer need not be exclusively animation or film inclined in order to bring relevant analysis to the table. For those of us not well versed in psychological thinking, comments like these invite an exploration into a new domain in which can only enrich the scope of the criticism. On the other hand words and phrases like "haunting" and "beautiful animation style" are accessible enough for most viewers to relate to and potentially to engage with, even those without any psychological study background. (https://vimeo.com/67051688)

Sarahiously 3 months ago (3 July 2013)
At first this really depressed me in a way. I am interested in your depiction of the whole story. as a psychology enthusiast I read a whole lot into it, but perhaps I am completely left of field.
Anyway the animation style is beautiful.. and the tempo of the piece very haunting.

d.

Viewers needn't be well versed in animation theory or have an extensive knowledge in the field in order to provide engaging comments. For example, Nikhita Prabhudesai's comment about the short film, *For the Remaider,* could have been provided by anyone with interest in the work. However, her remark about the film's sound is insightful because it draws attention to an aspect of the work that is not visual or animation related yet plays a crucial role in its impression. While watching the film again after reading this comment, I realized how accurate Prabhudesai's analysis of impact of the minimalistic use of the sound was. The piece does not make use of any recognized form of music, but rather uses enhanced, ambient sounds to drive emotion, which is an effective strategy. For me, the rain resembled the onset of death, and towards the end the rain builds up into a crescendo where the sound of

thunder marks the last audible heartbeat. This is my interpretation of the meaning of the choice of sound, but just as Kikhita's comment opens the possibility for new interpretation, there are many other ways in which a viewer can be affected by an animation and consequently there are numerous means for a viewer to form valuable criticism without having to refer to anything animation related.



Nikhita Prabhudesai 1 year ago (16 February 2012)

It's absolutely beautiful. I'm gonna point out all the things that are so beautiful in this film.
The use of sound - it's so minimalistic, the constant patter of the rain sets the mood for the film. It took me a while to figure out it was a cat I was looking at, but the animation - its motions, gestures are so amazing. Really. And the compositions are brilliant as well. What is it made on? It's 3D right?

2.

The following comments are concerned with animation as part of a broader artistic community and the opinions refer to other art forms and fields of study.

a.

Other comments challenge what can be passed off as filmic, media and story stereotypes for the effect of humor and what ventures dangerously into chauvinistic territory. *Spartalis'* comment acknowledges this possibility which recognising the artistic merits and as a result ultimately defends the film. "pop culture has completely bastardised the concept of women, particularly in films and video games, I think you miiiiight be venting a bit unfairly on this film". His comment refers to an extensive history of character stereotyping of the female sex within various media and literature forms in the past. Such comments are powerful because they encourage one to look at histories outside what is displayed in the work itself, enriching its impression. (https://vimeo.com/58179094)



spartalis 8 months ago (January 26 2013)

While I overwhelmingly agree that pop culture has completely bastardised the concept of women, particularly in films and video games, I think you miiiiight be venting a bit unfairly on this film. These are not particularly honourable dudes depicted here; they're not particularly deep and their whole story is that they want to get chicks and accidentally become awesome. This is a story of conquest, and a large proportion of males - as unfortunate as it is at times - view being with a beautiful woman as an achievement and something they aspire to do. The way women are depicted in this short isn't any worse than the way the men are. There is definitely a time and a place to the in-depth discussion of

sexism in creative media, but I don't see this film as being at fault. Its more of a deconstruction of the concept of men, heroism and the hero's journey rather than a film about sexy ladies being objects. You are, of course, entirely entitled to your opinion, Im just adding counterpoint :)

b.

Andrew Le's comment is interesting because it we can assume that he has a knowledge of and is relatively informed about animation This is because he recognizes Masaaki Yuasa influences in the short. Masaaki Yuasa is as a Japanese animation director working within the anime tradition whose animation has an incredibly distinct style. His characteristic elongated perspectives and loose style is quite obviously mimicked in *The Reward.* Only after watching one of Yuasa's films (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzQTttuWSQA) I was alerted to the possibility that much of Yuasa's style has been borrowed in *The Reward* (as well as many other animations where I had also not noticed this influence). As an animation student and practitioner, it is gratifying to be introduced to new learnings about a process I consider myself to be proficient in and this was made possible through the criticism within the commentary section.

Andrew Le 8 months ago (27 January 2013)

This is a beautiful short with a resonating Masaaki Yuasa influence.

#

c.

Corax's Incarna's comment about the short film *ARK* focuses on the film's narrative. There is a common misconception that comments on websites are either wholly on one side or the other, either positive or negative, in other words praising the work completely or dismissing it entirely. This comment suggests that there is scope for elements of both. The viewer provides constructive criticism that provides insight into both the negative and positive elements of the storytelling. This is particularly apparent during the introduction. Corax's focus on the narrative is further illuminating as it demonstrates that one does not need to be engaged or even interested in animation or film specific endeavors in order to provide valuable criticism.

Corax Incarna 3 years ago (10 March 2010)

This is fantastic, undoubtedly.

However I'd also like to echo that the introduction seemed to set up the film for something that it really wasn't. It felt like the story was changed a quarter of the way through the animation process, or something.

The quote works wonderfully, but the other text in the beginning doesn't fit. With that sort of narration it feels like another outside observer is stating it as fact, which doesn't fit with the true nature of the plot. I believe there could have been a more appropriate way of introducing the film.

That being said, I really liked it and it's of fantastic quality.

Will Damien holds a similar opinion to Corax Incarna. His frustrated response relates to the disparity between the quality of the visuals and the (what he considers) substandard story. His main issue of contention is with the writing, which he describes as “lazy”. Both Will and Corax’s comments are useful analyses despite being as opinionated as they are. This is because they are supported by good reasoning. Both critiques deal with text and are story related. In a sense then, a literature scholar or expert could have just as easily written them emphasising my point that good criticism in this form and on this space (the comments section of video websites) need not be derived from people within the animation field only.

will damien 3 years ago (11 March 2010)
I'm sorry, the beginning is amazing, so unbelievably good, but the writing is lazy. The end twist is so lazy it might as well be "It was all a dream." The epic beginning was a set up for a different film. Loved the animation and music. Write a better story.

d.

Howl
Vincent Jaramillo 2 years ago (19 August 2011)
I felt like I was watching a Hayao Miyazaki film, on all levels from writing, animation, emotions etc. This was awesome. Started out cute and humorous for me, then edged toward uneasy, some horror and then finally understanding and acceptance. At least that's what I got out of it. I had to watch it twice. Well done :D

e.

Howl
arthur.lucena 2 years ago (28 August 2011)
Smooth animation with sharp edges and a nice script. Photography is also great.

f.

I, pet goat II
Sam Caudill 1 year ago (26 June 2012)
This is one of the best executions of surrealist cinema I have ever seen! The animation and style are flawless and this piece is riddled with iconic symbols. I'm on my 3rd watch-through and I keep finding new details that make this piece stand out. BRAVO!

It is apparent by this contribution about *I, pet goat II* that Sam Caudill applauds this short and makes references to important artistic movements which has the potential to alert viewers to another

perspective and well as recognising the status of animation as an art form within a broader artistic language. (http://vimeo.com/44583147)

3.

These responses demonstrate the comment section's ability to successfully facilitate the flow of conversation between potential critics that allows for the possibility of eliciting engaging arguments and critical discussions.

a.

This extract from a the comments under the animated short *The Reward* is an excellent example that illustrates how effectively the comments sections attached to these video based websites are at facilitating the flow of conversation between viewers and potential critics. The conversation in question revolves around the potential discriminatory portrayal of the female sex. The issue requiring attention is not the final outcome of the argument but rather the point that the animation has sparked a fruitful debate made possible by the comments section. Often multiple perceptions and insights that are made in order to reach each point and substantiate the arguments involved are actually more interesting than the points themselves.

David Jacaré 8 months ago (26 January 2013)

This is truly amazing. I just wished it weren't so sexist. It kind of ruins it for me.



John Doe 8 months ago (26 January 2013)

Are you saying women *aren't* attracted to extremely accomplished and successful men?



David Jacaré 8 months ago (26 January 2013)

I don't honestly know how could a person with a brain ever get to that conclusion. Maybe I shouldn't be assuming you have one to start with.

What "women" are or aren't attracted to isn't something that I can point out for you for a lot of reasons but mainly because women have unique personalities, tastes and life experiences, so trying to generalize would be a little stupid.

When I said the story was sexist it was because I think that using women in stories only as accessories whose role seems to only be of conquests/sexual objects for the male characters, or villains who seduce and destroy, is incredibly narrow minded and a very prejudiced view of half of the population in the world.
It's a common trope for women and not a very smart one.
This is also particularly sad to recognize in such an amazing story centered around teaching the power of friendship, adventure, cooperation and overcoming adversity.
#



spartalis 8 months ago (26 January 2013)
While I overwhelmingly agree that pop culture has completely bastardised the concept of women, particularly in films and video games, I think you miiiiight be venting a bit unfairly on this film. These are not particularly honourable dudes depicted here; they're not particularly deep and their whole story is that they want to get chicks and accidentally become awesome. This is a story of conquest, and a large proportion of males - as unfortunate as it is at times - view being with a beautiful woman as an achievement and something they aspire to do. The way women are depicted in this short isn't any worse than the way the men are. There is definitely a time and a place to the in-depth discussion of sexism in creative media, but I don't see this film as being at fault. Its more of a deconstruction of the concept of men, heroism and the hero's journey rather than a film about sexy ladies being objects. You are, of course, entirely entitled to your opinion, Im just adding counterpoint :)



Philip Edward Alexy Plus 8 months ago (27 January 2013)
i have to agree with David on this one. If one of the duo would have been female, it wouldn't have changed the story at all (and having a plutonic yet deep relationship between the two heros would also have been refreshing) and would have raised this short to "EPIC" levels.



Kay 8 months ago (28 January 2013)
I agree with David completely. Every single female anything in this video is either there to be lusted after, killed, or rescued. If they exhibit any sort of power or control - they're killed. The fact that nobody seems to even *notice* this is really, really sad. If someone calls out something as sexist, don't immediately deny it and shout them down without even thinking. Have a think about it. Maybe David's right. Have a look at these female characters again. These students are the future of our media and awareness is important.
Women are not objects to be aspired to, or prizes for the completion of the quest. Women are people.



Stanislaw Menschow 8 months ago (28 January 2013)

I almost couldn't believe that spartalis is the only one, who understands the concept of this shortfilm. Really guys, this is just a great adventure about becoming a hero and growing during the process. And thats pretty much the biggest stereotype ever, so please David ... just enjoy this great piece and dont insult everyone just because they might not have your opinion.



Jessica Tischer 8 months ago (29 January 2013)

I think some of you guys are overinterpreting stuff. Just because the creators of this movie depicted many of the ladies in the sultry kind of way, doesn't mean they think of women as simple objects of lust. This is a classic fantasy setting, and yes, there will always be women who are objects of lust, be they simple farm girls, or professional wenches. And even then, that doesn't mean they are not strong or can't defent themselves, be it in this fictional setting, or in reality.

Also, saying that because a woman adventurer is killed, doesn't make it sexist. In fact, it would have been sexist if the guy had not taken her seriously.

Remember guys, feminism is not about treating women with preference. It's about treating everyone equally, be they male, or female.

Oh, and the scene with the two ladies giving high five at the end? I think those ladies are pretty smart. It actually made me grin.



Jessica Tischer 8 months ago (29 January 2013)

Oh, and one more thing. Everyone is different. Every woman can think, and everyone is free to make their own decisions. Do not generalise. If anyone is forced into a role, that is of course not right. But if a woman decides that they want to be a topless dancer (yes, they some woman do decide that), let them. It is their freedom. If a man decides he wants to earn money by arranging flowers, let him.

I see a bigger problem in people overanalysing situations which involve men and women, and wanting to "protect" women from sexism, than in sexism itself. What you can do is teach girls to stand up for themselves. By standing in front of them, you do not really make it better. Of course you can protect them, but do not take the reins out of their hands if it is not necessary.

Take this from a person who is master of overinterpreting, and had to learn social conventions from scratch, as they never came naturally.

Sometimes, a banana is just a banana.



Anton Telle 8 months ago (30 January 2013)

I enjoyed the film thoroughly. Yet, it to me seemed also a bit sexist, with women lusting for the hero, and just being a kind of accessory. (That is why I scrolled down, to see, if anyone already posted that opinion.)



Andria Schwortz Plus 7 months ago (19 February 2013)

I made a similar comment too, below. I get that the starting point is that these two stupid men are lusting after glory and women. But the end point is that they've become amazing heros who are supposed to rise above stereotypes. If the end of the video had them handing off the map to a couple girls or even a girl and a boy, or if one of the heros had a cute guy jump onto his horse, that would've given us a VERY different message.

Thanks for speaking up on this. (Also, have you noticed how few of the comments appear to be women?)



Andria Schwortz Plus 7 months ago (19 February 2013)

Reading the other replies to your comment, I'm really shocked at how people don't see the problem with their comments like "this is just a great adventure about becoming a hero and growing during the process." Women can't go on adventures, become heros, and grow during the process?

My comment before reading this thread is below at: vimeo.com/58179094#comment_8771013



Manuel Imboden Plus 7 months ago (12 March 2013)

Jessica, well said and straight to the point! Thanks for that. I think we have a similar understanding of the concept of sexism, that many of the other users who commented on this matter do not seem to share.



Daniel Bruce (08 October 2013)

Lol, I thought to myself as a joke, "I'm sure there's some PC cunt complaining about sexism and socially constructed gender roles in the comment section," and what do you know! In this sad reality we live in, thoughts like that never fail to hit home, because you're sure to find some spineless Marxist retard no matter where you go.

b.

Nikhita's comment about the film *For the Remainder* (https://vimeo.com/36818561) is doubly interesting because it has managed to garner a response from the creator of the short. Omar describes very simply the how the film was made in response to the question about whether it was achieved in 3D It describes his process very simply without venturing into anything technically complex. By doing this he is engaging in a meaningful and educative way a significant portion of his audience who follow the comments section. This interaction between artist and viewer, producer and consumer is potentially extremely powerful. This dynamic, engagement is only possible as a result of this interactive forum and is all but possible in the world of the traditional press type critic.



Reply

Nikhita Prabhudesai 1 year ago (16 February 2012)

It's absolutely beautiful. I'm gonna point out all the things that are so beautiful in this film.

The use of sound - it's so minimalistic, the constant patter of the rain sets the mood for the film. It took me a while to figure out it was a cat I was looking at, but the animation - its motions, gestures are so amazing. Really. And the compositions are brilliant as well. What is it made on? It's 3D right?



Reply

Omer Ben David Plus 1 year ago (16 February 2012)

Thank you Nikhita, Yes it's 3D. The technique basically is a variety of tools which use effects to simulate brush strokes in 3D space.

glad it made an impact on you :)

Reply

c.

I have also pointed out that like-minded people are likely to congregate around the same subject matter and can revolve around strong opinions such as the vigorous debate on sexism illicited by *The Reward* included earlier in this paper. This is because the comments section is so conducive to facilitating the flow of conversation. To further back these ideas of the gathering of likeminded people and the flow of conversation within the comments section I have used Corax Incarna's comment as an example: Corax acknowledges his common opinion in the comments section of *Ark*.



Corax Incarna (11 March 2010)

3 years ago

I agree Will for the most part, Will. Looks like we're outnumbered though. ;)

Still a great animation by any means. And a huge congratulations to the creators for finishing this project... the work and craft is so evident and it's definitely a massive achievement.

Reply

d.

Ryan Castañeda's comment about the film *I, PET GOAT II* (https://vimeo.com/44583147), is one of confusion. It is no doubt that he appreciates the film's imagery but does not quite make sense of it. As a result the creator of the film Heliofant replies to the viewer. This is a very good example of artist/animator audience/critic interaction.

ryan castañeda Plus 1 year ago (28 June 2012)
beautifully animated, but Im not sure I get the point? bush= obama? drugs and technology are same? other gods are interchangeable, there for less valid? jesus= ra? and jesus no longer lives in the church? am I on the right track of enterpretation or is there something I missed?



Heliofant Plus 1 year ago (28 June 2012)
Perhaps it's just an invitation to go past the veneer of change, into that fire that every great religion speaks of. That divine knowledge that I and the "Father", "Mother", "Source"... are one! Thanks for mulling it over!

4.

Online animation audiences include people with differing levels of skills, expertise and education, which results in responses ranging from incredibly complex and professional opinions to more basic and generalized inputs. The following examples demonstrate commentary targeted towards more specialized and well-informed audiences.

a.

This comment is an example of a more animation specific critique. The viewer refers to the characters' performances in *Another* when talking about "acting" – a term used in animation theory to describe the effectiveness of human like qualities of the characters.

Sasha Schotzko-Harris 4 months ago (28 May 2013)
So good, Sean! Some really nice animation and acting in here. Great job! Worth the wait!

b.

Apart from praising and commenting on the film *Another's* rhythm, which are aspects that can be appreciated by a general audience, the rest of Andreas' comment is very technically positioned. It discusses "After Effects layering and focus blurring" which are software specific discernments. *Adobe After Affects* is a compositing program many animators use in post-production to add effects and put their animations together. "Focus blurring" refers to the manner in which After Effects uses information based on layer orders and distance to create the illusion of depth of field. For the Andreas it is a

problem that these computer processed techniques are not marrying nicely with the more traditional method of hand drawn animation. This comment demonstrates my position that opening up the critisism to a broader audience allows for a variety of 'expert' opinions, which in turn creates the opportunity for education of others by drawing attention to specific details that might otherwise have gone unnoticed by a more limited audience.

Andreas Vakalios 4 months ago (1 June 2013)
Very nice work, with a nice rythm!
With all the respect I find the use of After Effects layering and focus blurring problematic though.
Especially when you are dealing with such a manual piece of work. It seems out of place compared to the hand drawn pencil lines.
And yes it is a minor thing but still could be perfect in my opinion. :)
#

c.

Many comments, particularly with a video as specific as *For The Remainder*, can be very complex. This is because one can assume that the audiences attracted to this video, especially the ones who like it are often quite well informed about the processes involved in the animation art form. The videos(') uniqueness and specificity excludes many amateurs. Thom May for example asks the artist very technical information relating to the 3D production process.

SYGGRAPH[43] is an international computer graphics festival where researchers, researchers, artists, developers, filmmakers, scientists and businessmen congregate to discuss and exhibit developments in the computer graphics industry. An alpha map is black and white image used as part of the texturing process in 3D computer imagery where black describes the transparent part of the texture and white the visible part. The texture is a 2D image that is wrapped around a 3D object. The word mesh in CGI terminology is synonymous with the word geometry and describes the 3D object in the virtual environment, it has inherited this name as it is made up of points, lines and faces. "After Effects" is a software product developed by Adobe that many contemporary digital animators use to composite and enhance their work.

Thom May's comment as pointed out delves into reasonably complex 3D animation production processes, complex enough to distance most amateurs but would not alienate the industry professionals and scholars who make up a considerable portion of this audience. The point I am illuminating is that the comments section is also a space available to professionals where critical

[43] Since its beginning in 1974 as a small group of specialists in a previously unknown discipline, ACM SIGGRAPH has evolved to become an international community of researchers, artists, developers, filmmakers, scientists, and business professionals who share an interest in computer graphics and interactive techniques. (http://www.siggraph.org/about/about-acm-siggraph#sthash.jxSVUTqT.dpuf)

engagements can occur on a very technical level. This is key because the comments section allows viewers to engage on so many different levels whether it be in depth technical discussions or program specific discussion designed for animation related commentary, or even to more generalized and opinionated criticism drawing on much broader film knowledge. As a result, there is enormous diversity of opinion available in the comments section unavailable to the traditional press type critic.

Thom May Plus 2 months ago (22 July 2013)
hey Omer - gorgeous film! I saw it last year, when the local SIGGRAPH chapter up here in Portland held a special repeat screening of the films from last years' festivals. At the time, it really confused me, technically, and now that I've been studying 3D for a while, I'm even more perplexed: i can imagine how to reconstruct most of this, using alpha maps, but the one part that still has me scratching my head is how you get the paint effect to move and ripple along the mesh (at moments like 1:15). is that an effect slipped in in post/After Effects, or...?
cheers! and again - congratulations on a stellar production.

d.

Paul Wells and John Canemaker are highly respected animation academics. John Hubley was a highly influential animation director. For Jesús Olmo to have found quotes as complex as theoretically complex as these relating to *I, Pet Goat II* (http://vimeo.com/44583147) is evidence of the fact that the online audience does include experts that frequently of procure valuable criticism.

jesús olmo Plus 1 year ago (3 July 2012)
“…animation works best as an abstract form, where it fully demonstrates its intrinsic capability of moving non-representational lines and material which fall outside the orthodox domains of 'realist' constructions and agendas. Animation of this sort may be recognized as more specifically bound up with the desire to express profoundly personal, sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious, aspects of human thought, feeling and experience. The liberating freedom of the medium has a direct correlation with the variety of work achieved by certain animators and artists, who are not merely seeking to find the most appropriate means by which they express their vision, but to progress the medium itself.”
Paul Wells.
“... We're confronted with such massive, serious problems as a society, on a world level, that animation as a medium of communication can deal with the abstractions of these problems that a camera can't."
John Hubley
"...the ultimate test of what animation might be would be life that is created rather than just photographed... I always think that's the basic magic of animation: to see the naturally inert come to

life. Even if it's alive. It just rivets. It shouldn't happen and we are just riveted by it. It's a form of magic, ...alchemy."
John Canemaker

5.

Some comments are directed towards both professionals and a general audience.

a.

This comment is once again animation specific as it refers to the movement and performances of the characters in the film *Another*. However, it is phrased in such a way as not to alienate the rest of the video audience. It also highlights the impact animation devices can have on driving the emotional qualities that the film seeks to engage the audience with.

Rachel Ho 4 months ago (28 May 2013)
Sean you're a master. I admire your tenacity. And I appreciate that the film takes its moments to really work on you.
It's interesting that the characters seem to labour through their actions in a way that feels connected to your laborious process. It works to a disconcerting effect and I think their performances effectively speak to a sense of repression.
I'm glad this is now online!!!!!

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