

MATURE CARTOONS

Mature Cartoons:

The Evolution of Subgenres in Adult Animation

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Television programs have been rapidly reinventing themselves since their onset in the mid 1900's. We've watched the traditional sitcom develop; we've seen the increasing prevalence of soap operas; and we've tuned into the gradual evolution of animation. Twenty years ago Americans viewed shows like *The Jetsons* and *Scooby Doo* as some of the top rated cartoons on television. At that point, animated shows were rarely on any time other than Saturday mornings and tended to be directed solely at kids.

Today, technological innovations and computer graphic manufacturing ease has brought on a new revolution of animated television shows, leaving slapstick, juvenile humor in the dust. Audiences have evolved to span age groups, as shows such as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *South Park* have become popular among both adults and late adolescents. Even Disney movies like *Finding Nemo* and *Shrek* have structured comedic methods to appeal to adults as well as children. "In truth the notion of the exclusive kids' film - like the exclusive woman's film, gay film or African-American film - is an inherently patronising one. It is a very rare picture indeed that can only be enjoyed by one distinct section of the cinema-going public. I bow to nobody in my devotion to *Sponge Bob Square Pants* and said as much in my review of the aquatic optimist's excellent first film." ("No Kidding," 2007)

Given the growing popularity of adult-themed animation, it's understandable that television networks have produced a vast selection of shows catering to these audiences' desires. One of the primary appeals of mature animation is their ability to attract an increasingly wide range of age groups. Adult audiences tend to fall primarily in the 18-34 year old age bracket ("Adult swim dominates," 2006); a generation characterized by liberal political views, Attention Deficit Disorder, and technological innovations. Many animators capitalize on these

characteristics as shows tend to last a mere 30 minutes, contain prevalent social issues, and run later in the evening or even at night.

Time Warner's article regarding the popularity of "Adult Swim," one of Cartoon Network's late night sequences of adult-themed cartoons, provides valuable tools and statistics for understanding the extent of the adult cartoon genre's popularity. The article specifies the particular age groups who watch the network, defining an overall audience concentrated in the 18-49 age groups, dominated by males in the 18-24 age bracket. Time Warner also identifies the frequency of the Adult Swim lineup, which claims 45 weekly hours on its shared channel space with Cartoon Network, which is seen in 91 million homes across the country.

Using inductive analysis, I will analyze what has become known as the "adult" or "mature" cartoon genre that has developed in relatively recent years. Through research, I have categorized four subgenres which have emerged from the adult-oriented animation genre. The texts that will be focused on include Fox's *Family Guy*, *American Dad*, *King of the Hill*, and *The Simpsons*; Cartoon Network's *Aqua Teen Hungerforce*, *Robot Chicken* and *Sealab 2021*; Comedy Central's *South Park* and *Drawn Together*; Nickelodeons *Ren & Stimpy*, and *Sponge Bob Square Pants*; MTV's *Daria* and *Beavis & Butthead*; and *Saturday Night Live* animated sketches including, "*The Ambiguously Gay Duo*," and "*TV Funhouse*." These texts are exemplary of the mass success found in the adult cartoon genre, and have directly influenced the ensuing subgenres that have developed.

The Birth of a Brand; the Two Dimensional Comedy

It is debatable where the adult cartoon genre initially got its start. The widespread perception that animation was originally aimed at children actually couldn't be farther from the

truth, according to K. Greenaway (2005). Greenaway argues that animated shows like *The Flintstones* or *The Jetsons* were made with the intention of being viewed primarily by adults.

The character most representative of this claim is none other than Betty Boop: “The curvaceous cabaret singer created by Max Fleischer’s studio in 1930 caused quite a stir with her flirtatious form and skimpy clothing. She was considered so risqué, in fact, that the precursors to film censors insisted Betty Boop artists pencil in a longer skirt and erase her décolletage” (p. 1). It was not until Disney created their first feature length animated film in 1938, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, that the trend to make children’s animation began to take hold.

Subsequent to *Snow White*, the cartoon industry skyrocketed. Animation defined the victorious Walt Disney Empire, and became an instant hit on numerous television networks. This triumphant power of youth-oriented animation overshadowed adult-themed cartoons, and the concept disappeared for decades. A. Larson talks about the connection between animation and children’s entertainment in his article *Re-drawing the bottom line*:

“Suffice to say that animation’s assumed, conventionalized appeal to pre-adolescent viewers has been the single most determining force driving the now nearly century-long evolution of filmed and televisual animation.” (Larson, 2003, p. 59)

The economic vigor that came with children’s animation radically eclipsed that of adults, and cartoons became customarily marketed to kids.

Although shows like *The Flintstones* have been said to target adults, the shows failed to contain content that was inappropriate to children; thus, they were accepted as family entertainment. It wasn’t until about 20 years ago that cartoons began being marketed to adults, and became unsuitable for kid viewing. “At the opening of the show, these words flash on a black screen: ‘This episode may contain explicit language and brief moments of animated

nudity.’ It’s read by a low voice right out of Law & Order. So begins the adult cartoon, one of dozens now on TV” (Shain, 2005).

This low voice of warning in the opening of the cartoon in addition to the parental controls and program ratings that pop up in the left corner of the screen, define the show as “mature” to whomever may mistake it. The onset of adult cartoons came at a time where the FCC was strengthening and parents of young kids were worrying about the content their children were viewing on television. These worries developed into strict guidelines in regards to show content. The “mature” cartoon became a show for “mature” audiences as TV-MA or TV-14 was flashed on television screens preceding shows containing adult content.

Despite adult content and ageless characters, mature cartoons seem to have one other prominent theme in common: social and political commentary. The adult cartoon epidemic seems to be centered on having a specific, possibly controversial, point. Adults are able to get the “ability to watch the R-rated stuff they were denied as children with the whimsy that cartoons brought to them in the first place” (Sposato, 2007, p. 1). Sposato’s article discusses the issues shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park* address. It alludes to the main reasons people became, and remain, interested in these shows, as well as how that is, in and of itself, a reflection of our society.

Four dominant subgenres have emerged from the adult cartoon genre over the last two decades: the Dysfunctional Family, the Delinquent Adolescents, the Bizarre and the Parody.

The Dysfunctional Family Cartoon

Dysfunctional families aren’t an unfamiliar topic to the dominant viewers of adult animation. Many television sitcoms depict this social issue in a comedic means, while other film and television mediums have found much success in dramatizing the dysfunctional family.

However, cartoons have a rare advantage in this respect, as humor in animation has abundant flexibility. Cartoons are often capable of making issues significantly more humorous than most actor depictions. Stanton (2006) of the *Western Mail* claims: “Cartoons can say things other genres wouldn’t dare. Violence is somehow tolerated because it is not seen as real, and political comment and personal insult are often allowed, the message sent through the apparently harmless guise of a computer-generated character.” (p. 1)

According to Stanton, it is the stereotypical characters that pervade the adult cartoon genre who ensure a diverse audience for the shows. He claims the audience that has developed encompasses a wide variety of age groups. The viewer cravings justify the shift from the cartoons we used to know and love (e.g. *Tom and Jerry* and *Topcat*) to the adult cartoons that are becoming popular today.

In 1989, a short animated piece at the beginning of *The Tracy Ullman Show* featured rough sketches of a family America would come to know as *The Simpsons*. *The Simpsons*, as the original and longest running mature cartoon, unknowingly birthed a genre. The dysfunctional family cartoon became one of the most popular formulas in adult-themed animation. Its follow up came years later in shows like *Family Guy*, *King of the Hill*, and *American Dad*.

The characteristic formula depicted among the dysfunctional family subgenre is a focus on the typical American family unit. They are not to be mistaken for family shows, however. “Family Guy offers poop jokes, sex gags, pop-culture references, and baby Stewie, the big-faced, pompous, British-sounding, prone-to-cussing toddler, who constantly plots how to kill his mother.” (Oldenburg, 2005, p. 2) Oldenburg discusses the mature content present in adult-themed animation in her article. Despite its sophisticated subject matter, however, the genre continues to find an audience in younger children.

It is evident in almost all television that audiences often look to relate to characters or situations. Animation, in general, tends to reinforce this, and it is evident in the dysfunctional family cartoon. Middle-America class stereotypes are abundant throughout the shows. In this adult animation subgenre, we watch a typical family with typical problems develop in a very atypical manner. D. F. Alters states: “Often the jokes play off the Simpson’s stereotypical working-class attributes, with much humor derived from Homer’s ignorance, his drinking buddies’ travails, or Marge’s taste in household decorations...*The Simpsons* offers standards of family and behavior through stories about characters struggling with basic and changing issues in American family life.” (Alters, 2003, p. 169)

Generally illustrating life in middle-American households, family dwellings in the dysfunctional family subgenre tend to be basic or modest, and are usually set in suburban cities and neighborhoods. *The Simpsons* takes place in ‘Springfield,’ a fictional town that seems to represent anywhere U.S.A. Similar is the setting of *Family Guy*, located in the story bound city of Quahog, Rhode Island, represented as a suburb of Providence; and that of *American Dad*, which is set in the mock town of Langley Falls, Virginia, and is actually a composite of Langley and Great Falls, Virginia, located near Washington, D.C. The key to this subgenre, however, does not lie in the setting, but rather in the father character that seems to be the overpowering presence as the simplistic and archetypal beer drinking, Archie Bunker-esque dad.

Sharon Hartman’s critique of *The Simpsons* (as cited in D. F. Alters, 2003), defines this convention further. She claims *The Simpsons* “is based on stereotypes of working-class culture. Like Archie Bunker, *The Simpsons* bear many markers of working class stereotypes: Homer’s beer belly, his low level security job at the nuclear power plant, his marriage to Marge while they were still in high school. Even their diet is mock working class, pure fantasy Elvis: pork chops,

mashed potatoes, and Homer's stay-home-from-church breakfast of a caramel filled waffle wrapped around a stick of butter on a toothpick." (p. 168)

Homer Simpson was the first to characterize what we can refer to as the 'dysfunctional dad.' In *Family Guy*, Peter Griffon plays this father figure. His tendency for drunken behavior, his blue collar job as an assembly line worker in a toy factory, and his loud, obnoxious laugh make him easily comparable to the classic Homer Simpson character. *King of the Hill* follows the dysfunctional dad standard set by *The Simpsons* with trashy Hank Hill, a propane salesman and manager of Strickland Propane, who will never turn down good beer.

Although the dysfunctional dad serves a unifying purpose in the subgenre, the dysfunctional family is not without a wife and kids, and sometimes even a pet. The wife character tends to be more intellectual, yet less outspoken than her husband in the dysfunctional family cartoon. Characterized as tolerant, the wife ordinarily serves a supporting role, yet is understood to be the foundation of the family. As is the case in *Family Guy*, where Louis's role tends to be primarily one of maintenance, as she finds herself picking up the pieces after her husband, Peter, time and again. Yet Louis also serves as a crutch for the family if and when any issues should arrive.

The kids in the dysfunctional family tend to be youthful adolescents. Often at least one child embraces delinquency, as with Stewie Griffon in *Family Guy*, whose foul mouth is used to vocalize his hatred for his own mother; and Bart in *The Simpsons*, who repetitively finds himself in detention for his careless behavior. Their role tends to reinforce dysfunction, usually coming across as irresponsible or reckless. Another prominent role can be found in the child who seems to shine above the rest intellectually. Lisa Simpson's youth genius depicts this in *The Simpsons*, while baby Stewie's limitless vocabulary is exemplary of it in *Family Guy*.

The dysfunctional family subgenre has become one of the most successful formulas in television animation. After *Family Guy* was dropped from the air prematurely in 2002, it developed such a cult following in syndication that Fox wanted it back. Creator Seth MacFarlane capitalized on the growing popularity of this subgenre and developed another dysfunctional family cartoon, *American Dad*, to bring to Fox with the new *Family Guy* season. Thus far, neither show has showed any signs of losing momentum.

The Delinquent Adolescent Cartoon

Similar to dysfunctional families, most generations are familiar with delinquent children or teens. The delinquent adolescent cartoon tends to follow a formula spotlighting the crude or lewd nature of comedy. This category of adult themed animation has developed a propensity for toilet humor, gross-outs, and elaborate sexual innuendos.

Indulging every 13 year old boy's desires, the delinquent adolescent cartoon follows a formula beyond its unrefined style of humor. Usually focused on middle to high school aged Generation X kids, this subgenre tends to develop teenage angst into an animated farce. With rudimentary plot lines, and ambiguous settings, the focus of the delinquent genre does not lie in the story or setting, but lies in the adolescent characters themselves. Parents are usually missing, preoccupied or substandard, and kids in delinquent adolescent cartoons often find themselves free to get into trouble, and happy to do so.

In 1993, MTV introduced *Beavis & Butthead* to America. Greeted with harsh reviews and parental protest, *Beavis & Butthead* seemed potentially doomed. But its popularity only grew and the cult following it developed eventually led to a discovery in the adult animation genre; crude or lewd humor is an acceptable primary source of comedy. Thus, the delinquent adolescent cartoon was born.

Almost always preceded by a ‘parental advisory’ warning, the delinquent adolescent cartoon has, in fact, developed a large following encompassing a variety of ages. *Beavis & Butthead* became so popular it led to the spin-off known as *Daria*, which became an MTV signature show, and a cult classic in its own right during its five-year run from 1997 to 2002 (Newman, 2003, p. 186).

Another revolutionary show in the delinquent adolescent subgenre is *South Park*, created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone in 1997. This series upped the ante after *Beavis & Butthead*, as its distasteful language and gross-out plot lines offended parents everywhere. *South Park* focuses on four core adolescent characters: Kenny, who somehow or other gets killed in every episode; Cartman, the foul mouthed fat kid with a ‘crack whore’ for a mother; Stanley, the easily influenced, but good natured kid; and Kyle, the Jewish, most moral member of the group.

Following the trends set by *Beavis & Butthead* and *South Park* is more difficult, as censorship and the FCC can inhibit these programs from “flowering” to their maximum potential. *South Park* has sparked controversy with its taboo subject matter, eventually causing Comedy Central to go so far as to pull episodes from the air waves. *Mission Hill*, a Cartoon Network Production with a similar delinquent formula, lasted only 13 episodes.

The Bizarre Cartoon

The bizarre cartoon is a subgenre comprised of less realistic plotlines and sometimes over the top fantastical elements. Often the bizarre cartoon entails animals with human characteristics, such as Nickelodeons *Ren & Stimpy*; or, as in the case of the Cartoon Network hit *Aqua Teen Hungerforce*, involves personified objects. Following a near identical formula is *Saturday Night Live’s TV Funhouse*, which uses what is referred to as ‘Anipal’ puppets to satire media and politics.

The format of the bizarre cartoon tends to be relatively random, utilizing arbitrary and unsystematic sequences with underlying, and sometimes overt, social commentary. Settings and character types are not unpredictable, but rather unfamiliar, and irony frequently becomes the source of humor. The bizarre cartoon caters to a more specific audience tending to fall in late adolescent to younger adult male age groups, although their female fanbase is growing.

Part of the irony portrayed in the bizarre cartoon, may be the play on children's animation that is depicted in bizarre cartoon characters. The outlandish creatures that are created through shows like *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Ren and Stimpy* have oddly similar features to characters found in strictly children's shows like *The Teletubbies*. The fantastical elements of cartoons are used as humor mechanisms, and in a comical paradox, seem to vaguely remind us of the childhood characters we watched so diligently as kids.

The bizarre cartoon tends to use sarcasm and surreal humor. Most texts have found their success on networks like Cartoon Network, usually featured in the late night 'Adult Swim' line ups. In *Aqua Teen Hungerforce*, three anthropomorphic fast food items, including a soda and fries, vigilantly and amusingly fight crime. Episodes tend to lack continuity amongst them; characters can leave or die off in one episode and be back healthy and happy in the very next. The focus of the bizarre cartoon tends to lie more so in character interaction rather than in the actual plot. Viewers are inclined to tune in for the tongue in cheek banter rather than for the actual storyline.

The Parody Cartoon

The parody cartoon is notorious for poking fun at conservative values, religion, racism, or pop culture in a provocative manner. Characters tend to be recognizable as well known pop culture figures or as archetypes, as in comedy Central's *Drawn Together*. *Drawn Together* was

advertised, upon its 2004 pilot, as the first animated reality show. However the show actually was a parody of reality shows, spoofing MTV's *The Real World* with their tagline: "Find out what happens when cartoon characters stop being polite- and start making out in hot tubs."

The formula for the adult Parody cartoon is evident in the retro feel presented in the animation, as in shows like *Drawn Together*, *Robot Chicken*, *Sealab 2021* and *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*. Character types tend to be familiar or stereotypical characters that we've seen emerge in media or pop culture. Episodes rarely utilize continuity editing, and most of the humor lies in one liners or short sequences. *Robot Chicken*, for example, may have a Super Mario sequence in the same episode that contains a mock Napoleon Bonaparte sequence.

The humor in these bizarre cartoons tends to capitalize on controversial current events or mainstream entertainment, as is apparent in *Saturday Night Live*'s "*The Ambiguously Gay Duo*", who have exploited a wide range of issues from homosexuality to Janet Reno. Using fantastical characters in elaborate settings can often serve to euphemize these messages in a humorous means. The messages tend to come across as less offensive to their audience when presented by unrealistic, comical characters.

Conclusion

As adult animation remains in its cultivation stages, its subgenres continue to transform themselves, as well. These revolutionary subgenre formulas seem to drive adult animation success by introducing older viewers to a fresh and contemporary spin on both comedy and animation. Although the original delinquent family formula started by *The Simpsons* seems to be, by far, the most triumphant subgenre thus far; the adult cartoon genre has just begun evolving, and will, no doubt, have a great deal of further progression in store for the future.

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