

“But it’s just a cartoon?”

A study of the generic assumptions attributed to mainstream American televised animation; focussing on the circumstances of their origins, the methods of their institution, and arguing for the case of contemporary examples that provide evidence of having transcended these assumptions.

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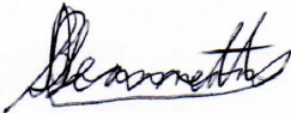
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I, Shannon Bennetts, hereby declare that all the work included in this thesis is my own, unless otherwise stated or referenced.



Contents Page

Introduction	3-8
Chapter 1: Low Quality Kid's Stuff - A brief history of US televised animation focussing on elements which established or exacerbated stigmas surrounding the genre.	9-14
Chapter 2: Animation for Adults - A discussion of <i>The Simpsons</i> and its involvement in the resurgence of televised animation in the 90's; and an exploration of <i>Rick and Morty</i> in terms of adult-oriented cartoons, with both case studies discussed in terms of their mature content and socio-political commentary.	15-26
Chapter 3: Redefining the Boundaries of Cartoons' Preconceived Audience - a discussion of Cartoon Network's involvement in the re-contextualisation of the cartoon genre, and the progression of cartoons implicitly aimed at younger audiences in the contemporary age in terms of their sophisticated visual elements and nuanced, mature subject matter, explored through an analysis of <i>Samurai Jack</i> and <i>Steven Universe</i> .	27-39
Conclusion	40-42
Reference Images	43-44
Bibliography	45-47
Rita Strong Scholarship Declaration	48

Introduction

The main objective in mind when setting out on this investigation was not only to argue for the case of televised animation as a medium capable of producing content with substance, but also to discover the origins of the stigmas placed against cartoons. In particular, this study is intended to discover at which point in the history of animation cartoons came to be considered as only appropriate for children. This was a concept that I myself believed for a long time, and which I believed that all animators of the past had aimed to work within, until my tertiary education into the field of animation, where I was introduced to early works that were not intended solely for children (if intended for them at all). I wanted to discover what had happened between then and now that had caused such a great disparity over the intended audience of cartoons. As far back as I can remember I have been an avid fan of televised cartoons, with this fondness for the medium remaining even into my years as a young adult. I was affectionately teased by my family about how I never developed beyond my 'cartoon stage' of adolescence, and I find myself to this day still attempting to convince them of the worth of the cartoons that I watch, in spite of my mother's "no cartoons" rule when picking something for the family to watch.

The stigma that associates televised animated cartoons with being 'just for children', of a low quality, and a genre that should not address content seen as being 'adult', is one that has haunted the genre since the 1960's, and is still an opinion held by many to this day (Mittell, 2004, p.77-79). This study seeks to uncover the origins of these assumptions and, using examples of contemporary mainstream television cartoons, will argue that this branch of the cartoon genre has transcended the frivolous associations that the medium has garnered. Furthermore, this study will argue that contemporary examples of US televised animations have been able to transcend these stigmas.

A brief historical overview of televised animation shall be discussed in order to explain why cartoons have earned the reputation of having substandard production values, narratives that are superficial, reliant on 'gags', formulaic in nature, and that they provide little appeal to anyone besides children (Mittell, 2004, p.78). Jason Mittell refers to genre as 'more than just bottom-line delineations of a category; the genre is formed by a broad array of cultural assumptions of meaning, value, and social function exceeding any textual definition' (Mittell, 2004, p.60). Thus a genre, and every text that fits within it, is defined largely by the cultural

consensus over its worth. Unfortunately, in the formative era of American televised animation (1950's-1960's), actions taken by the television industry would ensure that the most value to be sought from cartoons would be from the advertisements in between, establishing the low standards that would be attributed to the genre of cartoons until the 1990's (Mittell, 2004). I will track the development of the genre from the shift of cartoon shorts from film to television in the 1950's, to the introduction of "limited animation", to the short-lived primetime success of certain animated shows in the early '60's, to the genre's eventual banishment to the Saturday morning slot. This investigation will function to contextualise the era during which the stigma around cartoons as superficial entertainment for children first materialised. The study will then address cartoons and the cartoon industry of the 1990's and beyond up until the present, to contextualise the more recent state of the cartoon industry before arguing for the case that mainstream cartoons have proven themselves capable of being intergenerational, of quality, and generally of becoming more sophisticated (Butler, 2007).

Four main case studies shall be discussed in defence of the quality of contemporary televised animation, namely Genndy Tartakovsky's *Samurai Jack* (2001-2004), Rebecca Sugar's *Steven Universe* (2013-present), Matt Groening and James L. Brooks's *The Simpsons* (1989-present) and Justin Roiland, Dan Harmon's *Rick and Morty* (2013-present). Each will be investigated in order to argue that the visual and narrative quality of contemporary cartoons has improved, as well as to provide proof of their engagement with 'mature' subject matter, and involvement in social commentary.

Matt Groening and James L. Brooks's iconic family comedy show *The Simpsons* (1989-present) was chosen due to the massive impact it has had on animated television history, not only as "the show that single-handedly brought the prime-time cartoon back to life" (Butler, 2007, p. 346), but also in the way that it "demonstrated the possibilities of primetime animation to abandon the generic linkages to children and appeal to a broad mass audience" (Mittell, 2004, p. 80-81). Along with this, the show will be discussed in terms of its socio-political commentary, which transcends stigmas restricting the genre to mere children's entertainment. It will also be used in order to discuss the shift in the perception of televised animations that occurred in the 90's, and which fostered the creation of more sophisticated, and even various specifically adult-oriented cartoons, in the contemporary age. The satirical

sci-fi cartoon *Rick and Morty* (created by Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon) shall also be discussed in order to address the realm of contemporary adult-oriented cartoons that deal with mature and existential themes that disassociate these cartoons with the stigmas previously attributed to the cartoon genre. Finally, contemporary cartoons that are still implicitly aimed at children, but which will be argued to also succeed in transcending stigmas associated with the genre, shall be discussed, through *Samurai Jack* and *Steven Universe*. These will be defended mainly on the grounds of their sophisticated visual styles and the mature subject matter with which each show grapples with.

The generic assumptions attributed to televised animation have unfortunately been almost entirely negative, and require further explanation here in order to contextualise the rest of this study as it seeks to discover their cause, and argue against them in the case of contemporary case studies. These assumptions include the medium being viewed as “innocuous and juvenile” and “insubstantial and lightweight” despite proof to the contrary (Wells, Hardstaff, 2008, p.48), and a medium that Paul Wells states has long been dismissed as “merely children’s entertainment” (Wells, 2002, p.1). Children’s animation is associated with frivolity (Wells, Hardstaff, 2008, p.49), and the term ‘cartoon’ has become derogatory to those who consider it to be the “lowest form of animation” (Wells, Hardstaff, 2008, p.85). Along with those mentioned previously, Mittell talks about “categorical assumptions” created in the 1960’s that still affect cartoons as a genre today, with cartoons categorised as a “lowest common denominator”, a category featuring subpar production values, narratives and gags viewed as formulaic, hyper-commercialised, and appealing almost exclusively to children (Mittell, 2004, p.78). Other cultural assumptions associated with the genre at the time were that cartoons should not enter the realm of “adult” subject matter, with the genre being viewed as nothing more than “harmless” entertainment (Mittell, 2004, p.77).

The works that shall be discussed will be mainstream American televised animations specifically. This study acknowledges the fact that there are examples of animated content outside of the realm of the mainstream (experimental animation, for example) that have recognised the potential of, and has made use of, the medium in order to engage with adult content and themes, harking back to even one of the first examples of the animated film, Emile Cohl’s *Fantasmagorie* (1908) which “presented an illogical narrative of cruelty and torture executed by people and things at war with each other” (Leslie, 2002, p.2). However, this study instead intends to dissect American mainstream cartoons in particular, as it is this

branch of the medium which most people will be exposed to, and thus from which they will assumedly draw conclusions about the medium as a whole. Unfortunately the conclusions that were drawn about these televised cartoons were less than favourable, and it is the aim of this study to understand why this area of animation garnered the stigmas that it did, as well as how they are beginning to once again engage with more serious or sophisticated subject matter in the contemporary era.

Chapter One will function to contextualise my study historically, as well as to reveal the origins of the generic assumptions which the study is centred around. This chapter will consist of a brief history of US televised animation in order to explain when, how and why cartoons earned the reputation that they did by focussing mainly on elements which established or exacerbated stigmas surrounding the genre. This chapter will trace the history of American televised animation from a brief look at the multigenerational, highly acclaimed theatrical cartoons which preceded it, to its first appearance in the 1950's, to the first prime time animation boom, to the medium's downfall in the 80's, up until just before animation's resurgence in the 1990's. Core concepts such as the stigmas surrounding the genre, the introduction of limited animation, and the influence of the industry on public views of televised animation as a genre will be discussed, in order to inform further discussion of specific contemporary case studies. Limited animation itself will also be defended in response to the negative criticism it garnered at the time of its inception, mainly in terms of its function as a financial necessity.

Chapter Two will consist of a discussion of *The Simpsons* and its involvement in the resurgence of televised animation in the 90's; and an exploration of *Rick and Morty* in terms of adult-oriented cartoons, and a discussion of both case studies in terms of their mature content and socio-political commentary. This chapter will detail the 1990's resurgence of animated programming through discussion of *The Simpsons* and its heralding of the "second prime time animation boom", as well as other factors which allowed animated shows to be viewed in a more positive light by the public (e.g. a new generation of viewers). *Rick and Morty* shall be investigated in order to discuss adult-oriented animated programming, as well as the late night programming block Adult Swim. Both case studies shall also be discussed in terms of how they have been able to transcend stigmas of their genre in terms of their political and social engagement, as well as their engagement with mature and nuanced themes. *The Simpsons* will be discussed in terms of its ability to critically engage with social and political concerns through satire. The show discusses family dynamics, depression,

politics, alcoholism, the educational system etc., almost always in a humorous way, but in a way that often rings true and causes one to really consider these issues (Mittell, 2004, p.188). The effect on society that this satire has had (if any) will also be discussed, as proof of the potential of animation beyond simply entertainment purposes (Cantor, 1999). Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon's sci-fi adventure cartoon *Rick and Morty* (2013-present) will be discussed in order to address the realm of contemporary adult-oriented cartoons, with specific reference to the show's engagement with themes of nihilism, existentialism, and the rejection of religion (Bulger, 2015). The case study will also open up discussion about Cartoon Network's Adult Swim, a late-night programming block targeting adults specifically (Mittell, 2004), as well as challenging preconceptions about cartoons being exclusively entertainment for children (Lee, 2013, p.10).

Chapter Three will include a discussion of Cartoon Network's involvement in the re-contextualisation of the cartoon genre, and the progression of cartoons implicitly aimed at younger audiences in the contemporary age. This will be engaged with in terms of their sophisticated visual elements and nuanced, mature subject matter. This chapter will also discuss the role that the cable channel Cartoon Network had to play on the reforming of perceptions surrounding animated programming on television and their intended audience. Two examples of shows that this network has produced, Genndy Tartakovsky's *Samurai Jack* (2001-2004) and Rebecca Sugar's *Steven Universe* (2013-present), will also be studied in order to portray how even cartoons that are not primarily aimed at adult audiences have been able to transcend previous assumptions related to the genre in terms of their visual prowess and the mature subject matter dealt with over the course of their run times. *Samurai Jack* was chosen mostly due to its uniquely (and beautifully) stylised visuals, its fluid animation (Smith, 2017) and its exceptional and unique mode of storytelling (Butler, 2015), which goes against many stereotypical forms of narrative held by the average cartoon to explore new ways of expressing narratives (Vine, 2014). It was also significantly one of the first cartoons of its era to delve into extremely emotional, often dark themes, such as death, slavery, and sacrifice. This show will also be discussed in the context of the earlier outputs of Cartoon Network, as a way of tracking the progression cartoons made after the generic shift of the 90's (Mittell, 2004, p. 84). *Steven Universe* will be discussed mainly in terms of its engagement with complex and heavy subject matter, such as the show's inclusion of heavily flawed (but therefore more believable and relatable) characters, its engagement with different examples of mental illness and the grieving process, its engagement with LGBT

themes and the circumvention of traditional gender roles, its themes of war, its blurred lines of morality, and its ability to evoke a meaningful response from viewers. It will also be used to explore the content of present day Cartoon Network shows, as well as the current wave of contemporary children's cartoons that have begun to incorporate more serious themes (Smalley, 2016).

Chapter 1: Low Quality Kid's Stuff - A brief history of US televised animation focussing on elements which established or exacerbated stigmas surrounding the genre.

Jason Mittell refers to genre as 'more than just bottom-line delineations of a category; the genre is formed by a broad array of cultural assumptions of meaning, value, and social function exceeding any textual definition' (Mittell, 2004, p.60). Thus a genre, and every text that fits within it, is defined largely by the cultural consensus over its worth. Jane Feuer goes on to define genres not as natural products, but rather "ideological constructs that provide and enforce a pre-reading" (Feuer, 1992, p. 144 as quoted by Lee, 2013, p.114). Stigmas surrounding cartoons in the decades after their introduction to television were less related to the actual texts themselves, but rather through the way in which the industry packed, scheduled, marketed and promoted its genre, drawing on and furthering certain pre-existing cultural assumptions to their own profit-related ends (Mittell, 2004). In fact, theatrical shorts of the 1940/50's used to be regarded as having cross-generational appeal (Butler, 2007, p.357). However, the restrictions that had to be navigated in order to create original programming for television in the 1950's, as well as the actions of the industry, would severely affect the cultural understanding of cartoons years after these actions took place (Mittell, 2004, p.62).

This chapter aims to contextualise the history of American animated television from its inception in the 1950's, up until their lowest point in the 1980's. This shall be done in order to not only define the stigmas held towards cartoons, but will also reveal the phenomena that established and exacerbated these stigmas, as well as demonstrating how these factors evolved over time. This explanation is required in order to answer the question of when and why these stigmas came to be, to properly contextualise the history of animation leading up to the chosen contemporary case studies, and to adequately define the stigmas that these case studies will be argued to have transcended.

The 1950's saw the shift of cartoon shorts from film to television, following the deterioration of the theatrical market for cartoons (Mittell, 2004, p.63). Old libraries filled with theatrical shorts were sold to television, a profitable arrangement as these were regarded as high quality programs available without the burden of production costs (Mittell, 2004, p.61). These cartoon shorts were originally created to be paired alongside films played in cinemas (Mittell, 2004, p. 62), and included the likes of *Popeye*, *Bugs Bunny*, and other Warner Bros,

MGM and Disney animated shorts intended for theatrical release (Mittell, 2004, p.63). It was during this time that the TV screen became the main stage for animation as a genre (Mittell, 2004, p.61). These theatrical cartoons, the first on television, featured discourses that appealed to both child and adult audiences.

However, once the production of theatrical cartoons declined, a new, “economically efficient mode of production was needed for the creation of cartoons specifically for use on television” (Butler, 2007, p.340). Television animator’s answer to this need was an animation technique known as “limited animation”, which refers to the process of reducing the amount of drawings required to produce an animation by limiting the amount of movement performed by characters, as well as reusing cels, that became a popular technique for animators in the 1950s (Mittell, 2004, p.65). The introduction of this method (which significantly cut costs) and endeavours to create new, original animation brought about a shift in the genre where dialogue and verbal humour became the main focus, visuals became much less varied and movement was minimised, with scenarios and narratives became repetitive (Mittell, 2004, p.65). Wells states that, while characters are admittedly often defined by dialogue, that “the fundamental appeal of the cartoon lies in its commitment to action” (Wells, 1998, p.39), and it was theatrical animation which was characterised by full, traditional animation (Mittell, 2004, p.16). This caused legendary cartoon directors of theatrical animations such as Chuck Jones to believe that this form of animation was superior to the limited animation style of televised cartoons, which Jones referred to as being “crap” and nothing more than “illustrated radio”(Jones, C., as quoted by Mittell, 2004, p.69). The use of “limited animation” was, however, a “direct outcome of financial constraint” (Wells, 2003, p.19), and was required by these animators in order to adapt to what was required of this new form (Wells, 2003, p.20).

By this time (1957), the two types of televised animation that existed – rerun theatrical shorts and low-budget original cartoons – were, while still regarded as multi-generational, accepted as being primarily for children (although not yet restricted to being only for children) (Mittell, 2004, p.65). Compared to other genres featured in the budding new medium that was television, cartoons were mostly seen as “low-budget filler” (Mittell, 2004, p.66).

Following the enormous success of the Mattel toy company’s sponsorship of *The Mickey Mouse Club* (1955-59), various companies suddenly began to aim their advertising towards the children’s audience as primary consumers, despite this group having previously been written off due to children not being active consumers (Mittell, 2004, p. 66-67). The success

of Mattel's second campaign, promoting the Barbie doll, speaks to the potential profit to be gained from advertising to children (Mittell, 2004, p. 68). The television industry, eager to attract equally eager sponsors, actually ended up constructing this category of audience itself (using strategic marketing, types of programming etc.), and established it based on assumptions held by the industry about what children would watch (Mittell, 2004, p.68). They believed that children preferred to watch repeated content instead of the new, and that they couldn't differentiate between high quality and low quality content, and (it was these assumptions that worked towards to rise of limited animation), and linked these assumptions under the umbrella term of 'kidvid' or the 'moppet market' (Mittell, 2004, p.68). Adults were aware of the shift in quality between these cartoons and the more sophisticated and nuanced theatrical cartoons that had preceded them, however the industry believed that children wouldn't be aware of, or concerned with, the difference (Mittell, 2004, p.68). At the time, televised cartoons, while still regarded as merely 'filler' and of possessing little cultural value, remained thought of as mass audience entertainment (appealing mainly but not exclusively to children) due to their maintained association with the theatrical shorts that preceded them (Mittell, 2004, p.67). The late 1950's, however, would include a change in the assumptions held by the public about animated television, as the sponsor's interest in appealing to children would result in more original cartoons being produced (Mittell, 2004, p.67).

The rise of Hanna-Barbera's cartoons (working with an adapted style of limited animation and having drawn upon and revised "notions of the children's audience, adult appeals, and the cultural status of cartoons) would result not only in animation's first prime time animation boom, but also, unfortunately, to the genre's banishment to the Saturday morning programming slot (Mittell, 2004, p.68). Bill Hanna and Joseph Barbera's massive success with shows like *Huckleberry Hound* (1958-62) and *Quick Draw McGraw* (1959-62) would bring about a shift in the way in which television animation would sound and look like, and subsequently initiated the "biggest boom of cartoons in television history" (Mittell, 2004, p.69). Their work was met with strong but mixed reviews (Mittell, 2004, p.69). The majority of modern fans and scholars of animation view this shift negatively, and as that which brought about the death of classical animation (Mittell, 2004, p.69). A hierarchy between classic animation and television animation is at the heart of the negative comments made by those within the animation field (notably, Chuck Jones referring to Saturday morning cartoons as "crap"), implying that animation in the studio era was "better suited to a

discerning mass audience, able to amuse and amaze all ages through its superior humour and vibrant visuals, while the television material of the 1960's was low-budget and low brow filler, suited only to the unrefined taste of children" (Mittell, 2004, p.69). However, adult viewers of these cartoons at the time did not share these opinions, instead regarding these shows as valued advancements in the medium and more entertaining for both adult and child viewers than the classics that preceded them, commending them for their mature humour and use of satire (Mittell, 2004, p.69). Mittell goes so far as to say that Hanna-Barbera's works appeared "groundbreaking in their intergenerational appeal", and describing the way in they used their dialog in order to engage with adult viewers, and their visuals to entertain children (Mittell, 2004,p.69). These shows were praised at the time for their nuance, their engagement with human flaws, their mature wit and their use of satire (Mittell, 2004, p.69-70). In fact, *Huckleberry Hound* would garner an audience of which over 40% were adults (Mittell, 2004, p.69). Far from soiling the medium as these shows have been accused of, viewers at the time believed that they were instead "broadening the genre's appeal through intelligence and sophistication" (Mittell, 2004, p.70).

Going into the 1960's, televised animation had confirmed its ability to appeal to child and adult audiences, limited animation had lowered production costs enough allow networks the freedom to experiment with original cartoons, and the continued success of reruns of theatrical shorts suggested that "the market for animated properties was potentially eternal" (Mittell, 2004, p.71). These were the perfect conditions to take a chance with animated television, and that was exactly what the television network ABC did in picking up three animated shows in 1960 to be aired during primetime, one of which was an adult targeted animated sitcom that would lead to the biggest primetime animation boom in the history of television: *The Flintstones* (1960-66) (Mittell, 2004, p.71). *The Flintstones*'s sitcom structure and aim to chiefly target adults went against the conventional cartoon set-up (Mittell, 2004, p.72). The show received mixed reviews; however no comments brought into question the suitability of cartoons for adult viewers, indicating that the stigma that cartoons are exclusively for children did not yet exist (Mittell, 2004, p.72). Various other networks attempted to achieve the same success that *The Flintstones* had garnered, resulting in seven animated programs being aired in primetime in the 1961-62 season, a record for televised animation (Mittell, 2004, p.72-73). Unfortunately, primetime animation would suffer the same fate as various other genres at the hands of the 'innovation-imitation-saturation' cycle endemic to the programming trends of the 1960's (Mittell, 2004, p.73). *The Flintstones* acted

as the innovator, was followed by a slew of clones hoping to replicate its success, which in turn oversaturated the primetime line-up, causing viewers to stop watching shows in this vein (Mittell, 2004, p.73). The industry took it as a sign that cartoons were just not appropriate for adults, and so they were removed from the primetime slot, with some (in order to not lose money, and seeing as children would watch anything anyway) being relocated to the infamous Saturday morning slot instead (Mittell, 2004, p.74).

The Saturday morning slot thus became a dumping ground for failed primetime animations (Mittell, 2004, p.74). This was a hugely profitable endeavour for the industry, as the Saturday morning hours, although drawing in fewer children overall than the more highly rated (but also more expensive) evening slots, would draw in an audience with a higher proportion of child viewers (Mittell, 2004, p.75). Therefore, prospective advertisers would end up paying less, but also “reach a higher proportion of their target audience per dollar” (Mittell, 2004, p.75). Through the establishment of this slot, the use of targeted marketing, and the active exclusion of adult viewers in an attempt to up the amount of children watching the adverts being targeted at them specifically (a hugely profitable endeavour), the entire genre became categorised by the industry as being just for children (Mittell, 2004, p.77). Thus the “Saturday morning cartoons” generic label was established (Mittell, 2004, p.77). As well as this, the industry “as part of a larger cultural context, drew upon and furthered cultural assumptions linked to the cartoon genre – that kids will gladly watch recycled and repeated programs, that kids cannot discern quality of animation, that cartoons should not address “adult” subject matter, and that cartoons are “harmless” entertainment” (Mittell, 2004, p.77). The assumptions established in the 1960’s still affect the way cartoons are viewed even today (Mittell, 2004, p.78). By the 80’s, the visual and written quality of animation had declined to what was describes as “little more than poorly drawn, glorified half-hour commercials for action figures and video games” (Hilton-Morrow, McMahan, 2003, p.78), and came to be regarded as “the worst moment in animation history” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p.184, as quoted by Lee, 2013, p. 129).

In conclusion, this chapter has functioned to provide an overview of the history of American televised cartoons from their shift from cinema to television, the strategies required of the medium in order to produce original made-for-television programming, the influence of the industry and sponsors on the medium, the first prime time animation boom, the genre’s subsequent relegation to Saturday morning slot and finally ending upon the genre’s lowest point in the 1980’s. This chapter served to define the generic assumptions attributed to

televised animation on which this paper is based, these being that animated programs are ‘just for children’, of a low quality, and a genre that should not address content seen as being ‘adult’ (Mittell, 2004, p.77-79). The phenomena that have worked to establish and exacerbate these stigmas, namely the actions of the industry and the necessary introduction of “limited animation”, have also been discussed in order to identify the circumstances of their origins, and the methods of their institution, as is one of the primary goals of this study. It is with these stigmas, as well as the history of animated television leading up to 1990’s, in mind, that the chosen contemporary case studies may now be discussed in terms of their ability to transcend the previous assumptions and circumstances that have plagued the medium.

Chapter 2: Animation for Adults - A discussion of *The Simpsons* and its involvement in the resurgence of televised animation in the 90's; and an exploration of *Rick and Morty* in terms of adult-oriented cartoons, with both case studies discussed in terms of their mature content and socio-political commentary.

This chapter will function not only to further discuss the development of the cartoon genre by exploring the resurgence of animated programming in the 1990's up until the contemporary era of televised cartoons, but will focus specifically on the sphere of animated television aimed at the adult audience. *The Simpsons* (1989-present) shall be discussed in terms of the profound effect that the show had on the history of animation during the 90's, in particular it's heralding of the "second prime time animation boom". *Rick and Morty* (2013) shall be investigated in order to discuss the realm of contemporary adult-oriented animated programming, as well as the late night programming block *Adult Swim*, during which it is broadcast. Both of these case studies shall also be discussed in terms of how they have been able to transcend stigmas of their genre particularly in terms of their political and social engagement, as well as each show's engagement with mature and nuanced themes. It is through these factors that this study aims to provide evidence of animated television programs that transcend assumptions surrounding cartoons that label them a merely shallow children's entertainment.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the 80's was not a shining moment in the history of animated programming. The decade saw a rise in the merchandising of animated characters, with the boundaries between advertisements and animated shows blurring as pre-existing products (e.g. toys) were developed into cartoon shows (Butler, 2007, p.353). Butler explains that "[t]he difference between the characters and the products became less and less clear, and the textual difference between the commercials and the narrative cartoons diminished correspondingly" (Butler, 2007, p.353). In their pursuit of advertising products to children, the industry had merged product and medium, leaving children hard-pressed to distinguish between the two, and the genre at one of its lowest points (Butler, 2007, p.353). However, the

end of the decade brought with it a need to create shows that were more than just extended advertisements, a challenge that was met with the inception of a certain yellow family.

Jeremy G. Butler referred to Matt Groening and James L. Brooks's animated family comedy *The Simpsons* (1989-present) as "...the show that single-handedly brought the prime-time cartoon back to life", and that this, along with a renewed interest in cartoons in the 1980's as a result of "accelerated developments in computer graphics technology" and, "new modes of production and distribution (including new cartoon-oriented networks on cable television)", brought about a renaissance for televised cartoons (Butler, 2007, p.347).

The Simpsons brought about "second prime time animation boom" in the 90's airing despite considerable amount of factors working against it, and (as with the first boom) ushering in a plethora of primetime animated series attempting to reproduce its success (Hilton-Morrow, McMahan, 2003, p.77-79). The factors working against the initial airing of the show ranged from networks weary of taking on a form of show that had failed them previously, to the decline of the quality of animation at the time, and cultural associations of animations as nothing more than Saturday morning kids shows (Hilton-Morrow, McMahan, 2003, p.77-78). However, assumptions about animation were beginning to change, the quality of animated programming was on the rise, a shift away from Saturday morning cartoons was occurring, and all due in no small part to the fact that there was now a new generation of adults (viewers, creators and network executives alike) who had grown up with, and were fans of, television animation (Hilton-Morrow, McMahan, 2003, p.80-81). As Eileen Katz stated: "-the adult audience that was weaned on cartoons and is comfortable with animation is telling us they want a product that just isn't aimed at their kids, and TV is responding" (Richmond, 1996, p.40, as quoted by Hilton-Morrow, McMahan, 2003, p.81). This resulted in shows such as *Beavis and Butthead* (1992-97) and *South Park* (1997-present), shows suited to teenage and adult audiences, and which, like *The Simpsons*, helped to redefine assumptions based around the genre (Mittell, 2004, p.81). Mittell, as well as many other sources, have stated that since the 90's, cartoons have become more widely accepted as quality programming, with some shows appealing exclusively to adults and enjoying primetime success (Mittell, 2004, p.79). Butler states that "[t]he long perceived notion that cartoons were only for kids was therefore dashed in the 1990s", explaining that the most innovative, imaginative and unique cartoons were produced to be aired during the prime time and late night slots, which are not aimed at child audiences (Butler, 2007, p. 357). This resurgence may also be thought of in

terms of a return to the style of the theatrical cartoons of the 40s and 50s which preceded televised cartoons (Butler, 2007, p.357). Both eras of cartoons shared a multi-generational appeal, captivating writing, original music usage and a consideration of style and design in their work (Butler, 2007, p.357). These eras also share an inclusion of more mature content, with Butler sighting various adult-oriented cartoons as being proof of the genre having “swung decidedly full circle, back to the cursing, garter belt-exposing, tobacco-spitting style of early-sound theatrical releases” (Butler, 2007, p.357).

The Simpsons frequently engages in socio-political commentary. The show discusses topics such family dynamics, depression, politics, alcoholism, the educational system to name but a few, almost always in a humorous way, but in a way that often rings true and causes one to really consider these issues (Mittell, 2004, p.188). It is this element of the show which will be discussed in terms of how this cartoon is able to transcend stigmas restricting the genre to mere children’s entertainment through its engagement with mature subject matter.

The Simpsons deals fairly regularly with the topic of religion. This is a risky target of satire if ever there was one, but one that the show engages with nonetheless. What makes this engagement with such potentially heavy subject matter even more impressive is that not only does this provide proof of *The Simpsons* having gone far beyond that which was termed as mere shallow entertainment for children, but also reveals how the show was able to rival even its live-action primetime counterparts. Instances of television shows tackling religion in the 1990’s were rare, with producers fearing potential backlash from orthodox viewers and television executives fearing that their sponsor’s products may face boycotting because of it (Cantor, 1999, p.742). However, *The Simpsons* not only dares to talk about (and even ridicule) religion but “recognizes, as few other television shows do, the genuine role that religion plays in American life”, going beyond the total avoidance (or alternatively representing religion only in terms of the binary of pure saints and atrocious sinners) of the subject by live action shows (Cantor, 1999, p.743). Religion is brought into the show via various contexts, be it during the family’s Sunday trips to church, episodes featuring Reverend Lovejoy and even through a depiction of God himself speaking about, or directly to, the other characters (Cantor, 1999, p.741). However, orthodox religion is no better distilled, and mocked, by the show than in the form of the Flanders family. The Flanders family represent an extreme example of ‘old-style morality and religion’, and is made up of

Ned, his late-wife Maude¹, and his two obedient and innocent (to the point of naiveté) sons Rod and Todd. Their righteousness, and self-righteousness, while laughable can also become vaguely threatening, with Maude at one point stating, “I don’t judge Homer and Marge; that’s for a vengeful God to do” (“Home Sweet Homediddly-Dum-Doodily”, 1995, as quoted by Cantor, 1999, p.741). However, even the infallible Ned Flanders becomes a mouthpiece through which the creators criticise the Bible, when in a frustrated conversation aimed at God he declares “I don’t drink or dance or swear...I’ve even kept kosher just to be on the safe side, I’ve done everything the Bible says, even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff” (‘Hurricane Neddy’, 1996).

The scope of the show’s satire covers far more than just religion; with various topics such as environmentalism, LGBT rights, immigration laws, the dangers surrounding the use of nuclear energy (the town’s nuclear power plant being run by the sadistic and ludicrously evil Montgomery Burns) also covered, as well as various institutions such as the military, government, and the educational system (Cantor, 1999, p.734, 742-3). In the eleventh episode of the show’s 20th season, entitled “How the Test Was Won”, a strong jab is made at the education system and its tendency of teaching-to-the-test as the students of Springfield Elementary are made to take part in the Vice President’s Assessment Test. In the words of Superintendent Chalmers: “Your scores on this test will determine how much money this suck-shack gets for years to come. So we will spend every moment of the next two weeks drilling the questions AND (emphasis) answers into your soft little skulls” (‘How the Test Was Won’, 2009). This is then followed by a sequence where the children spend music class performing songs made up of test answers, being fed alphabet soup that forms answers for lunch, and eventually simply reciting the various letters that make up the answers of the multiple choice section. On the political front, *The Simpsons* does not shy away from mocking either of the two main US political parties, be it Democratic or Republican (Cantor, 1999, p.734-735). Despite the show being pro-Democrat itself, the party is frequently satirized through the actions of Mayor Quimby, a man who frequently cheats on his wife, forgets the name of his own town on many occasions, flees said town should trouble arise, and yet who also speaks with an accent akin to that of Kennedy’s, and who in the words of Paul A. Cantor “generally acts like a Democratic urban-machine politician” (Cantor, 1999,

¹ At this point I believe that it is fair to mention that the mere inclusion of a semi-regular character’s death, which only occurred as late as the show’s eleventh season, points to the fact that this is a show that has succeeded in transcending the generic assumptions placed on its genre as a cartoon dictating that it should not include “adult” subject matter, or that it lacks any depth beyond mere “harmless” entertainment for children (Mittell, 2004, p.77).

p.735). Republicans, on the other hand, are represented in the form of a foreboding secret society that appears to manipulate the town from the shadows, the towering grey castle within which they spy on the residents of Springfield and hold their meetings perpetually surrounded by thunderclouds and lightning, and with one of their members being an actual bloodsucking vampire (Cantor, 1999, p.735). These examples are to name but a few of the socio-political or cultural topics that the show engages with, as, as Paul A. Cantor so eloquently puts it, *The Simpsons* is a show that “makes fun of everything” (Cantor, 1999, p.743).

Despite the clear discrepancy between *The Simpsons* and the animated output on which the generic assumptions about cartoons were based (or which these assumptions created), the show would still have a hard time distancing itself from the stigmas held towards its medium in the eyes of many viewers. Controversy surrounded the show’s success, primarily over fear that the show was providing mature satire in a form that was still presumably aimed at children (Mittell, 2004, p. 80). The criticism of the show’s engagement with mature and nuanced topics such as that of troubled family life and even more troublesome children is to criticise the exact reason that this case study was chosen: because it dared to go beyond the “unchallenging content” that these viewers had implied that the cartoon genre should be restricted to (Mittell, 2004, p.186). Various critics have fought to defend the show against the preconceived notions tied to its medium, still referring to the show as a cartoon (which unfortunately would have been enough for many to judge the show unfavourably) but frequently qualifying it with “additional markers of legitimacy or clarification”, be that through mentioning the fact that the show is indeed for adults, making mention of the show’s depth, or in one case referring to the show as “more than a cartoon, it’s TV’s most intelligent comedy” (Mittell, 2004, p. 182-183). Even the show itself highlights the difference between itself and what viewers have come to expect of televised cartoons through its own in-show cartoon, *The Itchy and Scratchy Show* (Mittell, 2004, p.184). The classic cat-chases-mouse cartoon does this through presenting itself as the epitome of a Saturday morning cartoon, not only in order for the show to parody cartoons of this nature, but also to further distance *The Simpsons* itself from “the cluster of assumptions typing the cartoon to mindless children’s entertainment throughout decades of television” (Mittell, 2004, p.185). In stark contrast to *Itchy and Scratchy*, *The Simpsons* was often praised on its realism, especially in terms of its depictions of realistic family life in comparison to the more ‘cartoonish’ characters populating its live action sitcom counterparts, *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) and *Married...With Children* (1987-1997) (Mittell, 2004, p.189). With the former portraying an

unrealistically ideal family, and the latter reducing the family unit to a ‘vicious cartoon’ in their constant comedic chiding of one another, The Simpson family somehow finds itself as the most recognizably human as it faithfully portrays the struggles of a dysfunctional middle-class family of five, without the burden of a laugh track nor constant one liners, nor restrictions around writers subjecting their characters to situations that might be deemed too harsh in the context of live-action televisions, as, after all, they are only cartoon characters (Mittell, 2004, p.189-190). It would be fair to state that the fact that the show is animated is what allows the show to hold the emotional weight that it has, and deal with the diverse range of topics that it does; far from being a hindrance of the show’s quality (Mittell, 2004, p.190) Mittell suggests that the stylised cartoon form, while less realistic, allows for viewers to resonate with these characters more substantially, and goes on to quote Dave Berkman, who maintains that certain aspects of life that the Simpson family portray simply can’t be reproduced outside of the realm of animation (Berkman, as cited by Mittell, 2004, p.190). Thus, here we have an argument not only for the sake of *The Simpsons* being able to push their thematic boundaries beyond that which was commonly assumed about cartoons, but that the show was even able to do so in a manner beyond the scope of its real life counterparts due the fact that the show is animated.

The Simpsons has become nothing short of iconic in the sphere of animated television, if not television in general. Born from televised animation’s worst era, and leading the genre forward into one of its best, *The Simpsons* not only had a massive impact on televised animation in the 1990’s, but also “demonstrated the possibilities of primetime animation to abandon the generic linkages to children and appeal to a broad mass audience” (Mittell, 2004, p. 80-81). Along with this, the show frequently engages in socio-political commentary, transcending stigmas restricting the genre to mere children’s entertainment. Paul A. Cantor tactfully summarises the massive accomplishments of *The Simpsons* despite the stigmas that plagued the medium of animated television when he stated that the show “may seem like mindless entertainment to many, but, in fact, it offers some of the most sophisticated comedy and satire ever to appear on American television” (Mittell, 2004, p.80-81).

Cartoon-oriented networks such as Cartoon Network had worked to broaden their target audience beyond the kids-only stigma that had plagued the genre for decades (Mittell, 2004, p. 84). Established in 1992, Cartoon Network (a network associated with all of my case studies excluding *The Simpsons*) changed preconceptions directed at the cartoon genre in the

90's through attempting to (along with the products of the second prime time boom) disassociate cartoons with the assumption that they are just for children, and did so by cater neither to adults nor children specifically, but rather to all those who enjoy cartoons (Mittell, 2004, p.84). The 24-hour cable channel dedicated entirely to cartoons boasts a viewer percentage of 15% teenagers and 40% adults (Mittell, 2004, p.83-85), and, according to Kevin S. Sandler, "prides itself on vision and creativity, exemplified by original characters, unique story lines and brazen animation style" (Sandler, 2003, p.97). In 2001, Cartoon Network introduced Adult Swim, a late-night programming block designed for adults, and the eventual home of *Rick and Morty* (2013-present) (Mittell, 2004, p.86). Butler goes on to point to the very existence of Cartoon Network's Adult Swim as proof of the popularity of cartoons amongst adults (Butler, 2007, p.358). Hye Jin Lee echoes this sentiment in a PhD dissertation focussing on the programming block itself, and attributes the establishment of this block to being to "cater to adult cartoon fans who craved more sophisticated and mature contents" (Lee, 2013, p.9).

The contemporary era of animated television programming has definitely made strides in catering to this need, as various adult-oriented cartoons exist today that deal with emotionally complex and thematically dark aspects of reality that greatly transcend the stigma of cartoons being strictly aimed at children and avoiding mature subject matter. From the violence and sexual promiscuity typical of Adam Reed's *Archer* (2009-present), to the heart-breaking introspection of Raphael Bob-Waksberg's *BoJack Horseman* (2014-present), the televised cartoon has come a long way from the realm of mere children's entertainment (Bulger, 2015). One show in particular shall be discussed in order to represent this sphere of mature cartoons, as not only does it engage with complex and nuanced themes on an individual level, but also grapples with questions facing the entirety of the human race. Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon's satirical sci-fi cartoon *Rick and Morty* (2013-present) shall be discussed with specific reference to the show's engagement with themes of Cosmic Horror, Existentialism, Nihilism, and the rejection of religion in order to provide evidence of this case study having transcended the generic assumptions held to cartoons (Bulger, 2015).

Rick and Morty is a sci-fi cartoon revolving around the titular characters, Rick Sanchez, a perpetually drunk but extremely intelligent scientist, and his shy, dim-witted grandson Morty Smith, as they take part in multi-dimensional adventures across the universe (Opperman, 2015). The show is undeniably dark (to be elaborated on later) overflowing with gratuitous violence, and made up of crass, often juvenile humour. However, in amongst all these factors,

the show uses its sci-fi setting in order to make various profound statements ranging from existential questions at a cosmic scale, to moments as small as a grandfather trying to avoid family therapy (Opperman, 2015).

The way in which the show engages with elements of sci-fi horror speaks to the show's thematic sophistication. In amongst the various pop-culture horror references made by the show in homage to the genre, the show takes of elements of Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror which entails dealing with the fear of the unknown, as well as calling into question the significance of humanity within the greater cosmos (Opperman, 2015). Reference to this phenomenon can be found in the form of Rick's portal gun, a device used to travel into an infinite amount of potentially horrifying dimensions, the inhabitants of which the viewer is only able to see once characters have walked head first into the unknown beyond the opaque green portal that the gun creates, or through various objects or disembodied alien appendages that reach out from beyond that which we can see (Opperman, 2015). A more direct reference to the work of H.P. Lovecraft and cosmic horror is the appearance of Cthulhu (a winged, octopus faced being of great power which Lovecraft made use of in his address of cosmic horror) in the opening credits of every season of the show thus far (Opperman, 2015). Cosmic Horror revolves around the idea that humans are merely insignificant beings in a greater universe has no sympathy towards them, often demonstrated through the inclusion of massive beings which humanity finds themselves at the mercy of (Cthulhu being a prime example of one of these beings). *Rick and Morty* engages directly with this concept, although admittedly with a humorous twist, in the episode "Get Schwifty", during which a species of massive floating heads demand that Earth participate in an inter-planetary singing competition for their entertainment, lest their planet be swiftly destroyed by these uncaring beings (Opperman, 2015). The show pushes this idea of human insignificance even further through their embodiment of Eugene Thacker's "Cosmic Pessimism", and their characters interactions with alternate versions of themselves (Opperman, 2015). Cosmic Pessimism relates to the idea of a universe completely indifferent to the lives of humans, and this is embodied perfectly in a scene in which Rick mutates the Earth's population into terrifying monsters, and he and Morty must abandon that reality for an alternate one, one in which the Rick and Morty of that timeline were able to cure the mutation, but also die soon after. ('Rick Potion No. 9', 2014) The two are faced with their own dead bodies, horribly mangled in an explosion, are forced to bury themselves, and slip into their place in this world. The episode ends with Morty staring blankly ahead as he walks to the lounge, passing his parents and

sister acting exactly as they always would, assumedly haunted by the knowledge that he has left his original world behind, shaken at having just buried his own dead body, and horrified at the implications of just being able to slip into a new reality and try to pretend as though nothing had ever happened. The show presents viewers with some incredibly dark and morally ambiguous elements, far beyond the assumed thematic capacity of cartoons, and through this scene pushes the theme of cosmic pessimism even further as in this narrative not only are humans insignificant in one universe, but are merely insignificant beings within one of infinite potential universes (Opperman, 2015). As Alec Opperman states: “In a multiverse beyond our comprehension, with infinite possibilities, values and meanings start to slip away...all that can remain, is pessimism” (Opperman, 2015).

Another example of the heavy, nuanced and sophisticated themes that the show engages with are those relating to Existentialism, which branches into questioning the significance of individual human life, with Opperman describing the shows links to Friedrich Nietzsche’s nihilism and Albert Camus’s absurdism in its attempts to face these existential questions (Opperman, 2015). Rick could be defined as Nihilism personified; his unmatched genius able to coldly explain away any phenomenon (one example being love) using science, and yet his alcoholism and struggle to find meaning in life, is comparable to the Enlightenment Age and the scientific revolution, and the way in which it left God irrelevant (hence Nietzsche’s famous “God is dead” statement) and the universe devoid of any meaning (Opperman, 2015). Alec Opperman describes Rick as a character that “embodies a tension between a kind of active and passive nihilism”, ‘passive’ referring to those who accept their fate of living lives without meaning, while ‘active’ refers to those who actively aim to dismantle the meanings and values of their current society and begin again (Opperman, 2015). Evidence of his passive nihilistic tendencies is provided by Opperman in a video clip of the final scene of “Auto Erotic Assimilation”, during which he attempts suicide, only failing due to being too drunk to hold his head up in order for a laser to hit him (Opperman, 2015). In terms of him being an active nihilist, there are several examples of Rick either mocking the rules or values of society, “[w]ell, scientifically, traditions are an idiot thing”, or attempting to literally end society as we know it, such as when, in a drunken state, he planned to bomb the Earth the ruined through mutation (mentioned earlier) to “get a whole fresh start” (Opperman, 2015).

Opperman continues his discussion of the way in which Existentialism is tackled in the show by referencing Absurdism, Camus and the Meeseeks; a race within the show designed to appear, perform once task given to them, and then happily cease to exist (Opperman, 2015).

Absurdism operates on the basis of two conflicting facts, that humans tend to imbue life with meaning, and that the universe is apathetic towards human life (Opperman, 2015). The Meeseeks, however, provide a stark contrast to this reality as, in the words of one of their own: “Meeseeks are not born into this world fumbling for meaning, Jerry! We are created to serve a singular purpose for which we will go to any lengths to fulfil!” (‘Meeseeks and Destroy’, as quoted by Opperman, 2015). A Meeseeks purpose is to fulfil the request given to it as soon as possible in order to die, their main goal. Absurdism, on the other hand, compares the frustrating, unending (and ultimately unachievable) struggle to find meaning in human life to that of the myth of Sisyphus and the boulder he is cursed to repeatedly push up a hill, watch roll back to the bottom, and to begin pushing once again for eternity (Opperman, 2015). Other characters in the show simply resort to hating their creators for creating them, rather than attempting to find meaning in their existence (Opperman, 2015). Camus suggests that humans should instead embrace this absurdist void in which they exist, which Morty aptly sums up in explaining that: “[n]obody exists on purpose. Nobody belongs anywhere. Everybody’s gonna [sic] die. Come watch TV?” (‘Rixty Minutes’, as quoted by Opperman, 2015).

Like *The Simpsons*, *Rick and Morty* also tackles the subject of religion, with its rejection/invalidation of religion and its acknowledgement of the misuse of science by religious groups providing further evidence of the show’s thematic sophistication (Opperman, 2015). In the episode “Get Schwifty” (mentioned previously), humans that witness the meteorological effects on the Earth caused by the giant floating heads abandon religion to form a new one dedicated to the heads, as the Principal of the local high school proclaims that “The old gods are dead, f*** all previous existing religions” and that “I’m going out onto the sidewalk, I’m dropping to my knees and pledging my eternal soul to the thing that literally controls the f***ing weather” (‘Get Schwifty, 2015) They soon become radical, sacrificing those whom they deem to be sinners to the heads via helium balloons (for transgressions as mild as simply being goth), and reducing Summer, Morty’s sister, to a condensed and extreme example of what would happen if a child were to follow religious teachings to the letter (not unlike Rod and Todd Flanders, but in this case she becomes unsettling whereas the brothers are merely meek and naïve) (‘Get Schwifty’, 2015). Opperman describes the show’s opinions on religion as a “unique kind of atheism that constantly invalidates religious figures by boiling them down to pure science”, as well as acknowledging those who misuse science in order to further their religious agendas (Opperman, 2015). This is present most notably in

the episode “Something Ricked This Way Comes”, during which Morty’s father Jerry’s refusal to accept that Pluto is no longer classified a planet (claiming that “[s]ometimes science is about conviction”) ends up in the two being escorted to Pluto by the Plutonians (drawn with pupils reminiscent of crucifixes) in order for Jerry to announce his “findings” to the Plutonian population (‘Something Ricked This Way Comes’, 2015). This is, unfortunately, done in order to convince the public that rich Plutonians are not in fact mining the core of the planet to the point where it has begun to shrink in order to preserve their luxurious way of life, with the Plutonian’s leader being fully aware that he was lying to his people for his own gain (‘Something Ricked This Way Comes’, 2015).

Engaging with such deep philosophy speaks to the sophistication of this show, as it deals not only with the topics mentioned above, but also engages in the constant subversion of expectations regarding morals, discussions of the human tendency to cling to freedom and yet that very freedom being the cause of tragedy and questions surrounding simulation vs. reality and the lines that blur them, among others (Opperman, 2015). Alongside these larger questions regarding existence and humanity are smaller, but more intimate issues such as Rick’s abandonment of his daughter for 20 years, Morty’s mother’s alcoholism, his parent’s rocky marriage and the strain Rick puts on it, and their eventual divorce in the third season (which is currently airing) and the unhealthy ways in which every member of the family is dealing with it; be it through the creation of horse hoof sculptures, the release of anger through the violent massacre of post-apocalyptic wasteland warriors, or turning themselves into a pickle under the guise of testing their scientific prowess, but really doing so in order to avoid family therapy. The show is hilariously ridiculous, but also incredibly poignant in its discussion of the realities facing humanity, from the smallest day to day struggles to issues of cosmic proportion. It is for these reasons that it can be argued that *Rick and Morty* transcends the generic assumptions placed on animated television programs regard them as mere children’s entertainment that should avoid mature subject matter, as the show is undoubtedly aimed towards adults and their concerns, and deals frankly with some of the most nuanced, complex and sophisticated themes available when discussing the fate of humanity (Bulger, 2015). As Matthew Bulger states, with a hint of influence from generic assumptions attributed to cartoons, but nonetheless proving the point being made: “It’s a bit strange that a cartoon would lead the way in addressing some of the biggest philosophical problems of the postmodern age, but *Rick and Morty* does it exceptionally well, and at least lets you laugh in between the tears” (Bulger, 2015).

Therefore, it can be seen that the two chosen adult-orientated animated television programs, *The Simpsons* and *Rick and Morty* can be argued to have transcended the generic assumptions attributed to cartoons through each show's social political commentary, as well as the way in which each address very mature and sophisticated subject matter far beyond that which cartoons are often viewed as capable of, or should be allowed to, address. *The Simpsons* was discussed in terms of the profound impact that it had on the perception of cartoons in the 1990's, as well as its socio-political commentary regarding religion, the education system, and politics, among others. It was concluded that the critical engagement of the show with these topics is what sets it apart from its Saturday Morning cartoon predecessors. The show was also discussed in terms of how the medium's stigmas affected critiques of the show, but also in terms of how the fact that the show is animated aided in the believability of the characters (which rivalled if not exceeded that of its live-action counterparts), and allowed the show to engage with subject matter that live-action shows could not. A brief discussion of Cartoon Network, the home of the programming block Adult Swim during which *Rick and Morty* airs, was had in order to explore the way in which contemporary cartoon-oriented networks have dealt with the stigmas associated with their output. It was found that a surprising amount of the network's viewers were adults, which prompted the need to produce more adult-oriented content in order to satisfy this audience. One outcome of the aim was *Rick and Morty*, which was discussed in terms of its use of Cosmic Horror in order to address human insignificance, its portrayal of the Existentialism and Nihilism in order to address the insignificance of individual human life, particularly through the character of Rick. Albert Camus's Absurdism was also discussed in the context of the show, specifically in regards to the Meeseeks characters that embody the opposite of this theory in contrast to humans, require no struggling in order to understand their purpose in life. Finally, the way in which the show frankly addresses religion and more intimate everyday human issues in contrast with its more cosmic-level topics was discussed. It was concluded that the show's engagement with such sophisticated philosophical subject matter proves that *Rick and Morty* can be regarded as having contradicted the stigmas associated to the cartoon medium as being merely shallow entertainment. Therefore, it can be seen that contemporary adult-oriented animated television programming has succeeded in transcending the generic assumptions attributed to its medium, resulting in thought-provoking, sophisticated animated shows worthy of regard by adult viewers.

Chapter 3: Redefining the Boundaries of Cartoons' Preconceived Audience - a discussion of Cartoon Network's involvement in the re-contextualisation of the cartoon genre, and the progression of cartoons implicitly aimed at younger audiences in the contemporary age in terms of their sophisticated visual elements and nuanced, mature subject matter, explored through an analysis of *Samurai Jack* and *Steven Universe*.

This chapter shall function in order to continue the discussion of the cable channel Cartoon Network beyond what has been said in the previous chapter, briefly further discussing the role that the cable channel Cartoon Network had to play on the reforming of perceptions surrounding animated programming on television and their intended audience. Two examples of shows that this network has produced, namely *Samurai Jack* (2001-2004) in its earlier years, and *Steven Universe* (2013-present) more recently, shall then be discussed in order to portray how even cartoons that are not explicitly aimed at adult audiences have been able to transcend previous assumptions related to the genre in terms of their visual prowess and the mature subject matter dealt with over the course of their run times. *Samurai Jack* will be discussed mainly in terms of the show's use of the principles of design and animation to great effect, going against previous assumptions regarding cartoons as of low quality. Along with this, the show's unique manner of storytelling, as well as the dark themes that the show addresses, shall also be discussed in order to portray how the show transcends the assumption that cartoons should not include serious subject matter. *Steven Universe* shall be discussed in terms of its nuanced, sophisticated and also occasionally dark subject matter, as well as through the way it depicts and engages with the inner turmoil of its characters, which shall be argued to be evidence of the show having gone beyond that which is stereotypically expected from a cartoon. While these two examples do stem from Cartoon Network specifically, and shall be used in order to argue for the network's ability to produce genre-transcending content, shows from other channels will also be mentioned briefly in order to describe the recent trend in contemporary animation where shows aimed primarily at a younger audience have begun to include more serious subject matter beyond that which would be expected for this category of show.

As stated previously, Cartoon Network has made great strides in distancing stigmas around cartoons from its animated output, with its success as a channel and its refusal to pander to a

specific age group (instead simply targeting anyone of any age who enjoys cartoons) eventually culminating in the network providing the “television cartoon genre with its broadest mass audience since the institution of Saturday morning in the mid-1960s” (Mittell, 2004, p.84). The 1990’s saw Cartoon Network having successfully broadened the medium’s target audience, with original programming produced in the mid to late 90s that was sure to contain elements that would appeal to any age group (erg. Physical humour for child viewers, more sophisticated humour for older viewers), as was in line with the network’s brand identity (Mittell, 2004, p.86). Following this, in the early 2000s, Cartoon Network further expanded their classification of the genre, adding a number of Japanese animated programming (known as ‘anime’) to its roster, as well as through the introduction of original shows with darker tones and more abstract stylisation (Mittell, 2004, p.90). Mittell here makes mention of *Samurai Jack* in particular, referencing the way in which the show pushed the boundaries of the typical American televised cartoon of the time through its blending of UPA-influenced stylisation (as was present in *Dexter’s Lab* and *Powerpuff Girls* as well) with Japanese influences such as the culture’s mythology and samurai films to “produce one of the more strikingly original animated television programs ever” (Mittell, 2004, p.90).

This visually stunning and deeply emotional show is a prime example of the way in which modern cartoons have gone far beyond the assumptions associated with the medium, even in the case of cartoons that are still implicitly aimed at younger viewers. Proof of this statement can be found through unpacking the show’s effective use of the core elements of visual storytelling, exceptional use of composition in the show that exemplified the principles of design, and its use of the classical principles of animation (Smith, 2017), as well as acknowledging the dark and often harrowing themes that the show deals with, both of which shall be examined forthwith.

Samurai Jack is a show that, while including plenty of what Storyboard Artist Bryan Andrews describes as ‘wacky comedy’, is not afraid to dive head first into exceedingly dark and complex subject matter (Smith, 2017). The show’s unabashed take on themes of death, slavery, sacrifice and persistence in the face of overwhelming despair distance it considerably from its shallow, product-driven predecessors, and furthermore provide proof of the show having gone far beyond the assumptions attributed to the cartoon medium, classifying them as of a medium that should not, and which do not, address ‘adult’ subject matter. *Samurai Jack* focusses on the titular character of Jack, a Samurai warrior and son of the Emperor of a

feudal Japanese kingdom who is banished into the distant future by a demon of pure evil, named Aku, before Jack can defeat him (Vine, 2014). The show consists of Jack traversing a hi-tech, super-advanced world functioning under the tyranny of Aku, populated with aliens, robots and humans alike, in search of a time portal back to the past so that he may defeat Aku before he enslaves the earth.

Kat Smalley chides traditional American action-adventure cartoons for their simplification of their in-show universes into a strict binary of good or evil, their avoidance of the portrayal of violence or horror, and the way in which they ignored the personal issues of their characters; all of which caused these show to lack ‘the depth that typified mature art’ (Smalley, para. 2, 2017). However, *Samurai Jack* embraces these factors, providing the viewer with complex characters that do not fit strictly into the category of either good or evil, with a truly horrifying villain who blatantly commits atrocious acts, and with a main character (and even a handful of smaller villains) who’s inner turmoil is addressed and explored by the show. This shall form the basis for a portion of the argument that *Samurai Jack* is able to transcend the stigmas associated with its predecessors as featuring subpar, formulaic narratives that should not delve into the realm of mature subject matter (Mittell, 2004, p.77-78).

Aku himself is not just another supervillain with some maniacal scheme defeated by the hero week to week, but is instead a terrifying, omnipresent force of pure evil, enslaving planets for their resources, destroying cities, brainwashing teenagers into becoming his followers, holding supreme power over most of the areas Jack finds himself in, and repeatedly besting Jack in his attempts to kill him and return to the past. The story of Aku’s origins in “The Birth of Evil – Part 1” (2003) features some particularly grim imagery, as a small portion of an immense black entity falls to Earth after being burnt off (but not fully destroyed) by the attacks of three gods (specifically, Odin of Viking mythology, Ra from Egyptian mythology, and Vishnu from Hinduism), causing the extinction of the dinosaurs and forming a large pool of bubbling black liquid which drags a surviving and distressed triceratops beneath its surface, one last air bubbling rising to the surface containing the animal’s dying cry (“The Birth of Evil – Part 1”, 2003). What follows is a sequence that plays out across thousands of years of the Earth’s development, with the pool taking many more victims such as a Neanderthal and his tribesmen who run to his aid, a dog who had run off from a small Japanese village (the discovery of which was met with wails of anguish by its owner which are painful to listen to), and eventually invading the Emperor’s kingdom, as evidenced by the

abandoned buildings pierced with the black tree-like structures that thrust out of the pool every time a new victim is claimed ('The Birth of Evil – Part 1', 2003). This is a truly evil being that not only poses a significant and very real threat to the lives of those in the show, but who often carries out these threats in his decimation of towns and offhanded murder of those that displease him (usually taking the form of alien or robot lackeys, but it is a violent act against these sentient creatures nonetheless). The inclusion of such a villain in an animated setting provides proof of the show having gone beyond stereotypes attributed to the medium that dismiss it as being merely "innocuous and juvenile" and "insubstantial and lightweight" (Wells, Hardstaff, 2008, p.48).

There is also an added depth to the show through the way in which they engage with certain smaller villains (often appearing in only one episode), creating multi-dimensional enemies that the viewer is able to sympathise with to the point where one almost begins rooting for them. For instance, in "The Tale of X9" (2004), an episode narrated exclusively by one of these villains, the viewer is introduced to a robot minion of Aku's out to kill Jack. However, the story is not that clear-cut, as X9 describes the experimental emotion chip placed within him by a sadistic member of the group of scientists responsible for his creation, his retirement from Aku's service of murdering conspirators against him to live out his life with his beloved dog Lulu (both of whom enjoy lounging in his apartment enjoying the sound of his trumpet playing), and his subsequent return to service once Lulu is kidnapped and held ransom ("The Tale of X9", 2004). In the final showdown in a ruined robot-making factory, X9 becomes the prey as it is Jack who stalks him from the shadows, seen only as an ominous silhouette or shadow up until silently slashing into X9 from behind, after which his familiar face is finally revealed. We never know what becomes of Lulu, but X9 is somewhat redeemed in his final moments as he begs Jack to take care of her, his glowing red eyes shifting to light blue just before he dies ("The Tale of X9", 2004).

A fair few serious and most often dark themes are presented by the show, such as the act of mercy-killing in 'Jack and the Lava Monster' (2002), slavery and subsequent (implied) murder in a coliseum setting in "Jack and the Smackback" (2002), and dealing with the remorse and despair that comes with discovering the moss covered ruins of your childhood village in a future where everyone and everything you once knew has been gone for potentially thousands of years in "Jack Remembers the Past" (2002). This last example in particular touches on some of the main concerns of the show; the sadness and guilt Jack feels

at having left his kingdom behind when tricked by Aku, and his struggle to continue fighting in the face of constant failure at every turn. When the persistent failure faced by Jack time and time again becomes too much, however, encouragement and reinvigoration is provided in order to keep a sense of hope alive amidst the despair. In ‘The Aku Infection’ (2003), Jack has to fight off a portion of Aku’s body that is slowly taking over his body and mind. The portion almost succeeds as the last shred of Jack himself pleads for help, admitting that he cannot fight the infection alone (‘The Aku Infection’, 2003). However the spirit of Jack’s parents residing within his heart remind him of how he isn’t alone, as all the lives that he has touched through his good deeds have become a part of him, and will provide for him the strength he needs to resist Aku (‘The Aku Infection’, 2003). Similarly, in ‘Jack and The Three Monks’ (2002) where Jack, after the seemingly impossible task of scaling an enormous mountain, (paralleled with his frustration felt at the beginning at the episode at having yet another one of his attempts to enter a portal and return home) gives up. Jack then experiences a vision of the human suffering caused by Aku’s reign, during which one of the monks accompanying him questions him as to whether or not he will abandon them in their time of need, whether or not he has forgotten why he struggles, and what is at stake (‘Jack and The Three Monks’, 2002). As Jack Butler describes it, the overall and compelling message of the show is that “[t]he fight against evil is constant, exhausting, and demanding, but requires waging nonetheless” (Butler, 2015). These heavy themes speak to the sophistication of the show able to present them, and along with the inclusion of serious, terrifying villains and other more nuanced and complex ones, the show succeeds in producing thought-provoking content capable of generating emotion in its audience, and through so doing it far exceeds the expectation held by many of the medium suggesting that cartoons should be viewed as nothing more than “harmless” entertainment featuring subpar narratives that should not enter the realm of “adult” subject matter (Mittell, 2004, p.77-78).

Another way in which the show surpasses the assumptions attributed to its medium is through its powerful and uniquely (and beautifully) stylised visuals, which contradict views that. Phill LaMarr, voice actor for Jack himself even states: “I don’t consider this a regular cartoon; I consider this show a work of art” (LaMarr, as quoted in Smith, 2017). In a video essay titled “The Artistry of Samurai Jack”, Animation Professor at NYU Christen Smith discusses the effective use of the core elements of visual storytelling of Genndy Tartakovsky’s *Samurai Jack* (2001-2004); making specific mention of the show’s distinctive, minimalist design that set it apart from other shows of its time, most notably through the absence of outlines typical

in other cartoons (2017). Smith also notes the challenges of this decision, and the careful selection of colour required of the design team in order to keep characters from getting lost in their environments, which the show is successful in achieving (Smith, 2017). Smith goes on to comment on the exceptional use of composition in the show that exemplifies the principles of design (these being harmony, balance, hierarchy, proportion, emphasis and contrast) present in every shot of the show (Smith, 2017). She does not justify this claim with a breakdown of any of these shots, but an analysis of one of the shots presented in her video essay (Figure 1 in the Reference Image page) can be argued to prove her case. Harmony can take the form of the repetition of certain elements (Sameer, 2014), and can be seen in this composition through the repetition of the sharp, thin, angular shapes within the environment that echo the shape of Jack's, as well as Jack's enemy's, sword; creating an evenly set out, but exceedingly hostile, arena in which the main action is about to commence. There is a sense of asymmetrical balance as the larger, heavier form in the foreground is extremely dark (and thus appears to recede away from the viewer), while Jack is the lightest form in the composition (and therefore appears to advance towards the viewer), but also makes up a much smaller portion of the composition. The large metal structure behind Jack also aids in balancing the shot with the large foreboding figure in the foreground. Thus, there is a careful asymmetrical balance held across the composition; threatening to be thrown out of whack, but aiding in portraying the tenseness of the moment. Proportion is used to great effect in this shot to emphasise how much of a challenge the fight that is about to commence will be, with the foreboding figure on the right appearing to loom over him along with the massive structures that surround him, almost trapping him within the arena. The emphasis is placed on Jack himself though colouring him in much lighter tones compared to his surroundings, drawing the viewer's attention to their hero in amongst the chaos and darkness surrounding him, while at the same time allowing them to be aware of his enemy though his massive scale within the frame, and the fact that he is the darkest form in the shot (with just a touch of light blue making up his head to catch the viewer's eye). Contrast is present in the play of light and dark between the light Jack and the dark environment and enemy, and a sense of hierarchy is promoted through the use of all of these principles in order to make Jack the focal point (the eye being drawn to him first due to his colour contrasted with his surrounds), then to his enemy (colour and scale drawing the eye across) and finally the environment (drawing attention to itself through the repetition of the pointed rectangular shapes until the view is able to appreciate its scale as well) (Kliever, 2016). Therefore, one can argue that the show's design team do take the principles of design into consideration when crafting the composition

of their shots, proving the show's visual sophistication beyond the stigmas claiming that cartoons are nothing more than low quality garbage for children who couldn't discern quality anyway (Mittell, 2004, p.77). The showrunners also prove to be unafraid to push their abilities to make use of these principles to the limit. A perfect example of this is when Jack faces a Shinobi warrior who makes use of the darkness in which to stalk his victims in "Samurai versus Ninja" (2003). In the final fight sequence, Jack reveals that he has been trained to use the light in the same way, and a fight ensues with the environment, shadows and ninja being drawn in pure black, and with Jack and the light areas of the environment rendered in pure white, leaving the show's design team with the task of creating a dynamic and compelling fight scene with only shapes in one of two tones at their disposal². Richard Vine elaborates on the quality of the show's actions scenes, describing them as "frenetic, stylish, gripping and artfully told", as well as making mention of Tartakovsky's extensive set of visual tricks such as "staccato free-frames that suddenly chop up the screen, flipping into widescreen panels" and his "brilliant use of graphics and negative space" (Vine, 2014). The show is further distinguished from typical cartoons through its minimal use of dialogue, and its fluid animation despite production restrictions, uncharacteristic of the dialogue-heavy and 'limited animation' style of most television cartoons. Tartakovsky, the show's creator, is an animator himself, and appreciates the difficulty of producing high quality work within the budget and time allocated to those working in the television business (Smith, 2017). However, the show was able to find other ways to make the most of the limited amount of frames available to them, by creating considerably more expressive and fluid motions than their typically stiff and expressionless predecessors, and through the use of the classical principles of animation (e.g. Arc, Anticipation, Secondary Action and Follow Through³) (Smith, 2017). This allowed the limited amount of drawings that the animators had to work with to "move in a lifelike and beautiful way" according to Smith (2017). One cannot deny the show's visual prowess, receiving high praise such as being declared a 'seminal cartoon

² See Figure2

³ Refer to Figures 3-6.

Fig. 3 - The use of arcs can be seen in the arced motion of Jack's body flying towards the gravestone.

Fig. 4 - Anticipation is seen through the movement before the main movement as Jack prepares to land on the gravestone, as well as through the way in which he looks off towards the left of the frame once landing, building anticipation for the eventual arrival of Aku into the frame.

Fig. 5 - Secondary action can be seen through the movement of Jack's hair, still in the process of falling even though Jack has landed, which is true to the movement of real hair that is lighter than a body and would thus return to rest more slowly, therefore making the entire movement seem more realistic

Fig. 6 - Follow Through can be seen in the movement of Aku that goes slightly beyond his initial slice into the gravestone, as if the momentum of the swing has pulled him beyond the end of his main movement, which again is true to real-life movement and thus makes the animated movement read as more realistic.

series with its self-conscious use of a range of graphic design idioms' (Wells, Hardstaff, 2008) as well as "an intelligent, artful and entertaining show that elevated the entire medium of TV animation" (Smith, 2017). It is through positive critique such as this, and the understanding of the show's adherence to (and effective execution of) the principles of design and animation, as well as the show's ability to persevere beyond the restrictions associated with the production of televised cartoons, that one can conclude that *Samurai Jack* is a contemporary cartoon which transcends the assumptions that cartoons are merely low quality garbage with subpar production values (Mittell, 2004,p.78), instead proving itself to be a visually stunning, sophisticated work of art that would earn many adult fans, and even prompt a fifth and final season to be produced for this year on Adult Swim, allowing the show to explore even darker and more violent territory (Smith, 2017).

In an article entitled "'Steven Universe' Cartoon Network's Avant-Garde Animation" (2016), Kat Smalley describes what she terms the "new era" of contemporary cartoons implicitly aimed at younger audiences, but which would work to disavow this restriction, through engaging with more 'adult' and heavy subject matter, not unlike that mentioned previously by Lee, but not included in shows that you would define as adult-only by any stretch of the imagination (Smalley, 2016, para. 9). The genre has begun to pull away from the stigmas that once restricted it, producing not only cartoons aimed at adult audiences, but also improving upon and expanding the thematic scope of cartoons that are still primarily aimed at younger audiences. Examples of shows which fit this description are Bryan Konietzko and Michael D. DiMartino's *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008), which deals intimately with the topic of war and all that comes with it, as well as Pendleton Ward's *Adventure Time* (2010-present), which has also touched on themes of war, violence and sexuality (Smalley, 2017). However, there are some topics which even these shows hesitate to depict, but which Rebecca Sugar's *Steven Universe* (2013-present) unashamedly tackles head on (Smalley, 2017). The aforementioned topics are those concerning the LGBT community, and it is Sugar's willingness to explicitly include characters and situations related to the LGBT community (where other shows have merely hinted at them at the most) that has earned her show the title of being '-the vanguard of the revolution in "children's animation"' according to Smalley (Smalley, para. 9, 2016). It is through a discussion of these themes, as well as the show's engagement with other sophisticated and nuanced topics, that *Steven Universe* will be argued to contain that transcend generic assumptions attributed to cartoons denoting it as a medium that should not enter the realm of "adult" subject matter, viewing it as nothing more

than “harmless” entertainment (Mittell, 2004, p.77).

As mentioned above when discussing *Samurai Jack*, Smalley makes mention of the lack of complexity displayed in traditional American action-adventure cartoons in terms with their tendency to avoid blending the binary of good and evil, and their disregard of subjects such as sexuality, violence, horror, and the mental state of their characters (Smalley, para. 2, 2016). This would suit the industry’s goal of selling advertisement space and creating toyetic characters, but would fail to allow the medium to transcend its ‘age ghetto’ (Smalley, para.2, 2016). However, *Steven Universe*, with its direct engagement with the topics of gender and sexuality, its portrayal of body horror and allusion to execution and genocide, and its engagement with the often traumatic internal lives of its characters, stands in stark contrast to these commercially-driven cartoons, amassing a dedicated fan base of both child and adult viewers (Brown, 2016). *Steven Universe* is a show that focuses on the titular character of Steven, a young boy learning to deal with the powers granted to him by his late alien mother (Sugar, 2013-present). He lives with three other aliens, Pearl, Garnet and Amethyst, who are thousand-year-old sentient gemstones (their names corresponding to what type of gem they are) that are able to take any form they wish as their bodies are composed of physical manifestations of light (Sugar, 2013-present). Steven himself houses his mother’s gemstone, a Rose Quartz, on his stomach, in the same place where the gem was present on her body. Together, Steven and the others (known as the Crystal Gems) fight to protect their city from gem monsters that terrorize the public, with the show slowly revealing details of the war thousands of years ago that brought the gems to Earth in the first place, and the part that they played in it. LGBT themes are present throughout the show, an inherent part of life that isn’t brought attention to, but is instead accepted as normal.

The characters which most embody LGBT themes are Pearl and Garnet, two of Steven’s three foster-mother-like parental figures. Pearl is a tragic figure who was deeply in love with Steven’s mother before her death and who still many years later grieves over her loss. She initially came to Earth not only in order to do the right thing and defend the planet, but also in order to live out her life with the woman she loved. This same-sex attraction is never once brought into question or thought of as strange by anyone within the show, and is even encouraged in “Last One Out of Beach City” (2016) where Pearl is urged by Amethyst and Steven to talk to a girl she finds attractive, and congratulated when she eventually gets her phone number. Even more blatantly LGBT is the same-sex relationship that forms Garnet,

who is the amalgamation of the two separate gems through a process known as ‘fusion’. Fusion refers to “the process in which two or more Gems combine to become a brand new entity, someone that is more than just a sum of their parts” (Brown, para. 18, 2016). Garnet herself is revealed to be one of these fusions, to the surprise of Steven who has only known fusion to last a couple hours at most, but who has known Garnet his entire life. Garnet’s ability to stay whole for as long as she has is due to the love felt between the two gems she is comprised of, Ruby and Sapphire (Brown, 2016) Both are referred to by female pronouns, and with the explicit statement of their romantic attraction towards one another within the show, their relationship is “one of the very few same-sex relationships depicted in an all-ages cartoon” (Brown, para.18, 2016). However, despite Steven’s acceptance of their relationship without hesitation, the reaction of the upper class members of gem society when the two fuse for the very first time is a negative one, with their fusion becoming an allegory for a same-sex relationship within a society that does not approve of it, with one of the matriarchs of their society even ordering for the execution of Ruby (“The Answer”, 2016). The Earth becomes their refuge, where they are allowed to be themselves and live together freely.

Hand-in-hand with this topic is the way in which the show circumvents traditional assumptions attributed to gender, which Steven emulates perfectly. Steven is the antithesis of the stereotypical young male protagonist in most cartoons, as he is deeply in touch with his emotional side (crying unashamedly at the drop of a hat), doesn’t subscribe to traditional gender roles (dressing in a skirt on one occasion, and not for comedic effect, in ‘Sadie’s Song’, 2015), is often the weakest and least knowledgeable in most situations, and who refuses to use violence unless absolutely necessary, and even then still tries his best to avoid it (Sugar, 2013-present). The gems themselves are genderless (they are rocks after all) despite using female pronouns and taking on female-coded physical forms (Brown, 2016). The act of fusion opens up further possibilities for the show to engage with the topic of gender, such as when Steven fuses with his female friend Connie for the first time in “Alone Together” (2015) to form ‘Stevonnie’. While a viewer might question the resulting gender of this amalgamation of the two children, the show never does, with both male and female characters alike showing signs of attraction towards them (as together they form a rather attractive looking teenager), and having other characters refer to Stevonnie as “they” (Brown, 2016). To use pronoun of ‘they’ in reference to the fact that Stevonnie is made up of two people, but is also a nod to those who identify outside the binary of ‘male’ or ‘female’ who prefer this pronoun due to its gender-neutral nature, just as Stevonnie themselves cannot be said to be

strictly male or female (Smalley, 2017). The inclusion of those that identify outside of the gender binary is of no doubt comforting to those who can relate or who are in the process of questioning their gender. Sugar herself (who identifies as a bisexual woman) comments on how themes such as these are seen as inappropriate to discuss with children, despite stories for children commonly featuring themes of love and attraction, and goes on to explain the importance of the inclusion of these themes, stating that “-it really makes a difference to hear stories about how someone like you can be loved” and that “I want to feel like I exist, and I want everyone else who wants to feel that way to feel that way too” (Freitas, 2016). This statement was met by thunderous applause from the largely (if not entirely) young adult audience present at the conference at she spoke. It is the inclusion of these topics which Smalley feels places the show ahead of its contemporary counterparts (mentioning shows that merely hint at LGBT relationships by name) in attempting to remove the age distinctions attributed to cartoons, and can be argued to prove the show’s ability to successfully engage with serious and nuanced subject matter far beyond the scope of its predecessors, and beyond the generic assumptions attributed to the medium (Smalley, 2017).

The show also delves into rather dark and emotionally raw spaces, featuring horror, moral ambiguity and internal turmoil that its predecessors did not, but which allows *Steven Universe* to rise to a level of maturity that these other shows did not. Instances of horror and violence are sprinkled throughout the shows, from Steven’s body being covered in teratomas during a failed attempt to shapeshift in “Cat Fingers” (2013), to Pearl being stabbed through the torso in front of him in “Steven the Sword Fighter” (2014), to the terrifying body horror present in the abominations produced by broken shards of various murdered gems being forcefully fused together and attempting to form whatever horrifying body they can (“Keeping It Together”, 2015). Execution and genocide is present in the actions of the gem nobility, willing to kill or “shatter” those that oppose their wishes (as was almost the fate of Ruby as stated above), as well as through their colonisation of various planets in order to harvest their resources, paying no mind to the living beings that may have resided there (Sugar, 2013-present). Ambiguous moral territory that Steven has to navigate is also present in the series, one significant example being presented to him in “Bismuth” (2016), where a character of the same name provides him with a weapon able to efficiently shatter enemy gems, murdering them as they had murdered so many of Bismuth’s comrades. Steven refuses, not wanting to mortally injure anyone (as his mother had also wanted, although the moral purity of her decisions also comes into question in this episode, and throughout the rest of the

series), but one is still left to consider: how many of your own have to die before you consider using deadly force in return? This is an exceedingly heavy question to be posed by a 'kids show'. Finally, the show's characters deal with a fair amount of inner turmoil not present in the work of its action-adventure predecessors, and which elevates the show above the stigmas related to cartoons dictating that they should not enter the realm of "adult" subject matter, with the genre being viewed as nothing more than "harmless" entertainment (Mittell, 2004, p.77). From the grief felt by all the characters who knew Rose that is prevalent throughout the series, to Pearl's mental instability revealed in her self-destructive tendencies in defence of Rose during battle ("Sworn to the Sword, 2015), to Amethyst's self-loathing due to her being a 'runt' and unknowingly a part of the attempted colonisation of Earth ("On the Run", 2015); the show tackles exceedingly heavy and complex topics far beyond the scope expected of a 'children's cartoon' (Smalley, 2017).

In conclusion, this chapter has functioned to continue the discussion of Cartoon Network as a channel, describing the channel's success in broadening the assumed age of animation's target audience. *Samurai Jack* was then discussed, not only in order to present an example of the quality of Cartoon Network's earlier output, but also in order to demonstrate how contemporary cartoons that are still aimed primarily at a younger audience (as opposed to contemporary examples aimed primarily at adults) have been able to transcend the generic assumptions attributed to televised animation. This show was argued to have been successful in doing so through its stunning visuals that make use of and exemplify the principles of design and of animation, elevating the show to a level of quality far above that stereotypically attributed to the cartoon medium. The show was also discussed in terms of its legitimately threatening main villain, its handful of morally ambiguous villains, the dark themes with which it deals and the inner turmoil of the main character; all acting as proof of the show's thematic sophistication beyond stigmas surrounding animated television which suggest that the medium is of a low quality and that it should not (and does not) address mature and complex subject matter. *Steven Universe* was then introduced in order to address the current output of Cartoon Networks, as well as to discuss the new wave of contemporary children's animation that is working to eliminate the age distinctions placed on cartoons through their inclusion of more serious subject matter within their shows, of which *Steven Universe* is the forerunner. The show was discussed in terms of its engagement with themes that other shows of its ilk were hesitant to touch upon (namely LGBT concerns), as well as the other serious and complex matters portrayed by the show. These were namely the inclusion of horror and

violence, dealing with moral ambiguity, and engaging with the inner turmoil of its characters. It was concluded that the show's engagement with these elements could be argued to prove the show's superiority over its action-adventure predecessors, as well as its success in having transcended the assumptions attributed to televised cartoons regarding their low quality and lack of engagement with mature themes.

Conclusion

The main objectives of this study were to describe, and determine the origins of, the generic assumptions attributed to American televised animation, as well as to argue for the case of contemporary cartoons that provide evidence of having transcended these stigmas. This was achieved through three chapters, the first to detail the history of televised animation in America and the events that played out during this time that led to cartoons earning the reputation that they did, the second to extend this history into the 1990's in order to explore the resurgence of animated programming during this time and in which two adult-oriented cartoon shows are discussed, and the third focussing specifically on the events related to the perception of cartoons in the contemporary era, featuring animated case studies that are still aimed mainly at children, in order to defend their quality in the face of stigmas attributed to their medium. Through these chapters this study was able to sufficiently contextualise the circumstances that led to cartoons facing the stigmas that they do, as well as being able to track the progression of events that led to the cartoons being produced in the contemporary era that are able to transcend these stigmas. Chapter One described the stigmas associated with cartoons, namely that they are of a low visual, narrative and thematic quality that should not engage with mature themes, and which are intended solely for the consumption of children who were deemed unable to discern the quality of whatever was placed in front of them anyway. The chapter also identifies the factors which led to these assumptions. In terms of visual quality, the technique of 'limited animation' introduced in the face of a suddenly significantly reduced budget (compared to that of theatrical animation) would indeed enable television animators to produce cartoons under these constraints, but would also come under intense scrutiny from theatrical animators who chided the method's reliance on dialogue to carry scenes in the face of the reduced movement of their characters. The influence of the television industry is also discussed, with the assumptions that cartoons are merely for children and a tool for the advertisement of toys and nothing more attributed to the actions of the industry in reaction to the potential profit to be made off of advertising directly to children. These actions would include the construction of the 'child audience' as a separate category of viewership, basing their programming off of assumptions that the industry held about cartoons (these assumptions being the same generic assumptions that haunt the medium to this day), and the intentional exclusion of adult viewership, as well as other strategies. Therefore, it was concluded that financial constraints placed on the production of television cartoons, as well as the actions of the industry that dictated its packaging, marketing, and

quality, can be blamed for the creation and perpetuation of the stigmas associated with the genre that once boasted an intergenerational audience. Chapter Two focussed on the perception by the public of animation in the 1990's, with a discussion of the sphere of animated content aimed at adults though an investigation of the quality of Matt Groening and James L. Brooks's *The Simpsons*, as well as Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon's *Rick and Morty*. The profound influence that *The Simpsons* has had on televised animation in the 1990's is documented, further tracking the progression of the perception of animation by the public through the show's success in elevating the medium above its lowest point in the 1980's, and its success in reinstating the prime-time cartoon in American television schedules. Both shows were also discussed in order to present examples of contemporary adult-oriented cartoons that were able to transcend the generic assumptions attributed to cartoons. Each was concluded to have succeeded in this endeavour, with *The Simpsons* engaging in socio-political commentary (from politics to religion to the education system) and *Rick and Morty* dealing with complex existential and cosmic questions, both far beyond the scope of what cartoons are stereotypically expected to concern themselves with. The cable channel Cartoon Network was also discussed, along with its adult-oriented programming block Adult Swim (home of *Rick and Morty*), from which it was concluded that surprising amount of the network's viewers were adults, which prompted the need to produce more adult-oriented content in order to satisfy this audience. Finally, Chapter 3 is concerned with defending the quality of contemporary cartoons that are admittedly aimed primarily at children, but which transcend age boundaries as well as the stigmas attributed to their medium. Cartoon Network and the effect that it has had on the public's perception of the age restrictions surrounding cartoons is also discussed, concluding that through the channel's refusal to pander to a specific age group, it was able to broaden the mediums target audience to a level that hadn't been achieved since the 60's. The two contemporary case studies investigated were Genndy Tartakovsky's *Samurai Jack* and Rebecca Sugar's *Steven Universe*, with the former being defended in terms of its visual and narrative quality while representing Cartoon Network's earlier output of original shows, and the latter being discussed in terms of its thematic complexity while representing Cartoon Network's current output, as well as the current wave in contemporary 'children's' animation that seek to eradicate this label through their engagement with serious subject matter (*Steven Universe* being the vanguard of this movement). It was concluded that the exceptional use of the principles of design and the classical principles of animation by *Samurai Jack's* showrunners produced a visually stunning work of art that goes far beyond the negative assumptions

attributed to the visual quality of cartoons. The show's inclusion of a truly threatening main villain, morally ambiguous smaller villains and an in-depth look into the psychological turmoil faced by the main character was concluded not only to elevate the show beyond the level of its action-adventure predecessors, but also helped to produce a dark, complex and sophisticated show that transcends assumptions labelling cartoons as merely shallow, low quality garbage made with the sole purpose of selling toys and nothing more. *Steven Universe* was concluded to be leading the charge in the new way of more serious and challenging cartoons through its inclusion of LGBT themes (avoided entirely or merely hinted at by other shows), and able to transcend its genre's stigmas through its inclusion of horror and violence, mention of execution and genocide, and engagement with the traumatic inner turmoil (and in one case, potential mental illness) of its characters, subjects of a complex and nuanced nature far above the like of that which prompted the stigmas surrounding cartoons so many years ago.

Thus, it can be stated that this study achieved its aim to track the history of American televised animation history from its inception up until the contemporary age in order to determine how and when the medium gained the stigmas that it has, as well as to prove how the genre was able to eventually transcend these assumptions through a number of sophisticated, nuanced and socially conscious cartoons that the contemporary era has produced.

Reference Images



Figure 1 Screenshot from (Smith, 2017) depicting the events of "Jack and the Traveling Creatures" (2003). Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwYgJJLrL1M&t=83s>

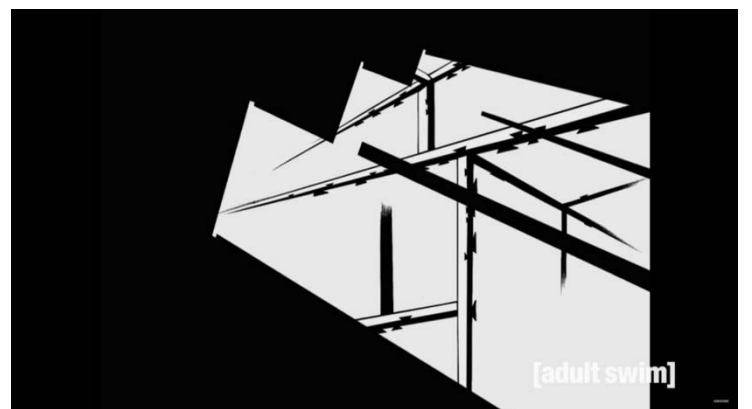


Figure 2 A series of screenshots from "The Artistry of Samurai Jack" (Smith, 2017) and "Jack vs the Ninja | Samurai Jack | Adult Swim" (Adult Swim UK, 2017), depicting the events of "Samurai versus Ninja" (2003). Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwYgJJLrL1M&t=83s> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Op-L_Xei-Lg respectively.



Figures 3-6 A series of screenshots from "The Artistry of Samurai Jack" (Smith, 2017), depicting the events of "Jack and the Zombies" (2002). Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwYgJLrL1M&t=83s>

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Rita Strong Scholarship Declaration

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