

# ANIMATION

# A WORLD HISTORY

VOLUME 3

CONTEMPORARY TIMES

GIANNALBERTO  
BENDAZZI

# ANIMATION: A WORLD HISTORY, VOLUME III

A continuation of 1994's groundbreaking *Cartoons*, Giannalberto Bendazzi's *Animation: A World History* is the largest, deepest, most comprehensive text of its kind, based on the idea that animation is an art form that deserves its own place in scholarship. Bendazzi delves beyond just Disney, offering readers glimpses into the animation of Russia, Africa, Latin America, and other often-neglected areas and introducing over fifty previously undiscovered artists. Full of firsthand, never-before-investigated, and elsewhere-unavailable information, *Animation: A World History* encompasses the history of animation production on every continent over the span of three centuries.

Features include:

- Over 200 high-quality head shots and film stills to add visual reference to your research
- Detailed information on hundreds of never-before-researched animators and films
- Coverage of animation from more than ninety countries and every major region of the world
- Chronological and geographical organization for quick access to the information you're looking for

Volume III catches you up to speed on the state of animation from 1991 to the present. Although characterized by such trends as economic globalization, the expansion of television series, emerging markets in countries like China and India, and the consolidation of elitist *auteur* animation, the story of contemporary animation is still open to interpretation. With an abundance of firsthand research and topics ranging from Nickelodeon and Pixar to modern Estonian animation, this book is the most complete record of modern animation on the market and is essential reading for all serious students of animation history.

A former professor at the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore and the Università degli Studi of Milan, Italian-born **Giannalberto Bendazzi** has been thoroughly investigating the history of animation for more than forty years. A founding member of the Society for Animation Studies, he authored or edited various classics in a number of languages, and has lectured extensively on every continent.

‘Giannalberto Bendazzi is a highly gifted historian, scholar, observer, teacher, and most of all, lover of animation in all of its many forms. His painstaking and detailed research, as well as his social and cultural observations about the various times during which many animated pieces were produced, give his writing an authenticity rarely seen in other books on the subject. I cannot think of anything better than to curl up with one of his books and have him tell me the world history of the animation medium I love.’

**Eric Goldberg, Animator and Director,  
Walt Disney Animation Studios**

‘Giannalberto Bendazzi’s book gives us the complete overview of how the art of animation developed around the world in the last one hundred years. It is a book global in scope for an art form now global in appeal and being created around the world. This work is an essential addition to the library of any serious scholar of cinema.’

**Tom Sito, Chair of Animation,  
University of Southern California**

‘A staple of any animation library, this encyclopedic book covers the far reaches of production worldwide, throughout history. It is an incredible resource from one of the animation world’s leading scholars.’

**Maureen Furniss, Director of the Program in  
Experimental Animation at CalArts**

‘Giannalberto Bendazzi is one of the world’s finest historians and scholars of the art of animation. We are indeed fortunate that his thorough research, cogent perceptions, and eloquent writing is now in this ... acclaimed masterly tome on world animation.’

**John Canemaker, Oscar winning independent Animator,  
Animation Historian, Author, and Professor**

‘I feel that one looks into Giannalberto Bendazzi’s exhaustive book as one does into a mirror – it is the whole history of the animated film and all its creators... In taking up such a grand endeavor, Bendazzi has shown a determination, a predisposition, and above all, a talent comparable to that of the finest filmmakers... With this talent Giannalberto Bendazzi gives meaning to our work. To our creativity and volition, to both the ability to withstand hard work and the temperamental nature of a creative spirit, to study, to our artistic caprices, to accuracy, and to our eccentricities, creative perfection and human imperfection, expectations and improvisations, passions and doubts, successes and failures... This is a book that has long been anticipated by professionals and enthusiasts of animation from all over the world.’

**Jerzy Kucia, Director, Poland**

‘Giannalberto Bendazzi is the greatest animation historian I have ever met.’

**Priit Pärn, Director, Estonia**

‘I am extremely proud that Giannalberto Bendazzi, at the beginning of my career, was my first official biographer. And I like to believe that I was the flame that led him to become one of the world’s top experts in the field of animation.’

**Bruno Bozzetto, Director, Italy**

‘I don’t know any historian of animation more reliable than Giannalberto Bendazzi.’

**Yamamura Koji, Director, Japan**

‘I have been anxiously waiting for this sum total on animation... Giannalberto Bendazzi monitored, saw, and noted everything and met everyone in the world of my beloved profession – and for so long, way before it was fashionable. Wherever I went – to both festivals and meetings throughout continents – he was there. Welcome to the monumental book that takes into account a great art and the whole planet.’

**Michel Ocelot, Director, France**

# ANIMATION: A WORLD HISTORY

## Volume III: Contemporary Times

Giannalberto Bendazzi

CRC Press  
Taylor & Francis Group  
6000 Broken Sound Parkway NW, Suite 300  
Boca Raton, FL 33487-2742

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
A catalog record for this title has been requested.

ISBN: 978-1-138-85482-6 (hbk)  
ISBN: 978-1-315-72074-6 (ebk)  
ISBN: 978-1-138-94307-0 (pack)  
DOI: 10.4324/9781315720746

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# THE SIXTH PERIOD

The Sixth Period, since 1991, features economic globalization, the expansion of television series, developments in such countries as Japan, Korea, China, and India, and the consolidation of elitist *auteur* animation. But it is impossible to write history while it is in the making. So we'll leave this period, its contributions, and its legacy open to interpretation as we explore these 'Contemporary Times (1991–2015)'.



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# CONTEMPORARY TIMES

## The Last Days of the Wall

‘This Government has decided to grant its citizens the permanent right to travel abroad,’ said Günter Schabowski, spokesman of the new government of the German Democratic Republic.

‘And how?’ asked Riccardo Ehrmann, an Italian journalist.

‘Permanent expatriation can be done via any frontier station between the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany.’

‘Is this decree in force for West Berlin, too?’

‘... Yes, yes.’

‘Since when?’

‘Uh . . . as far as I know, it comes into force, well . . . *ab sofort*.’

It was the beginning of the end. *Ab sofort* means ‘straightaway’ in German. The live broadcast press conference ended with these words at 7:01 p.m. Straightaway, tens of thousands of East Berliners rushed to the crossings to go west and massed there until the East border guards, who had watched TV in their turn and hadn’t received any official instruction, opened the gates wide and restricted themselves to directing traffic.

It was 9 November 1989. The border was actually supposed to open the next day, but nobody had briefed Schabowski. A blunder by the over-efficient Communist Party triggered the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Between 1989 and 1991, the Eastern European satellite countries abandoned Communist rule and the Soviet protectorate. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania broke from the Soviet Union itself, which had included them since the Second World War. On 24 August 1991 the Ukraine left the Soviet Union and declared its independence. Moldova, Tajikistan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Byelorussia (later Belarus), Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan followed. By

the end of the year the Cold War was definitely over. Only the division between North and South Korea remained.

Western leaders experienced various feelings during those years. Bliss was not among them. The status quo had pleased everyone, and after 1980, when the Soviets became bogged down in Afghanistan and the Poles openly and steadily started opposing the regime, the chancelleries of the entire Northern hemisphere embarked more or less secretly – and more and more frantically, after the rise to power of reformist Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 – in a piloted strategy to let the Soviet Union lose the Cold War without losing face.

The West Germans were exhilarated by the reunion with their Eastern brothers, but the French had a joke: ‘We love Germany that much that we are happy to have two of them’. Russians, Poles, the British, Czechs, and Americans all agreed. After more than forty years of Communist rule, Eastern European countries had to face, all at once, an embarrassingly difficult commodity: the free market. Poverty arose and many people migrated to the US, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and Spain, causing serious social problems that those countries had wished to avoid.

The map of Europe was redrawn for the third time in little more than seventy years. Germany was unified, the Czech Republic and Slovakia split amicably, and Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan left the USSR. Yugoslavia became a battlefield. Twenty years of fratricidal atrocities and ambiguous international military interventions followed. By 2010, the former Yugoslav territory was occupied by the independent states of Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia (officially called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), and Kosovo (partially recognized).

## An Animation Notebook

1. What implications did all of this have for animation? The fall of the Soviet Empire brought with it the end of the State-based economy. As far as cinema was concerned, it was the end of the State-funded film industry. Films continued to be made sporadically and states continued to be the films' patrons, but only in a disorderly and casual way. In effect, what was known as 'animation from the Eastern countries' ceased to exist.
2. Around 1990, in Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Japan, South Korea, and other countries, there was a sudden, unexpected demand from the public and from new television stations for cartoons. In the European Union between 1989 and 1992, the consumption and production of TV animation increased by 15 to 30 percent each year. France, the largest European producer of cartoons, went from creating 61 hours a year in 1988 to 237 hours a year in 1994. Between 1985 and 1996, the US market increased from 810 million to 4,000 million dollars. In 1995 in Japan, 80 weekly animated TV series lit up the domestic screens. In Taiwan, Wang Film Productions had more than a thousand people on the payroll, and most of the time worked for Warner Brothers. There were many booms in what had been traditionally a field of subsistence.
3. The global spread of personal computers, the Internet, and easy-to-use software for animation (such as Flash) opened the way for an entirely new network – animation on the Web. Production was cheap. Creating an Internet site presented no obstacles, so the filters of production, distribution, theatrical exhibition (the last ring of the goods chain, from production to consumption), and broadcast were wholly eliminated. Making an animated film became an accessible art, like writing poetry. (After the initial enthusiasm, spurred by a sense of freedom of expression without limits, the disappointments came. Despite the many new artists using the medium, works worth remembering on the Web were rare).
4. From the late 1980s onwards, there was a marked growth in animation schools, both in the number of institutions and in their quality. First in the United States, and then gradually throughout the rest of the world, universities, academies of art, and film schools offered courses for aspiring animators. At international festivals, graduation films often were presented as a separate category, with separate awards; frequently these débuts were of high quality. All this coexisted with fads, some filmmakers were adopted as models for imitation (the most exploited of these in the decade from 1990 to 2000 was Jan Švankmajer), and the unfortunate belief persisted that computer software would perform the creative tasks of animation.
5. In 1995, the great success of the feature *Toy Story*, directed by John Lasseter, put an end to the experimental era of computer-generated and animated images. Algorithms and pixels were no longer called 'new technology'; they became everyday 'digital technology'. It was here to stay, and cels and ink and paint departments became outmoded.
6. Hybridization became the rule in film production – at least in blockbusters. Techniques and technologies that had been experimented with in animation, or that already belonged to animation, were absorbed by Hollywood film producers. Live-action shooting combined with postproduction computer special effects became standard. Many people thought live-action was becoming artificial-action. Cinema was going back to its origins, when animation and live-action worked together.
7. The road forked, and forked, and forked again. Animation entered the new markets of the Web, special effects proliferated, and then mobile phones arrived, and music videos, video games, and so on.

What happened after the early 1990s in animation is still too recent for us to have a historically clear perspective on the events and movements. The following pages document, as far as is possible at the present time, and in no way exhaustively, the films and movements that seem to have significance for the larger history of animation.

# 2

## NORTH AMERICA

### Is TV an Art Too?<sup>1</sup>

In the 1980s, American TV changed definitively. The monopoly of the three major channels (ABC, NBC, and CBS) was broken by a new network, Fox, and by the growth and spread of cable TV. From then on, there was a differentiation of supply and demand, with programmes oriented to different audiences. TV series had to cater to these new and diverse audiences in order to catch their attention.

The late 1980s, called the beginning of the Second Golden Age<sup>2</sup> of TV, represented the turning point. It marked the birth of Quality TV, a new style of American fiction. Quality TV consisted of an open serial format, multiple plots, controversial subjects, and a large ensemble cast. It created a new genre by mixing old ones, using quotations and self-referential elements. The visual element became a fundamental aspect of these series.<sup>3</sup>

The most important examples of Quality TV in the 1980s included *Hill Street Blues*, *St. Elsewhere*, *Moonlighting*, *Miami Vice*, *China Beach*, *L.A. Law*, and *Thirtysomething*. During the 1990s, differentiation was of paramount importance, as was seen in *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek*, *ER*, *NYPD Blue*, *Law and Order*, *The West Wing*, and so on. By the turn of the century, Quality TV was a stylistic trend.

The first phase of Quality TV referred to the *network era*, but cable and satellite TV were developing too. For instance, HBO made its own Quality TV series, without the previous restrictions on content, including: *Sex and the*

*City*, *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, and *The Wire*. Networks made *24*, *Lost*, *Desperate Housewives*, *CSI*, *Ugly Betty*, and *House M.D.* New cable TV channels presented *Dexter*, *Weeds*, and *Mad Men*.<sup>4</sup>

### Animation Followed

The new trend also involved animation. In 1989 *The Simpsons* broke with TV tradition, opening a new 'TV Animation Golden Age'.<sup>5</sup> Thanks to *The Simpsons*, aired in prime time, animated series gained visibility and prestige in networks. Meanwhile, cartoons were also promoted by cable channels in their programme schedules, and their production increased.

Animated series were no longer just for children. They were programmed on prime time and aimed at people aged between 18 and 49, the most valuable target audience. Cable channels differentiated programmes according to various targets: preteens, tweens (between middle childhood and adolescence), teenagers, and young adults. Programmes for the youngest age groups represented mainly pedagogic experiments. The middle category aimed at creating a narrative and stylistic mix, hoping to attract a more adult audience as well. The last category took a visually and verbally irreverent approach.

*The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* were two of Fox's highest-rated programmes; *South Park* was cable TV station Comedy Central's highest-rated programme.<sup>6</sup> Cartoons

<sup>1</sup> By Stefania Carini.

<sup>2</sup> The first Golden Age was the period between the late 1940s and the 1950s.

<sup>3</sup> See J. T. Caldwell, *Televisuality. Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> See also Stefania Carini, *Il testo espanso*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, eds, *Prime Time Animation. Television Animation and American Culture*, Routledge, New York, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> D. Leonard, '“South Park” creators haven't lost their edge', last modified 2010, <http://money.cnn.com/>.



became valuable commodities. Animation represented the core business for media conglomerates, which worked across different connected fields. Cartoons soon became a multiplatform service (TV, DVD, Internet, video games, etc.), and their characters turned out to be great icons, generating huge levels of merchandising.

Animated series became the way to differentiate, both for cable TV and the networks. Furthermore, thanks to their international circulation, they also became an important part of global pop culture. As for their narratives, the most important difference from the past was the better quality of the screenplays.

The new animated series used different comic forms, from satire to the grotesque, and parody with quotations, self-referentiality, and postmodern irony. The multifaceted comedies often had surreal elements and fast, frenetic timing. Thanks to animated series, the comic genre was renewed: *The Simpson* transformed the live sitcom.

Limited animation became a conscious stylistic choice. Moreover, cartoons showed graphic research: the style was characterized by grotesque deformity or by personal approaches that echoed UPA. Stylized geometric shapes and strong colours were among these cartoons' main features.

## Sub-Period 1: The Beginning, 1989–1998<sup>7</sup>

*The Simpsons* by Matt Groening represented the first successful cartoon example of Quality TV. It marked a big change, both in the history of animation and in the history of the sitcom. The decade witnessed other important changes, such as the increased role of cable channels and new brands, including the Cartoon Network.

*The Simpsons*<sup>8</sup> was created in 1989 by Matt Groening (b. Portland, Oregon, 15 February 1954). Groening was a comic artist and writer whose first success was *Life in Hell*,<sup>9</sup> published in the innovative *Wet Magazine*. It attracted the attention of James L. Brooks (b. North Bergen, New Jersey, 9 May 1940), creator of the TV series *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970–1977) and *Lou Grant* (1977–1982), who was at that time working at Fox. The new network needed something to break the oligopoly of CBS, ABC, and NBC – something new and

unexpected. Brooks was working on the sitcom *The Tracey Ullman Show* and asked Groening to adapt *Life in Hell* for that programme.

Groening created a short film series with a dysfunctional family; these were the first Simpsons cartoons. Brooks loved them and convinced the network to create a complete series for prime time, which hadn't happened since *The Flintstones*. The sitcom scriptwriter Sam Simon (b. California, 6 June 1955, who had worked on *Taxi*, *Cin Cin*, and *The Tracey Ullman Show*) joined the crew. *The Simpsons* soon became one of the most watched shows in America, quickly spreading round the world and becoming a classic. The target audience was young adults; for this reason, taboo subjects were allowed. The visual style was complex, using a language close to live-action cinema.

The Simpsons are yellow characters with big eyes. The family is composed of the stupid father Homer, the careful mother Marge, the smart daughter Lisa, the little-boy brat Bart, and the baby girl Maggie. Homer works at a nuclear power plant, Marge is a housewife, and Bart and Lisa attend school. They live in Springfield, a small town full of strange characters. The drawing style was generally grotesque, though it changed over the years.

Groening defined his work as 'the hallucination of a sitcom'. Each episode focused on a seemingly meaningless subject and developed it into a complex story. Characters were often involved in catastrophic adventures, but in the end everything went back to ordinary life. It was not a traditional happy ending or a return to status quo but the characters experienced a kind of 'end of hallucination'.

*The Simpsons* was a subversive satire of American middle class and culture. It created a dense text, partly by quoting from TV, cinema, literature, and pop culture. Parodies and tributes were common. The world in the show was surrounded by the media, evoking the ideas of representation, reproduction, quotation, and distortion. *The Simpsons* poked fun at pop culture but at the same time, being part of it, paid tribute to it.

In 1981, aged 20, Bruce Timm (b. Oklahoma, 8 February 1961) started to work for Fimation, a production company that specialized in animated series inspired by comics. For instance, he worked on the studio's *He-Man*

<sup>7</sup> By Stefania Carini.

<sup>8</sup> The production companies behind *The Simpsons* were 20th Century Fox Television and Gracie Films (created by James L. Brooks).

<sup>9</sup> The strip features the anthropomorphic rabbit Binky, who is bitter, depressed, and thus 'normal'. Groening used these characters to explore a wide range of topics with an alienated, angry style.

and the *Masters of the Universe* and *She-Ra: Princess of Power*. At Warner Brothers Animation he worked on *Tiny Toon Adventures* before creating and producing *Batman*<sup>10</sup> (1992–1995) for Fox with Eric Rodomski.

The animated series of *Batman* pleased both audience and critics. Its design was simple and angular, inspired by 1950s- and 1960s-era comics as well as art deco. Graphic combinations of black and white created an elegant noir and dark effect, well adapted to adult-oriented narration. Later, Timm produced *Superman* (1996–2000, on The WB), *The New Batman Adventures* (1997–1999, The WB), *Batman Beyond* (1999–2001, The WB and Cartoon Network), and *Justice League* (2001–2006, Cartoon Network). His fans called Timm's work 'The Timmverse', as he enriched the comic book world of DC. His creations represented a new standard for animated series based on comics.

In the 1990s MTV, a youth-oriented cable TV channel dedicated to music (owned by Viacom), began producing and airing animation through its show *Liquid Television*. It was composed of various shorts (*Cartoon Sushi*, *The Maxx*, *The Head*). *Æon Flux*<sup>11</sup> was an avant-garde animated series (1991, a six-part series of short films, followed in 1995 by ten half-hour episodes as a stand-alone series). Created by Peter Chung (b. Seoul, South Korea, 19 April 1961), *Æon Flux* is set in a dystopian future. The main character is a secret agent from an anarchistic nation whose mission is to infiltrate a centralized government of another country, led by her nemesis and lover. The plot was obscure, characterized by philosophical subjects and violent and sexual elements. The style was influenced by Egon Schiele, Moe-bius, and anime.

*Daria* (1997–2001; created by Glenn Eichler) was a spin-off of *Beavis and Butt-Head* (see below), about the life of a sarcastic teenage girl. Ironic and intelligent, Daria is an outcast in her high school. Ironic violence was the hallmark of *Celebrity Deathmatch* (1998–2007, created by Eric Fogel, b. 1969), a Plasticine animation in which caricatured celebrities fight each other.

## Mike Judge

MTV's most famous animated series was *Beavis and Butt-Head* (1993–1997, revived 2011).<sup>12</sup> It described the life of two unsociable teenage boys who love heavy metal, hate school, and usually spend their time watching MTV and commenting on its music videos. They speak their plain thoughts, emphasizing the stupidity of the world around them, and criticize the mass media they depend on.<sup>13</sup> The animation is as rough as the world portrayed in the show. Mike Judge (b. Ecuador, 17 October 1962) directed the cinema film spin-off, *Beavis and Butt-Head Do America* (1996).

In 1997, Judge created *King of the Hill* (1997–2010)<sup>14</sup> for Fox, teaming up with Greg Daniels (b. USA, 13 June 1963), a scriptwriter for *The Simpsons*. The series focused on the Hills, a small-town Methodist family in Arlen, Texas. There is Hank, the father, Peggy, his wife, and Bobby, their son; living with them is Peggy's adult niece, Luanne Platter. If Springfield is a place that subverts values, Arlen is the realm of traditional ones. Hank can neither reject them nor respect them perfectly, but he tries to do his best in every episode. The show depicts the American middle class with a realistic approach but is no less meaningful for that.

## Nickelodeon's Double Humour

Nickelodeon is a cable TV channel owned by Viacom and aimed at children and teenagers. It opened its in-house animation studio in 1990, and a year later it aired its first original series. Its products followed different approaches: simple comedy (*Doug*, *Rugrats*), more complex approaches (*Rocko's Modern Life*), and sometimes grotesque work, following the lessons learned in Warner's Golden Age (*The Ren and Stimpy Show*).

*Rugrats* (1991–2004)<sup>15</sup> was created by Arlene Klasky, Gabor Csupo, and Paul Germain. In 1981, Klasky

<sup>10</sup> *Batman* was produced by DC Comics, Sunrise, Warner Brothers Animation, and Warner Brothers Television.

<sup>11</sup> *Æon Flux* was produced by Colossal Pictures, MTV Animation, and MTV Networks.

<sup>12</sup> *Beavis and Butt-Head* was produced by MTV Animation, J.J. Sedelmaier Productions Inc. (season 1), Paramount Television (1–7), Judgmental Films, Inc. (2–8), Tenth Annual Industries (2–7), Ternion Pictures (8), and Film Roma Productions (8).

<sup>13</sup> See Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, 'Prime Time Animation', in Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison (eds.), *Prime Time Animation. Television Animation and American Culture*, Routledge, New York, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> *King of the Hill* was produced by Deedle-Dee Productions, 3 Art Entertainment, 20th Century Fox Television, Film Roman Productions, Judgmental Films, and Judgemental Films, Inc.

<sup>15</sup> *Rugrats* was coproduced by Klasky-Csupo and Nickelodeon Network.

(b. Omaha, Nebraska, 26 May 1949) founded, with her then-husband Gabor Csupo (b. Budapest, Hungary, 29 September 1952), the remarkable production company Klasky-Csupo, Inc. The third member of the group, Germain (b. Los Angeles, California, 6 June 1959), was an American animation screenwriter and producer.

*Rugrats* told the adventures of a group of babies whose ordinary life becomes imaginary adventures, underlining the different points of view between adults and children. The style was linear; the cartoon was one of the most popular children's animated series and attracted adults as well. In 1998, *The Rugrats Movie* was released, followed by *Rugrats in Paris* (2000), and *Rugrats Go Wild* (2003); the latter film also featured characters from another Klasky-Csupo series, *The Wild Thornberrys* (1998–2002).

*The Ren and Stimpy Show* (1991–1996)<sup>16</sup> was created by John Kricfalusi (b. Chicoutimi, Québec, Canada, 9 September 1955). He worked on *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures* (1987–1988), a zany, irreverent version of the venerable cartoon character produced by Fritz the Cat director Ralph Bakshi. Kricfalusi then established Spümcø International Animation Studio and created *The Ren and Stimpy Show* for Nickelodeon. The series chronicled the nonsensical adventures of Ren Höek, a psychotic Chihuahua, and Stimpson J. Cat, a good-hearted but stupid cat. The style echoed the Golden Age of American animation, but taken to extremes. Grotesquerie prevailed and visual gags were linked to strange and disgusting deformations. Because of that, *The Ren and Stimpy Show* had a reputation for indecent humour and violence. In 1992, Kricfalusi was fired by the network,<sup>17</sup> and when the series was turned over to Games Animation it lost its peculiarity.

*Rocko's Modern Life* (1993–1996)<sup>18</sup> was created by Joe Murray (b. San Jose, California, 3 May 1961), who had joined CalArts and worked for MTV, making some shorts and films. The show featured an anthropomorphic wallaby

named Rocko and his life in the city of O-Town. The series was a surreal interpretation of life, with a deformed and caricatured style, aimed at both children and adults. Unlike *The Ren and Stimpy Show*, *Rocko's Modern Life* never became grotesque.

## A Matter of Style

Cartoon Network (CN) was created by Turner Broadcasting in 1992. Its initial programming consisted of reruns of classic cinema and television cartoons. Its first original shows (*Space Ghost Coast to Coast* and *The Moxy Show*) were created in 1994 by Hanna-Barbera Productions.<sup>19</sup> In the same year, production started on *What-a-Cartoon!* (also known as *World Premiere Toons* and *The Cartoon Cartoon Show*). The programme showed shorts created by the studio's animators that were later turned into series.

These series included *Johnny Bravo* (1997–2004), *I Am Weasel* (1997–2000), *Ed, Edd 'n' Eddy* (1999–present), *Courage the Cowardly Dog* (1999–2002), and *Mike, Lu & Og* (1999–2001).

*Cow and Chicken* (1995–2004) was created by David Feiss (b. Sacramento, California, 16 April 1959). The series showed the adventures of a cow, named Cow, and her chicken brother, named Chicken. They were often tormented by the Red Guy, a usually pants-less devil. The series was characterized by surreal and sarcastic humour.

The best-known CN series were *Dexter's Laboratory* (1996–2003)<sup>20</sup> by Genndy Tartakovsky and *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998–2004)<sup>21</sup> by Craig McCracken. These creators helped define the style of the network. Tartakovsky (b. Moscow, Russia, 17 January 1970) moved to the United States at age seven; in 1993 he worked for *2 Stupid Dogs*, a Hanna-Barbera animated series. Then he created *Dexter's Laboratory*, based on a university project. The show

<sup>16</sup> *The Ren and Stimpy Show* was produced by Games Animation, MTV Networks, Nickelodeon Network, Paramount Television, and Spümcø.

<sup>17</sup> In 1995, Kricfalusi directed and animated a music video for Björk's song 'I Miss You'. He also made Flash animation for the Web. In 2003–2004, he relaunched *The Ren & Stimpy Show* as *Adult Party Cartoon*; it was aired during a late-night programming block on Spike TV, a cable channel for young adult males (it was a branch of MTV Networks, owned by Viacom). The series explored more adult themes but was soon cancelled.

<sup>18</sup> *Rocko's Modern Life* was produced by Games Animation, Joe Murray Productions, Inc., and Nickelodeon Network.

<sup>19</sup> In 1991 Turner purchased the studio and the Cartoon Network Studios division was created to produce new animated shows for Cartoon Network. In 1996 Turner merged with Time Warner. In 2001, coinciding with the death of William Hanna, the studio folded into Warner Brothers.

<sup>20</sup> *Dexter's Laboratory* was produced by Cartoon Network, Hanna-Barbera Productions, and Rough Draft Studios.

<sup>21</sup> *The Powerpuff Girls* was produced by CCTV, Cartoon Network, Hanna-Barbera Productions, and Media Asia Films.

featured a little scientist, Dexter, whose work is mostly subverted by his older sister Dee Dee, a naive hurricane.<sup>22</sup>

Craig McCracken (b. Charleroi, Pennsylvania, 31 March 1971) created *The Powerpuff Girls*, based on one of the shorts he made while at university. Blossom, Buttercup, and Bubbles, three sisters with superpowers, were created by Professor Utonium. The heroines have big heads and eyes and little bodies and defend their town from monsters and villains.

The styles of McCracken and Tartakovsky underlined their graphic aspect through limited movement. Linked to the new Flash fad, their shows were graphic work, in which lines and colour are predominant. Their characters were openly inspired by UPA, Mr. Magoo, and Gerald McBoing-Boing, as well as by Japan's *Tetsuwan Atom* by Osamu Tezuka and *Rocky and Bullwinkle* by Jay Ward. McCracken and Tartakovsky's shows were visually and verbally innovative, with comic nonsense narration. Their characters were hybrids of design, animation, comics, advertisements, and art, representing pop art's new frontier. They were analogous to the creations of Takashi Murakami, or to street art.

## The Extremist

*South Park*<sup>23</sup> was created in 1997 by Trey Parker and Matt Stone. The series was written for the cable channel Comedy Central, owned by Viacom, which was oriented towards comedy-based programming for mature viewers. Trey Parker (b. 19 October 1969 in Denver, Colorado) and Matt Stone (b. Houston, Texas, 26 May 1971) met at Colorado University. They started their film career with the shorts *Jesus vs. Frosty* (1992) and *Jesus vs. Santa* (1995), also known as *The Spirit of Christmas 1 and 2*. These were the basis for *South Park*, which also spawned a 1999 cinema feature, *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*.

South Park is a small town in Colorado. Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and Kenny are four boys who experience

indescribable adventures together. Cynical and innocent, bad and commonsensical (as children can be), they live in a hypocritical world surrounded by irresponsible adults and influenced by mass media. Beauty, depth, and nuance do not exist in their chaotic, strange, and grotesque world. Characters are shapes that move jerkily in settings that are just as poor. Everything is two-dimensional in *South Park*, portrayed through explicit visual and verbal language: religion, sex, death, war, violence. The series aims to show how to deal with cultural relativism and political correctness, two obsessions of American culture (among others). With *South Park*, the animated series for adults reached a peak of stylistic and narrative provocation.

## Sub-Period 2: 1999–2009<sup>24</sup>

In 1999, Fox launched a new sitcom, *Family Guy*.<sup>25</sup> It was created by Seth MacFarlane (b. Kent, Connecticut, 26 October 1973), an animator, producer, actor, and voice-actor. The animated sitcom revolves around a lunatic family, the Griffins. Peter, the father, lives in his own world (he's often portrayed as an infantile imbecile, though the show's characterizations can shift without warning). Stewie, a malevolent baby with an adult voice, wants to conquer the world and kill his mother. Brian is a talking dog who reads newspapers and is highly cultured. Lois, the wife/mother, seems wise but often follows Peter's craziness. The other children, Meg and Chris, are maladjusted in their own ways.

MacFarlane focuses on the accumulation of images, parodies, and gags, rather than on plot consistency. His comic style is based on fragments and cutaway gags, inspired by television and mass media, which symbolize the simple imagination and aspirations of America's middle class. In 2009 *Family Guy* spun off *The Cleveland Show*, featuring Peter's titular friend and his own family. MacFarlane also cocreated *American Dad!* (2005) with Matt Weitzman and Mike Barker. The 'odd family' this time includes

<sup>22</sup> Rita Street profiled the 25-year-old Tartakovsky. 'After the debut of *Dexter's Laboratory* [ . . . ] Tartakovsky became the youngest member of an animation movement that might be called "Retro Absurdists". The movement is helmed by the likes of Ralph Bakshi and John Kricfalusi and pays deference to the art of the "funny drawing" vs. the art of the animated actor. "The appeal of animation is the drawings. I love looking at even bad animation because it's like eye candy," Tartakovsky said. "But when you get into live-action animation like *Pocahontas*, for me it loses its appeal." A Cal Arts graduate, some of Tartakovsky's other credits include animation on Steven Spielberg's *Tiny Toon Adventures*, *Two Stupid Dogs* and *The Critic*.' (*Daily Variety*, 20 September 1995, p. 38).

<sup>23</sup> *South Park* was a coproduction by Comedy Central, Branimir, and Comedy Partners.

<sup>24</sup> By Stefania Carini.

<sup>25</sup> *Family Guy* was produced by 20th Century Fox Television, Film Roman Productions, Fuzzy Doors Productions, and Hands Down Entertainment.

a fanatical CIA employee, his wife and children, an obnoxious alien, and a goldfish with the brain of an East German Olympic skier.

## Authors' Work

Ten years after *The Simpsons* first aired, Matt Groening created *Futurama* (1999)<sup>26</sup> for Fox. Fry, a pizza delivery boy, is accidentally frozen in 1999 and wakes up 1,000 years later. In the new world, he meets Bender, a cynical, heavy-drinking criminal robot, and Leela, a female one-eyed alien heroine. Fox cancelled the series in 2003, but DVD features were released in 2007 and aired on Comedy Central. In 2010, the same network renewed the series.

In 2001, Genndy Tartakovsky presented *Samurai Jack* (2001–2004; Cartoon Network). The evil Aku sends the only person who could challenge him, a samurai called Jack, to a future where Aku rules everything, so Jack tries to go back to the past to defeat his enemy. The drawings are influenced by anime and UPA. *Samurai Jack* is a real graphic work: all of its elements, from characters to movements, are a play of geometric lines. The screen is divided into vertical and horizontal sections, sometimes reminiscent of Japanese painting. Later Tartakovsky was commissioned by George Lucas to produce and direct *Star Wars: Clone Wars* (2003–2005; Cartoon Network), a successful animated series in the *Star Wars* universe. Tartakovsky's style gave new verve to the franchise.

In 2004, Craig McCracken produced *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* (2004–2009) for Cartoon Network. It was set in a home for 'imaginary friends', who were abandoned when their childhood companions grew up. McCracken created a surreal and poetic visual world. In April 2008, he became executive producer of a Cartoon Network showcase project called Cartoonstitute.

After *King of the Hill* was cancelled, Mike Judge created *The Goode Family* (2009)<sup>27</sup> for ABC, about a family obsessed with being environmentally responsible, liberal, and politically correct. The series had no success and was cancelled after the first season. Judge returned to *Beavis and Butt-Head*, made for MTV.

## Animated Channels

Fox was the animated network par excellence. Among cable channels, Cartoon Network continued broadcasting successful series (*Samurai Jack*, *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*), some imported from the Canadian channel TeleToon. After the success of *South Park* and the renewal of *Futurama*, Comedy Central sought a new success with *Drawn Together* (2004–2008),<sup>28</sup> created by Dave Jeser and Matthew Silverstein.

Nickelodeon continued searching for comedy. *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999) was created by Stephen Hillenburg (b. Fort Sill, Oklahoma, 21 August 1961), a marine biologist. He completed a master's degree program in experimental animation at CalArts and started working on *Rocko's Modern Life* for Nickelodeon in 1993. In 1999 Hillenburg created SpongeBob, a naive and optimistic sea sponge (drawn as a kitchen sponge). The series followed his and his friends' adventures under the sea. Made in a childish style, *SpongeBob SquarePants*<sup>29</sup> stood out for its surreal elements and became a transmedia franchise.

Nickelodeon's second biggest series was the American-Canadian *The Fairly Odd Parents* (2000),<sup>30</sup> created by Butch Hartman (b. Highland Park, Michigan, 10 January 1965). The main character is Timmy, a ten-year-old boy. One day Cosmo and Wanda, two strange parents, come to help him. Thanks to them, Timmy can satisfy his desires – but with comically catastrophic consequences.

## Limited Disney

Disney launched its own cable TV channel in 1983.<sup>31</sup> At the beginning, it aired the company's animated classics, live-action series, musicals, and sitcoms. Meanwhile, from 1985, The Walt Disney Company began to produce some animated TV series with both old and new characters, including *DuckTales* (1987–1990) and *Gargoyles* (1994–1997).

By the end of the 1990s, the Disney Channel was increasing its products. It concentrated on tweens, releasing sitcoms and films with strong musical elements: *Hannah Montana*, *High School Musical*, *Camp Rock*, and *Sonny with a*

<sup>26</sup> *Futurama* was produced by 20th Century Fox Television and The Curiosity Company.

<sup>27</sup> *The Goode Family* was produced by Blue Water Productions, Film Roman Productions, Judgemental Films, Inc., 3 Art Entertainment, Media Rights Capitol, and Ternion Pictures.

<sup>28</sup> *Drawn Together* was produced by Comedy Central.

<sup>29</sup> Produced by United Plankton Pictures, Nicktoons Productions.

<sup>30</sup> *The Fairly Odd Parents* was produced by Billionfold, Frederator Incorporated, Nickelodeon Network, and Nicktoons Productions.

<sup>31</sup> Disney Channel was managed by Disney-ABC Cable Networks Group, a Walt Disney Company division.

*Chance*. Thanks to its Original Series, Disney Channel was one of the most watched cable channels in the US and also one of the most famous in the world.

*Kim Possible* (2002–2007)<sup>32</sup> was created by Mark McCorkle (b. Bristol, Pennsylvania, August 1961) and Robert Schooley (b. Boston, Massachusetts, September 1961). The teenage Kim (a girl) is a special agent helped by her best friend, Ron Stoppable. The series parodied teen sitcoms and spy stories and made its limited animation a style choice. Kim, with her red hair, black t-shirt, and green trousers, was a mostly graphic heroine.

*Phineas and Ferb* (2007–present)<sup>33</sup> was created by Dan Povenmire (b. San Diego, California, 18 September 1963) and Jeff Marsh (b. Santa Monica, California, 9 December 1960). The series features two stepbrothers, Phineas and Ferb, during their summer holiday. They invent games to relieve the boredom while their sister, Candace, is obsessed with ‘busting’ their plans and their pet platypus acts as a secret agent.

The series has much in common with Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network productions, and also with *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons*, with its humour and pop culture

quotations. It is made with limited animation, bright colours, and stylized design, but it is also in line with the Disney Channel’s philosophy, which is founded on a positive vision of extended families and on a strong belief in the abilities of children.

## Renaissance in Disney Features

In the arena of feature animation, Ron Clements (b. Sioux City, Iowa, 25 April 1953) and John Musker (b. Chicago, Illinois, 8 November 1953) completed their second joint venture in 1989, following 1986’s *The Great Mouse Detective*. The new film was *The Little Mermaid*. To everyone’s surprise, it grossed 183 million dollars worldwide and started a much hoped for, but little expected, comeback for Disney cinema animated features.

*The Little Mermaid* was a fairy tale with a young female protagonist, a prince’s heart for her to conquer, and a wicked witch to defeat. Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora (the Sleeping Beauty) had a new colleague. But



Figure 2.1 Walt Disney, *The Little Mermaid*, 1989. © 1989 Disney.

<sup>32</sup> *Kim Possible* was produced by Walt Disney Television Animation, American Broadcasting Company (ABC), and Disney Channel.

<sup>33</sup> *Phineas and Ferb* was produced by Walt Disney Television Animation.

for filmgoers the mermaid Ariel was not a role model, an idealized alter ego, or a star in heaven. Like live-action characters of the 1970s and 1980s, Ariel was one of the girls. For instance, she had her room with her secret collections, from which her widowed father was banished. She was classic yet contemporary.

In the years before *The Little Mermaid*, an empty space had haunted the market. John Huston's disastrous *Annie* (1982) had demonstrated that live-action musicals were too expensive for the time and too out of tune with fashion to sell tickets. Yet world audiences still loved musicals the way they used to be. *The Little Mermaid*, a cartoon musical, filled that void.<sup>34</sup> Its songs were by lyricist Howard Ashman (b. Baltimore, Maryland, 17 May 1950; d. New York, 14 March 1991) and musician Alan Menken (b. New York, 22 July 1949); the pair had previously created the stage musical *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982). A retrospective Disney documentary, *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (2009), shows Ashman stressing the affinity between cartoon drawings and the painted scenery of stage musicals. 'We watch in a different way,' he argued of these media, 'therefore it may be easier to sing.'

*Beauty and the Beast* (1991)<sup>35</sup> was directed by Gary Trousdale (b. La Crescenta, California, 8 June 1960) and Kirk Wise (b. San Francisco, 24 August 1963; according to another source, 9 November 1958). It was another musical, again based on Ashman and Menken's songs. *Beauty and the Beast* was a better film than *The Little Mermaid* because it deeply depicted the psychology of the characters and openly challenged the equation 'ugly = bad'. The initially fearsome Beast shows his kind heart slowly and believably, both to the audience and to Belle, the female protagonist. Gaston (Belle's suitor) is even subtler, beginning as a muscular, jovial young man and gradually revealing himself to be a murderous villain. The songs and choreography add magic to the whole.

Clements and Musker returned in 1992 with *Aladdin*. Visually and narratively it was far from original, and even further from captivating, but it had a star: the Genie, animated by Eric Goldberg and superbly voiced by Robin Williams, who threw out almost sixty celebrity impressions. The Genie made *Aladdin* the third hit in a row for Disney's renewed animation.

A year later, Roger Allers (b. Rye, New York, 1949) and Rob Minkoff (b. Palo Alto, California, 11 August 1962) presented *The Lion King* (1993), with music by the Oscar-winning Hans Zimmer and songs by Tim Rice and Elton John. Fifty-one years after *Bambi*, a parent (the lion king) dies in a Disney film – this time before the audience's eyes. Nobody was shocked, but there were complaints that the second part of the film didn't match the tenderness of the father-son relationship in the first.

Interestingly enough, the company's menagerie became richer. The barnyard mice, pigs, and ducks of the 1930s had given way to parlour cocker spaniels and aristocats, or cutely drawn foxes and hounds. *The Lion King*, though, offered a mandrill, a hornbill, a meerkat, a warthog, and hyenas – a perfect team for children educated by National Geographic TV documentaries.

After *The Lion King*, the quality of Disney's feature animation went downhill – first slowly (*Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), and then at an accelerated pace with *Hercules*, *Mulan*, and *Tarzan*. The Disney Renaissance was over. The 2000s were saved by Pixar's productions, which Disney distributed.

Mention should be made of *Fantasia/2000* (premiere December 1999, distribution January 2000). Roy Edward Disney had not forgotten that his uncle's original idea was to treat *Fantasia* as a concert, adding and changing pieces now and then. *Fantasia/2000* had segments illustrating Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5 in C minor*, Ottorino Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, Dmitri Shostakovich's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Major*, Camille Saint-Saëns' *The Carnival of the Animals*, Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (the original *Fantasia* segment starring Mickey Mouse), Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*, and Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. Apart from *Rhapsody in Blue*, a masterful homage by Eric Goldberg to the New York cartoonist Al Hirschfeld, it was a generous but failed venture.

## The Mantle of Walt

[Michael] Eisner had clung to power with a King Lear-like intensity, convinced that he and he alone had

<sup>34</sup> A rebirth of live-action film musical comedy arrived in the twenty-first century with *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001), *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002), *Phantom of the Opera* (Joel Schumacher, 2005), *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2008), and *Nine* (Rob Marshall, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> This tale has dozens of European, Asiatic, and African versions. It's the story of an ugly person with a beautiful heart, and of a woman sensitive enough to recognize that.

the creative instincts and managerial skills to shepherd Disney into a twenty-first-century world of giant media and entertainment conglomerates. Indeed, Eisner claimed the mantle of Walt himself.<sup>36</sup>

Walt Disney was a tough man, but he looked like a benevolent uncle. Eisner had cold blue eyes, and his smile was not reassuring. Walt was both an emperor and an empire-builder. Eisner was a corporate executive, inclined to maintain power by laying plots. Walt was a farsighted strategist. Eisner was a short-term tactician, interested in quick revenues.

In 1994, the company's president, Frank Wells, died in a helicopter accident. A few months later, Jeffrey Katzenberg, the chair of film production, clashed with Eisner and left. After ten extraordinary years, Eisner's downward path began. He continued to enormously expand the company, but the business-driven shadow that 'New Disney' cast at the turn of the century wasn't popular. The Disney name should have been synonymous with childhood, trust, kindness, and quality.

On 20 November 2003, Eisner notified Roy Edward Disney, the last obstacle to his unchallenged power, that Roy Edward had passed the mandatory retirement age of 72 and would no longer be on the Disney board. Two decades after their battle over the studio in 1984, Roy Edward and his counselor Stanley Gold fought a second 'Save Disney' campaign. On 3 March 2004, at Disney's annual shareholders' meeting, 43% of the assembly voted against Eisner's reelection to the corporate board of directors. On 30 September, Eisner resigned.

Robert Iger<sup>37</sup> replaced him, and on 24 January 2006 he announced the acquisition of the extremely creative Pixar for 7.4 billion dollars. Roy Edward Disney died on 16 December 2009 in Newport Beach, California. In the *Los Angeles Times* of 17 December, animation critic and historian Charles Solomon wrote:

Roy was a warm, approachable man whom the animators could talk to and caricature, knowing their comments would be received with respect and affection. But Roy was more than a boss: he was also a link to Walt, whose spirit hovered over his studio long after his death

in 1966. [...] For animators and animation lovers, that was the Golden Age, and talking to Roy about Walt was like getting stories about Achilles from a veteran of the Trojan War.<sup>38</sup>

## Working on Dreams

In 1982, Jeffrey Katzenberg (b. New York, 21 December 1950) was President of Production at Paramount and reported directly to Chief Operating Officer Michael Eisner. In 1984, Katzenberg followed Eisner to Disney and became chairman of its motion picture (live-action and animation) divisions. While viewing some scenes from *The Black Cauldron*, Katzenberg asked to see the outtakes, thinking that the footage could be reedited. He did not know that, in animation, there are very seldom outtakes – at least of finished work.

On the ground that animated TV series were much cheaper than theatrical animated features, Eisner and Katzenberg thought the films' production costs and times should be halved. The dismayed animators could only rely on Roy E. Disney. But then Katzenberg decided to hire Ashman and Menken to write the music for *The Little Mermaid*. It was a brainwave. The music was worth half of the film, winning Oscars for Best Original Score and Best Song.

Meanwhile, Katzenberg discovered that he'd fallen in love with animation. He took a lot of care with *Beauty and the Beast* (again entrusting the music to Ashman and Menken, who would be awarded a second time<sup>39</sup>), then with *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*. In 1991, he brokered the deal with Pixar to produce three pictures for Disney, including the Academy Award-winning *Toy Story*.

When president Frank Wells died in 1994 and Eisner assumed his duties, he rejected Katzenberg's candidature for the position and pushed him to resign. On 12 October 1994, two weeks after leaving Disney, Katzenberg announced he was joining forces with director Steven Spielberg and David Geffen, the former head of Asylum and Geffen Records. The three contributed from their own personal wealth to launch a new company. (Katzenberg

<sup>36</sup> James B. Stewart, *Disney War*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> In 2011 Robert Iger (b. Long Island, New York, 10 February 1951) had his contract as CEO extended to 2016.

<sup>38</sup> C. Solomon, 'Roy Edward Disney, more than a famous name', [latimes.com](http://latimes.com), last modified 17 December 2009, [latimes.com/entertainment/news/la-et-roydisney-appreciation-2009dec17,0,5433946.story](http://latimes.com/entertainment/news/la-et-roydisney-appreciation-2009dec17,0,5433946.story).

<sup>39</sup> Howard Ashman, who died in 1991, was awarded posthumously.



mortgaged nearly his entire net worth to contribute his 33 million dollars.)

Thus DreamWorks SKG was born, an all-purpose production company whose objective was to release films, television content, albums, and video games at a lower price than most major studios. Its animation section had ups and downs. *The Prince of Egypt* (directed by Brenda Chapman, Simon Wells, and Steve Hickner, 1998) was a good adult-oriented animated film but didn't make money from merchandising.<sup>40</sup> While Andrew Adamson's<sup>41</sup> and Vicky Jenson's CGI *Shrek* (2001) was a hit (see below), *The Road to El Dorado* (2000) and *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (2002) – both hybrids of traditional drawing and CGI (computer-generated images) – were uninspired clichés.

The studio gave a private little office to every animator and promised that DreamWorks would produce the auteur shorts of the animators who wanted to express themselves. However, there were never any auteur shorts, production schedules became as frantic as they were in any other Hollywood studio, and there was no consistent guiding production style or philosophy. In 2006, DreamWorks SKG was sold to Paramount, though Katzenberg retained DreamWorks Animation. Flamboyant, talkative, and dynamic, Katzenberg was a media favourite but his later films have not left a lasting mark.

## Pixar: Character Animation in the Digital Era<sup>42,43</sup>

Founded in 1986, Pixar Animation Studios represented a new model in animation cinema for the digital epoch. It balanced innovation and tradition; it united animation and digital technologies. Pixar resulted from the work of three pioneers: John Lasseter, Ed Catmull, and Steve Jobs.

### Before Pixar

John Lasseter was born in Hollywood on 12 January 1957. He had a passion for cartoons from childhood and went to CalArts, where the lecturers included animators working for The Walt Disney Company. While there, Lasseter learned classic Disney animation.

After graduation in 1979, Lasseter obtained a job as an animator at The Walt Disney Company. The studio was declining, but Lasseter was amazed by *Tron* (1982) by Steven Lisberger, which contained passages created with computer graphics. The Disney management didn't agree with him, and Lasseter was fired (see below). In 1984, he moved to the computer division of Lucasfilm, a young company that, together with its subsidiary Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), would become a leader in special effects.

ILM was founded in 1975 by George Lucas to create the effects for *Star Wars* (1977). From 1979 on, ILM specialized more and more in new technologies as engineers and programmers from the New York Institute of Technology (NYIT) Computer Graphics Lab joined the company. This led to ILM's own Computer Graphics Division, which had about forty members.

Ed Catmull (b. Parkersburg, Virginia, 31 March 1945), who had been the director of the NYIT graphics lab, became the leader of the ILM division. He was a computer scientist with a passion for animation who recognized the new technology's implications for the film industry. One of the division's first achievements was the 'Genesis Effect' sequence, created for the film *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982).

Lasseter cooperated with Catmull's division on a small project, *The Adventures of André & Wally B* (1984). Lasseter created two characters for this short – an android and a bee. He adopted the basic Disney rules to make them come alive, using movement and acting. André and Wally B could be seen as two actors performing a little sketch (the puppet André mocks Wally B, who chases him). They communicate their feelings through body movements and facial expressions. Lasseter also tried exploiting the possibilities of cinematographic language in digital form.

The film was a narrative short, which distinguished it from previous works of computer animation (which were tied to video art). *The Adventures of André & Wally B* was shown to acclaim at SIGGRAPH, an annual computer graphics exhibition that had begun in 1974.

Catmull, Lasseter, and some members of ILM's Computer Graphics Division decided to create their own animation studio. Steve Jobs (San Francisco, 24 February 1955–5 October 2011), one of the pioneers of the new informatics industry, would be the third musketeer. He had

<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, the film grossed 101 million dollars in the US and an additional 125 million dollars internationally.

<sup>41</sup> Born in Auckland, New Zealand, on 1 December 1966.

<sup>42</sup> By Stefania Carini.

<sup>43</sup> For further information about Pixar, see Karen Paik, *To Infinity and Beyond!: The Story of Pixar Animation Studios*, Chronicle Books, San Francisco, 2007.

cofounded Apple, one of the leading companies in the personal computer market, with his friend Steve Wozniak.

In 1986, Pixar was officially born. It employed 44 people, and its first registered office was in San Rafael. The company then moved to Point Richmond and from 2000 on would be in Emeryville. In 1986, Pixar made a new short, *Luxo Jr.* (1986), which represented another leap in creativity. A large desk lamp, Luxo (the parent) reacts to the antics of a small desk lamp, Luxo Jr. (the child), as it plays with a small ball, chases it, and tries to balance on it. The ball deflates under Luxo Jr.'s jumping. However, after this disappointment, Jr. starts playing with a bigger ball. Luxo can only shake its head.

We talk about Luxo's 'head' even though the two lamps were not anthropomorphic. They were simply two desk lamps reproduced by computer technology. The characters come alive through Lasseter's animation, mixing character acting and cinematographic language. After *Luxo Jr.*'s success at SIGGRAPH, the title character became the studio's mascot and symbol, the letter 'P' of Pixar's company logo.

## From Toy Story to Disney

The new company focused on the development of hardware and software technology. For example, it cocreated

CAPS (Computer Animation Production System), with Disney, for the digital management of traditional animation. Pixar's rendering system<sup>44</sup> was initially called REYES (Renders Everything You Ever Saw) and was then renamed RenderMan. It was improved and updated through the production of various short films and was always the foundation of the studio's works.<sup>45</sup> Pixar's Marionette was created as an internal software tool (not sold outside Pixar) to be applied in the animation process.

Pixar went on making shorts – *Red's Dream* (1987), *Tin Toy* (1988, which won the Oscar for Best Short Film [Animated] in 1989), and *KnickKnack* (1989) – but its aim was to create a feature. In the late 1980s, digital technology became mandatory at all levels of the entertainment industry. The Walt Disney Company, thanks to its cooperation with Pixar, benefited from CAPS in features such as *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990) and *Beauty and the Beast*.

In 1991, the two companies signed the Feature Film Agreement to develop, produce, and distribute three feature films. The agreement would be more profitable for Disney,<sup>46</sup> but it also benefited the young Pixar studio, which would not have had the stability to make a feature without a powerful partner. The result was *Toy Story* (1995), the first fully computer-animated film, directed by Lasseter. (For more on *Toy Story* and its successors, see below.)



Figure 2.2 Pixar, *Toy Story*, 1995. © Disney·Pixar. Slinky®Dog is a registered trademark of Poof-Slinky, Inc. Mr. Potato Head® and Mrs. Potato Head® are registered trademarks of Hasbro, Inc. Used with permission © Hasbro, Inc. All rights reserved.

<sup>44</sup> Rendering is the step by which the features of a scene file (colour, light, shape, movement, etc.) are converted by the computer, through a series of calculations, into a colourful high-definition image.

<sup>45</sup> RenderMan was given in license to other production companies and became the leading software in the cinematographic industry. It was used in *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Avatar*.

<sup>46</sup> See D.A. Price, *The Pixar Touch*, Vintage Books, New York, 2008.

*Toy Story* was a commercial hit and helped to diffuse computer animation aesthetics. Lasseter and his team now had a new aim: to build a world-class animation studio. Constant training was essential in such a rapidly evolving sector, which was one reason why the production of short films continued.<sup>47</sup> They were useful exercises for new employees, an effective way to test new technologies, and a rewarding creative experience for the directors.

In 1997, Pixar signed a coproduction agreement with Disney to make five feature films over ten years. Production costs were to be shared 50–50 and profits derived from film releases and merchandising would also be shared. Both Disney's and Pixar's brands had to be put on the films and related merchandise.<sup>48</sup>

The first film produced under this agreement was *A Bug's Life* (1998), directed by John Lasseter and codirected by Andrew Stanton. During the making of *Toy Story*, Lasseter had realized how difficult it was for a single director to manage a computer animation film alone. Codirection had been very common in the traditional American animated cinema; for Pixar, it was also a way to find new talent.

On 29 January 2004, Pixar announced a halt in negotiations to renew its agreement with Disney. This was due to a conflict between Steve Jobs and Disney's Chairman and CEO, Michael Eisner. Jobs was determined to free Pixar from Disney's control.<sup>49</sup> However, when Eisner left Disney in 2005, negotiations between Pixar and Disney recommenced. In 2006, Robert A. Iger, Disney's new CEO, announced that the studio would acquire Pixar in an all-stock transaction.

Actually, the agreement was much more complex, and it resulted in principal positions for Lasseter, Catmull, and Jobs in The Walt Disney Company. Catmull retained his position as President of Pixar but also became President of

Walt Disney Animation Studios. Lasseter became Chief Creative Officer of both studios and Principal Creative Advisor at Walt Disney Imagineering. Jobs was appointed to Disney's Board of Directors.

The two studios continued to be separate, and Pixar maintained its registered office in Emeryville, but John Lasseter and Ed Catmull jointly supervised Walt Disney Animation and both continued to be actively involved at Pixar. The two felt strongly that Disney could reclaim its past greatness. Under their supervision, Disney released the traditionally drawn *The Princess and the Frog* (2009),<sup>50</sup> directed by Musker and Clements. Meanwhile, Pixar films continued to enjoy commercial and critical success with *Ratatouille* (2007), directed by Brad Bird, *WALL-E* (2008), directed by Andrew Stanton, and *Up* (2009), directed by Pete Docter.

## The Pixar Touch

In the 1996 Annual Report,<sup>51</sup> Jobs pointed out the need to transform the name Pixar into a clearly and positively recognizable brand. Pixar was tightly connected to the technique of computer animation, as its name reflected. Pixar comes from 'pixel', the smallest unit of a digital picture. But technology is nothing without artists. As Lasseter put it: 'We've reduced the way we work at Pixar to this phrase: *The art challenges technology and the technology inspires the art* [ . . . ] It's this wonderful yin and yang.'<sup>52</sup>

Pixar artists defined themselves as well-rounded filmmakers. As Lasseter explained:

In Pixar we believe in the filmmakers. It's a filmmaker-led studio. I believe very strongly in that vision. When we

<sup>47</sup> These shorts included: *Geri's Game* (1997), directed by Jan Pinkava; *For the Birds* (2000), directed by Ralph Eggleston; *Mike's New Car* (2002), directed by Pete Docter and Roger Gould; *Boundin'* (2003), directed by Bud Luckey; *Jack-Jack Attack* (2005; DVD release), directed by Brad Bird; *One Man Band* (2005), directed by Andrew Jimenez and Mark Andrews; *Mater and the Ghostlight* (2006; DVD release), directed by John Lasseter and Dan Scanlon; *Lifted* (2006), directed by Gary Rydstrom; *Your Friend the Rat* (2007 – Pixar's first short in traditional animation, also including CG and puppet animation; DVD release), directed by Jim Capobianco; *Presto* (2008), directed by Doug Sweetland; *BURN-E* (2008; DVD release), directed by Angus MacLane; *Partly Cloudy* (2009), directed by Peter Sohn; *Dug's Special Mission* (2009; DVD release), directed by Ronnie del Carmen, and many others.

<sup>48</sup> See D.A. Price, *The Pixar Touch*, Vintage Books, New York, 2008.

<sup>49</sup> See D.A. Price, *The Pixar Touch*, Vintage Books, New York, 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Dazzled by Pixar's enormous success, Hollywood animation studios assumed that traditional drawn animation was dead and that only computer animation would please audiences. Pixar's top executives openly declared their dismay. As soon as he could, John Lasseter hired back traditional animators to make *The Princess and the Frog*.

<sup>51</sup> See *Excerpts from the 1996 Annual Report*, at [www.pixar.com](http://www.pixar.com), last modified 1997, <http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1002114/000119312506018565/dex991.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> M. Cotta Vaz, *The Art of Finding Nemo*, San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 2003, p.11.

choose an idea of the movie to make, the first thing I look for is ‘where is the emotion going to come from?’ It’s typically in the emotional growth of the main character. I also think about the setting and the genre. The last thing in the world I worry about is if it fits with some other persons, with models of what a popular film could be. We believe in making great stories and movies . . . quality is the best business plan.<sup>53</sup>

## Computer Animation

The animation of CGI (computer-generated images) shares elements with both cel and puppet animation. It shares the three-dimensional form of objects, sets, and characters with puppet animation (albeit in virtual form). This allowed for more realism, compared to cel animation. However, the potential for fluid movements and the malleability of 3D computer animation also make it close to animated drawing.

Pixar applied the principles of character animation to CGI, always following Disney’s example. In particular, Pixar followed the concept of the *plausible impossible*, or the creation of a world in caricature that obeyed coherent laws. In order to seem believable, drawn characters had to act convincingly, but in a way that suited the caricatured world where they were. Lasseter was the first to prove that Disney’s Twelve Rules could be applied to computer animation.

The animator worked with a rough model of the character, which was far from its final look. Working with these models allowed for purity and fluidity of movement because the artist focused on a few, simple elements. Animators focused on both facial expressions and body movements, determined not only by the character’s personality but also by the ‘material’ of which it was made (for example, wood or fur).

Every animator had his/her own method and style. Some had a traditional background, having learned their craft working with puppets or cel animation. They adapted their methods to the new medium, a transition made easier by user-friendly software.

One profound difference between computer and traditional animation is in the area of interpolation. In computer animation, interpolation was the equivalent of inbetweening. The computer calculated the middle passages and positions of a movement, based on the key poses, and generated the missing frames. Interpolation saved time, with the animator deciding the key poses and modifying the automatically generated movements to get the best, most natural acting out of a character.

Sometimes interpolation was combined with other techniques, letting the computer generate the movement while taking mathematical parameters into account. For instance, the computer could simulate an object’s weight, mass, and inertia so that its physical properties and natural laws of movement could be simulated. Additionally, the computer could consider the movement of a group of objects as a living organism, which needed to be managed as a whole, but in which each of the smaller organisms had its own features.

## What It Looked Like

Disney had always looked for ways for animation to conform to the resemblance codes of live-action. As noted by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin,<sup>54</sup> computer animation *remediated*, absorbed, and reshaped Disney’s approach to animation and live-action cinema. To *remediate*, computer animation assimilated both the representation that pertained to Disney animation *and* the representation of live-action cinema. Animation could ‘finally compete with the realism of the Hollywood style’.<sup>55</sup>

Realism (good realism) did not mean photorealism. Rather, it was the mastery of a representational model, and a variety of language, that belonged to live-action cinema – through a technology that simulated them.<sup>56</sup> Depth of field had already been experimented with in traditional animation, through the multiplane camera. But 3D computer animation was *intrinsically* based on a deep-field environment. As Bolter and Grusin stressed, it was now possible for animation to obtain a moveable and shifting perspective.

<sup>53</sup> Interview recorded by Stefania Carini during the 66th Venice Film Festival, September 2009.

<sup>54</sup> J. D. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, MIT Press, London, 1999.

<sup>55</sup> J. D. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, MIT Press, London, 1999.

<sup>56</sup> See also A. Darley, ‘Second-order Realism and Post-modern Aesthetics in Computer Animation’, in *A Reader in Animation Studies*, ed. Jayne Pilling, John Libbey, Sydney, 1997.

Perhaps the computer's most important contribution to animation was the expansion of its language. It made it possible to simulate the work of a real camera in a virtual space, with the possibility of reproducing every lens and every camera move.

Pixar tended to stay halfway between the photorealistic imitation of reality and a 'cartoony' style, choosing a photorealism in caricature that followed Disney's ideals. For *Finding Nemo*, some underwater shots were filmed. Those images were successfully simulated by the computer, reaching a stunning photorealistic quality. Afterwards, though, the digital images were turned into a caricature of themselves, thanks to a (hyper-realist) intensification of colours and forms. Pixar's style owed its charm to this difficult balance between the photorealism of live-action cinema and the stylized nature of animation.<sup>57</sup>

## Storytelling

Pixar movies were addressed mainly to a family audience; however, this didn't affect their artistic value. Their brand of family adventure films is most comparable to that of Lucas, Spielberg, and Disney and was at least partially, if not highly, influenced by the works of Christopher Vogler,<sup>58</sup> who reprocessed Joseph Campbell's ideas.<sup>59</sup> Pixar movies were part of the adventure genre, because they set the main character on a real and objective journey. They featured strong action but focused on the inner changes the characters undergo as a result of the journey.

In Pixar's films, adventure was mixed with comedy, as in the live-action films of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Visual or verbal comedy had always been at the basis of American animated movies, and Pixar took part in this tradition by building up multilayered visual and verbal humour suitable for many different audiences. The films used quotations and knowing irony in the vein of, for example, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* or *The Simpsons*.

While Disney made animated musicals in the 1990s, Pixar decided to go another way with *Toy Story*. The movie used the 'song-over-action' technique, in which a

song commented on a sequence to underline its emotion. This solution was abandoned in Pixar's next film, *A Bug's Life*, and reappeared in just one sequence in *Toy Story 2*. The next films mostly did not use the song-over-action technique.

## CGI and Feature Films<sup>60</sup>

During the 1980s, American audiences were bombarded with computer-generated network logos, election graphics, and TV commercials. CGI was the ideal medium for creating shiny chrome letters, flying objects through space, and simulating complex camera moves. But the technique was widely perceived as too cold and unresponsive for the animation of characters.

In a 1987 interview, animator Chris Bailey summed up popular opinion when he said: 'For character animation, the only easy thing to do with a computer is turn the character into a block of cement and fly it around the room. Everything else is much harder.'<sup>61</sup>

Both the perception and the reality changed during the 1990s. The Disney Renaissance that started with *The Great Mouse Detective* in 1986 began to falter after *The Lion King* in 1994. The release of *Toy Story* the following year launched a revolution that would transform the art and industry of animation in America more profoundly than the introduction of sound or colour.

Animators had to rethink, and often reinvent, their approach to character animation. Many CGI artists had been trained in drawn animation, using the principles that had been pioneered by Winsor McCay, Otto Messmer, and the Disney artists in the 1930s. The three-dimensional look of the new characters and the use of the computer instead of pencil and paper required new ways of creating expressions and styles of movement that conveyed a unique personality.

Some principles could be adapted from traditional animation, some could be taken from puppet animation and live-action film, and some had to be invented. Similarly, the medium dictated new approaches to the use of colour,

<sup>57</sup> See also K. Sarafian, 'Flashing Digital Animations', in A. Everett and J. Caldwell, eds, *New Media. Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, Routledge, New York, 2003, p. 216.

<sup>58</sup> Chris Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*, Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, 1992. Vogler's book appeared at the end of the 1970s. It was a 7-page company memo titled *A Practical Guide to the Hero with a Thousand Faces* and it became influential in Hollywood. Vogler himself worked on Disney movies, such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, and his book was mandatory for Disney executives.

<sup>59</sup> J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1968. (Original edition, Pantheon Books, 1949).

<sup>60</sup> By Charles Solomon.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Solomon, 'Sees Limits to Computer Graphics: Animator Returns to Drawing Board', *The Los Angeles Times*, 28 August 1987.

lighting, texture, layout, editing, cinematography, and storytelling. As the new medium replaced drawn animation in American features, the ‘second age of Disney’ became the ‘age of CGI and Pixar’.

The initial inspiration for that revolution was Disney’s innovative but unsuccessful *Tron*, the first feature to use computer graphics extensively. Early footage from *Tron* excited John Lasseter, a young artist at the Disney studio. He and fellow animator Glen Keane contrasted the flashy, three-dimensional movements of the Light Cycle race with the flat, uninspired cinematography of the recent Disney features. *The Fox and the Hound* (1981), for example, had included a single multiplane shot.

In 1982, Lasseter and Keane created a 30-second test based on Maurice Sendak’s popular children’s book, *Where the Wild Things Are*. Max, a mischievous little boy, chases his dog out of the bedroom, through a hallway, and down the stairs. The setting and predetermined path of action were created at the computer studio MAGI-West. The animators’ drawings were scanned and coloured by the computer, with highlights and shadows added. The resulting footage was exciting and distinctive, adding a three-dimensional look and complicated camera moves to the vibrant animation.

Lasseter hoped to develop the first CGI feature at Disney based on Thomas Disch’s *The Brave Little Toaster*. The appliance characters would have lent themselves to the mechanical bias of early CGI, but the project was halted and Lasseter was fired in 1983. Ed Catmull invited him to come to the computer graphics division of Lucasfilm, where he began using CGI to create character animation in *The Adventures of André & Wally B.*

In 1986, Steve Jobs bought the graphics division of Lucasfilm and established it as an independent company, Pixar. Over the next few years, Lasseter directed a series of prize-winning shorts and commercials. He used these shorts the way Walt Disney had used the Silly Symphonies during the 1930s – as a way of exploring a new medium. Many computer companies were producing shorts, but most of them were showcases for new software or hardware and lacked appeal as films. Lasseter used his knowledge of traditional animation techniques and the Disney classics to produce films that were entertaining.

*Luxo Jr.* (1986), which depicts a patient father desk lamp and his rambunctious son, was the first CGI film that made audiences laugh. Lasseter’s experiments culminated in *Tin Toy* (1988), which became the first CGI film to win the Oscar for Animated Short Film. The success of the Pixar shorts led to an agreement with Disney to develop, produce, and distribute three features.

For Pixar’s initial feature, Lasseter planned to build on *Tin Toy*. An avid toy collector, he knew that a cast of plastic, metal, and fabric characters was well suited to CGI. Humans remained a problem, but the toys felt alive, and *Toy Story* played to a fantasy all children share: their toys come to life when people aren’t around.

Woody, an old-fashioned cowboy doll who has been Andy’s favourite toy for years, is consumed with jealousy when the high-tech action figure Buzz Lightyear threatens to replace him. *Toy Story*, which was conceived as a classic ‘Buddy Picture’ along the lines of *The Defiant Ones*, *Midnight Run*, and *The Odd Couple*, provided comedy, adventure, winning secondary characters, and a happy reconciliation at the end.

Although the animation was less nuanced than the best drawn work, *Toy Story* proved that CGI could be used to create characters to which audiences would respond. The three-dimensional settings, coupled with the realistic lighting, shadows, and highlights, gave the toy characters an added believability. The Pixar artists cleverly evoked such common childhood memories as making the army men walk with their feet fixed to their bases. Although considerable media attention was focused on the novelty of using CGI in a feature, audiences flocked to the film because it offered a solid, well-told story.

The highest grossing film of 1995, *Toy Story* earned 192 million dollars at the domestic box office, with a world-wide total of 362 million dollars. The film was nominated for three Academy Awards: Best Musical or Comedy Score, Best Song (‘You’ve Got a Friend in Me’), and Best Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen. Buzz and Woody appeared on the 1996 Oscar telecast, when John Lasseter received an Award for Special Achievement.

Pixar followed *Toy Story* with an unprecedented string of critical, technical, and financial triumphs. Between 1995 and 2010, the studio released 11 features, and each one advanced the medium and scored a hit at the box office. It was a record even Walt Disney had never achieved.

For *A Bug’s Life* (1998), Lasseter and his crew chose characters with hard exoskeletons, well-suited to CGI. But the artists encountered a problem that Ward Kimball had faced when he designed Jiminy Cricket for *Pinocchio* decades earlier – people perceive insects as ugly. Kimball recalled: ‘I ended up with a little man, really, wearing spats and a tail coat that suggested folded wings; he looked like Mr. Pickwick, but with no ears, no nose and no hair.’

The Pixar artists turned the ants, which make up the bulk of their cast, into creatures resembling Muppets, with bright pastel bodies and ping-pong ball eyes. The ants in Princess Atta’s colony are little better than slaves. All year

they gather food that thuggish grasshoppers confiscate. Flik, a misfit ant, recruits a troupe of unsuccessful circus bugs to help the colony break the grim cycle of labour and exploitation.

*Toy Story 2* (1999) was initially planned as a low-budget, direct-to-video sequel. But the story showed so much potential that the film was shifted to a theatrical release, extensively reworked, and completed in less than a year. Pixar president Ed Catmull said the push to make the second *Toy Story* movie as good as, or better than, the first was a defining moment in the studio's history. 'That was where our notions of quality were challenged, what lengths we would go to hit quality, how we get there, how we think about things, and the role of people in doing that. Everything shifted.'

*Toy Story* had centred on Woody's jealousy of Buzz, a jealousy that suggested sibling rivalry. In *Toy Story 2*, Woody confronts a toy's notion of mortality. Andy doesn't take him to Cowboy Camp because his arm is torn. Woody is left to wonder what will become of him as he ages. Will he gather dust on a shelf? Or be consigned to a yard sale – or the trash can? The Pixar crew invented a backstory that Woody had been the star of a children's TV series in the 1950s. Al McWhiggin, an odious toy collector, steals Woody to complete a set of 'Woody's Roundup' toys to sell to a museum in Japan.

Woody can remain perfect behind glass forever – and never be loved. Alternatively, he can remain Andy's favourite toy and be loved but risk being destroyed or abandoned. The tragedy he risks is made poignantly clear by Jessie, the cowgirl from 'Woody's Roundup'. In Randy Newman's touching ballad 'When She Loved Me', Jessie recalls how she had been the beloved doll of a girl, Emily, and how Emily had grown up and given Jessie away.

*Luxo Jr.* was the first CGI film that made audiences laugh. *Toy Story 2* was the first CGI film that made audiences cry. The old Disney animators had been amazed when their drawing of the Seven Dwarfs weeping at Snow White's bier reduced audiences to tears. A new generation of filmgoers wept over the fate of a lonely cowgirl doll that was just an arrangement of pixels. *Toy Story 2* was an even bigger hit than *Toy Story* or *A Bug's Life*.

*Monsters, Inc.* (2001) was the first Pixar feature not directed by John Lasseter. For the film, Pete Docter (b. Bloomington, Minnesota, 9 October 1968) drew on another childhood belief – that monsters hide in closets at night. Although children's screams provide the energy needed to power Monstropolis, the Monsters are terrified of being contaminated by contact with humans. A little girl named Boo mistakes top 'scarer' James P. 'Sulley' Sullivan for an enormous kitty and follows him into the

monster-world. Sulley and his sidekick Mike Wazowski learn that kids are really harmless – and that their laughter is far more powerful than their fears. The bond established between Sulley and Boo triumphs over prejudice, adversity, and the homicidal lizard-like villain, Randall. The ending feels warm, without becoming saccharine or manipulative.

*Monsters, Inc.* (2001) centred on supposedly irrational childhood fears. In contrast, Andrew Stanton's *Finding Nemo* (2003) depicted a parent's real fear – losing a child. Nemo, a young clownfish with a withered fin, is captured by a diver collecting specimens for the aquarium trade. His overprotective father Marlin sets out to find him and is joined by Dory, a dotty regal tang fish (in a wonderfully zany vocal performance by comedienne Ellen DeGeneris). *Finding Nemo* became the first Pixar feature to win the newly established Oscar for Best Animated Feature. In 2004, it set a record for DVD sales, selling over 24 million copies.

*The Incredibles* (2004) was the first Pixar feature directed by Brad Bird (b. Kalispell, Montana, 1963), a former CalArts classmate of Lasseter's who had made the critically acclaimed *The Iron Giant* (1999). Mr. Incredible (a.k.a. Bob Parr) and his family (Mrs. Incredible/Elastigirl, Violet, Dash, and Jack-Jack) struggle to keep their superpowers hidden and lead everyday lives. But the arrival of the super-villain Syndrome forces them to abandon their pretended normalcy and save the world. One of the highlights is Bird's performance as the voice of the maniacal Edna Mode, diminutive designer of superhero costumes.

Every Pixar film included technical breakthroughs. *A Bug's Life* had crowd scenes, sunlight shining through leaves, and a credible evocation of the world from an insect's point of view. In *Toy Story*, every hair on the dog Scud was applied to his body individually; Sulley in *Monsters, Inc.* was covered with realistic blue and purple fur. *Finding Nemo* required believable water, undersea effects, and swimming movements. In *The Incredibles*, Bird pushed the animation of the human characters in a broader, cartoonier direction. In each film, the animated acting grew more nuanced and polished.

Lasseter's love of automobiles and his recollections of family trips through the American Southwest on Route 66 provided the inspiration for *Cars* (2006). Hotshot racecar Lightning McQueen learns what's truly important in life when he's stranded in the largely forgotten town of Radiator Springs. Mater, a rusty, none-too-bright tow truck, and Sally, a plucky Porsche, present the lessons. The car characters delighted little boys, and the toys flew off the shelves.

Despite its extraordinary success, the relationship between Disney and Pixar soured over questions involving

sequels and disagreements between executives Michael Eisner and Steve Jobs. Shortly after Eisner's departure Disney bought Pixar, in early 2006, for 7.4 billion dollars. Catmull became President, Walt Disney Animation Studios/Pixar Animation Studios, and Lasseter was the Chief Creative Officer of both companies. The task of reviving Disney's moribund feature animation division was added to their duties at Pixar.

After completing *The Incredibles*, Bird was asked to take over as director of the troubled *Ratatouille*. Remy, the film's unlikely hero, is a rat with the desire and the talent to become a great chef. He gets his chance when he discovers he can manipulate Linguini, a hapless human dishwasher in a once-great restaurant that's fallen on hard times, by pulling clumps of his hair. With Remy as puppeteer, Linguini attracts the attention of diners and food critics and wins the love of fellow chef Colette.

Bird insisted that Remy had to be believable as a rat and able to run on four legs. The artists threw out models they had worked on for nearly two years and reconfigured them on a breakneck schedule. Bird told the crew: 'I've jumped out of an airplane, I'm knitting a parachute on the way down – and I need you to jump with me.' The crew jumped, and the results justified the effort. The scenes of Linguini jerking around the kitchen, as Remy commandeers his body, suggest Buster Keaton, and the mime sequences of Remy set a new standard for subtlety. *Ratatouille* was the best-reviewed film of 2007, earning more than 623 million dollars worldwide and winning Bird a second Oscar for Best Animated Feature.

Stanton's *Wall-E* (2008) is set on a ruined Earth that is little more than a gargantuan rubbish heap. The title character (an acronym for *W*aste *A*llocation *L*oad *L*ifter *E*arth-Class), spends lonely days compacting blocks of trash and stacking them into towers. His metal body can't be squashed or stretched, and his minimal facial features preclude using the expressions that usually bring a pantomime character to life. The Pixar artists employ slight tilts of the binoculars that form his eyes to suggest expressions and use the character's blunt but sensitively animated hands to indicate his emotional state.

*Wall-E* proves that animated characters are often most eloquent when they say nothing but reveal their emotions purely through movement. The film garnered six Oscar nominations, won Best Animated Feature, and was voted Best Film of the Year by the Los Angeles Film Critics' Association – a first for an animated feature.

Pete Docter's *Up* (2009) defied Hollywood's conventional wisdom about animated films. Prior to the film's opening, entertainment industry observers predicted that

audiences, especially the vital juvenile audience, wouldn't watch a movie about an old man. *Up* proved the naysayers wrong. Lonely, disgruntled widower Carl Fredricksen embarks on a long-dreamed-of adventure to South America, accompanied by the enthusiastic boy Russell, a Junior Wilderness Explorer. A montage of Carl's long and loving marriage to the irrepressible Ellie moved viewers of all ages to tears and balanced the action sequences and the comedy provided by Russell and Dug, an endearingly dim golden retriever fitted with a voice box.

*Up* became the second animated feature to be nominated for Best Picture (the first was Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*). It won Best Animated Feature and composer Michael Giacchino won for Best Original Score. In 2009, Lasseter, Docter, Stanton, Bird, and *Toy Story 3* director Lee Unkrich were honoured with the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Film Festival.

Lasseter had often thought about a third *Toy Story* film, and after Disney acquired Pixar he asked longtime collaborator Lee Unkrich to direct it. The key Pixar artists came up with the outline of the story, and Oscar-winning screenwriter Michael Arndt wrote the script. Once again, the toy characters are forced to confront their mortality. Andy is now 18 and preparing to go to college. What will he do with his old toys? Woody believes that Andy still loves them and they have to be there for him; Jessie argues that their time with Andy is over and they have to move on; Buzz insists all the toys must stay together as a family.

*Toy Story 3* brought the cycle to a moving close. Woody, Buzz, Jessie, and the rest of the gang find a new life with Bonnie, an imaginative little girl who will love them and play with them. Andy can move on to college and adulthood knowing his toys will be well cared for. *Toy Story 3* was the best-reviewed and most successful film of 2010, earning more than a billion dollars worldwide – a record for an animated film. Producer Darla Anderson summed up the movie's themes and how they paralleled the experiences of the Pixar artists, including the death of beloved story artist Joe Ranft.

'This movie can be as deep as you want it to be,' Anderson concluded. 'It reflects what's happened with our company. People have died. Joe's gone. It reflects people moving on. It reflects the human experience. All the *Toy Story* movies have always been about mortality. You can keep peeling that onion and going as deeply spiritual as you want into it. Or enjoy it for what it is.'

Disney initially used CGI to enhance the cinematography in drawn animated features, creating camera movements in three dimensions and simulating the illusion of depth produced by the multiplane camera. Lasseter and



Keane had sought to achieve such effects in the *Wild Things* test in 1983. The soaring flight of the eagle Marahute in *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990), the ballroom sequence in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and the wildebeest stampede in *The Lion King* (1994) demonstrated the potential of CGI to enrich drawn animation. Like the classic Disney films of the 1930s and 1940s, these features were at the cutting edge of filmmaking as well as animation.

But the increasingly elaborate CGI effects blended less effectively with the drawn characters in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001). Although Disney released the Pixar blockbusters, the studio entered the CGI field belatedly and unimpressively.

*Dinosaur* (2000) combined computer animated characters with live-action background plates. While some of the visuals were interesting, the film was burdened with a weak, rambling story and effortful humour from a lemur-like character who described himself as 'your love monkey'.

In *The New Yorker*, critic David Denby complained, 'I found myself missing the violent freedom of Tarzan surfing the upper branches of the forest and the exuberant airborne absurdities of *Aladdin*.' After the exciting battles in Steven Spielberg's first two *Jurassic Park* films, *Dinosaur* felt pallid. Disney, the studio that had led American animation artistically and technically for decades, was clearly playing catch-up.

The studio's first purely CGI film, *Chicken Little* (2005), proved even less memorable. The title character (a boy, despite the name) begins as a nerdy kid who can't, to his father's dismay, play baseball. But this storyline gets lost as the feature progresses and mutates into a heavy-handed imitation of some live-action science fiction films. *Chicken Little* lacks the hip edginess of DreamWorks' *Shrek* series, while the awkward character designs and uninspired animation look like student work next to the innovations of *The Incredibles*.

*Chicken Little* grossed 135 million dollars domestically – better than Disney's unsatisfying drawn films *Brother Bear* (2003) and *Home on the Range* (2004) but less than *Toy Story* had made a decade earlier. Changes in management, a lack of vision, and a proliferation of vice presidents, creative executives, and other 'suits' left the artists feeling demoralized and adrift. When Disney bought Pixar, the new leadership faced the daunting challenges of rebuilding the once-great studio.

The Pixar team arrived too late to do much to help *Meet the Robinsons* (2007), an unimpressive film that performed indifferently at the box office. *American Dog* had been initiated by Chris Sanders, the co-writer/codirector of the

charming and quirky traditional Disney feature *Lilo and Stitch* (2002). Sanders created a story about a dog who's the star of a popular TV series but doesn't realize this world is a fantasy. When Sanders departed over creative differences, Byron Howard and Chris Williams took over and the title was changed to *Bolt*.

The new crew kept the premise but focused on the bond between Bolt and Penny, the girl-actress who plays his owner. Although more satisfying than *Chicken Little* or *Meet the Robinsons*, the film often feels derivative. Bolt's stubborn belief in his own superpowers recalls Buzz Lightyear's insistence that he really is a space ranger in *Toy Story*; and the backstory for Mittens, a cat abandoned by her owner, echoes Jessie's story in *Toy Story 2*. On the plus side, the film has a handsome visual style that distinguishes it from the work of Pixar and DreamWorks. *Bolt* was not a great film, but it suggested that Disney Feature Animation was on the road to recovery.

Disney's next CGI feature, *Tangled* (2010), spent nearly a decade in production and preproduction. It began as a retelling of the fairy tale 'Rapunzel', under Glen Keane's direction. Keane left the movie due to health reasons in 2008 and Nathan Greno and Byron Howard restarted and completed the project. When the drawn feature *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) failed to perform as well as studio management hoped, the new film's title was changed to *Tangled* in an effort to attract more boys – who, it was believed, would not come to a movie about a princess.

*Tangled* is still the story of Rapunzel, the girl imprisoned in a tower. But she's now a princess who was kidnapped as a child for the magical properties of her hair, which keep the manipulative Mother Gothel perpetually young. The role of Flynn, a dashing rogue who helps her escape, was enlarged in hopes of attracting male viewers. Unlike the passive original heroine, this version of Rapunzel is feistier and displays a teenager's seesawing emotions.

*Tangled* is a good film, but it's still not a great one. It offers some excellent animation of the main characters, especially Flynn. The often lyrical visual style once again sets it apart from the work of other studios – especially the scenes of hundreds of candlelit lanterns floating through the evening sky. But the story feels like a mixture of *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, and DreamWorks' *The Road to El Dorado*. *Tangled* opened on Thanksgiving weekend 2010 to generally favourable reviews and earned 68.7 million dollars – the biggest opening for any non-Pixar animated film released by Disney. Its success boded well for the future of Disney Feature Animation.

Pixar's most serious rival in CGI features was DreamWorks SKG, the studio Jeffrey Katzenberg founded with

Steven Spielberg and David Geffen after leaving Disney in 1994. Although he had come to Disney knowing virtually nothing about animation, Katzenberg quickly grew to love the medium and focused his attention on the new studio's feature animation division. The studio's first feature was *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), a retelling of the story of the Ten Commandments in drawn animation. Two years later, DreamWorks released *The Road to El Dorado* and its first CGI film, *Antz*, made in association with Pacific Data Images (PDI).

Z, a young ant in a colony in New York's Central Park, chaffs at the restrictions of its conformist society. His efforts to advance individuality within the colony win the heart of Bala, the Queen's daughter. While Pixar's ants in *A Bug's Life* look like puppets with two arms and two legs, the DreamWorks ants suggest aliens with large triangular heads, human eyes, and small noses. They walk on four legs, like insect centaurs. *Antz* boasts an all-star vocal cast that includes Woody Allen, Sharon Stone, Dan Aykroyd, Jennifer Lopez, and Sylvester Stallone. But the story lacks emotional punch – despite Woody Allen's humorous commentary as Z – and the overwhelmingly brown palette failed to charm audiences.

DreamWorks' decision to make a film about ant characters angered the Pixar artists, as did the plan to release *Antz* two months earlier than *A Bug's Life* (2 October 1998 vs. 20 November 1998). *A Bug's Life* outdrew *Antz* at the box office (163 million dollars vs. 91 million dollars, domestically) but the face-off left bad feelings between the studios. DreamWorks acquired a majority interest in PDI in 2000, and the combined entity went public as DreamWorks Animation.

In 2001, DreamWorks scored its first major hit with *Shrek*. Loosely based on a children's book by *New Yorker* cartoonist William Steig, *Shrek* is a hero-in-spite-of-himself story. The title character, a grumpy green ogre, is drafted into rescuing Princess Fiona from a tower guarded by a fire-breathing dragon. Initially, Shrek's motives are selfish: the villain Lord Farquaad has banished all fairy tale characters from his realm, and they've taken refuge in Shrek's swamp. If Shrek rescues the princess for him, Farquaad will move the squatters out. During his quest, Shrek acquires a sidekick, Donkey, and discovers that Fiona is under a curse that causes her to turn into an ogress at sunset. All ends happily, with Farquaad eaten by the dragon and the ogres married.

*Shrek* was a spoof of fairy tales in general and of Disney fairy tale films in particular. A fussy Pinocchio, a trio of Germanic Little Pigs, and a Gingerbread Boy were among the supporting characters, and Farquaad's realm was a pointed send-up of Disneyland. The animation,

particularly of the stiff human characters, was less polished than that of the Pixar features. But *Shrek* was a huge hit, grossing 268 million dollars domestically and winning the first Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.

The film also set the pattern for most future DreamWorks films: characters with A-list star voices delivering sitcom-style one-liners. The humour was edgier than that of the Disney and Pixar films, aimed at the teenage and young adult audiences who see movies on their opening weekend. This approach proved more effective in some films than in others, but the DreamWorks approach to animated comedy was very successful and influenced features from other studios.

DreamWorks scored an even bigger hit in 2004 with *Shrek 2*, which is generally considered the most entertaining of the four *Shrek* films. After their honeymoon, Shrek and Princess Fiona are invited to visit her parents, the King and Queen of the Kingdom of Far, Far Away. The royal couple isn't expecting an ogre son-in-law or an ogress daughter. His plans for his daughter foiled, the King seeks the help of a nasty Fairy Godmother and a handsome Prince Charming. Of course, Shrek triumphs in the end.

The animation is much more polished than in the first film, and the gags more outrageous. The Kingdom of Far, Far Away is a caricature of Beverly Hills, complete with the fairy tale equivalent of Rodeo Drive. However, the lively animation of *Puss in Boots* (complemented by an over-the-top vocal performance from Antonio Banderas) nearly steals the film. In just a few frames, the cat shifts from threatening Shrek and Donkey with his sword to pleading for mercy with the outsized eyes of a dime-store painting. *Shrek 2* earned more than 441 million dollars domestically, setting a new record for an animated feature.

DreamWorks offered a change of pace in 2008 with the warmer *Kung Fu Panda*. Po, the panda, begins as a slacker who daydreams about martial arts while working in his father's noodle shop. (Po is clearly adopted; his father is a goose.) A series of mishaps causes Po to be proclaimed the hero of an ancient prophecy, and he begins Kung Fu training with the Furious Five. Under the guidance of Master Shifu, a diminutive red panda, Po learns to exploit his strengths (especially his love of eating) until he can defeat the terrible snow leopard Tai Lung. Like Shrek, Po is an unlikely hero who comes from behind to win the day, but he is more appealing – clumsy yet endearing.

*Kung Fu Panda* also earned widespread praise for the strikingly stylized two-dimensional dream sequence that evoked both Chinese painting and contemporary graphics. The film showed that the DreamWorks artists could

move beyond the sardonic tone of most of their features and tell a story with more heart.

*How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) reunited writer-directors Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois, who made Disney's *Lilo and Stitch*. The other Vikings dismiss teenage Hiccup as the village loser. Skinny and inquisitive, he tries out unsuccessful contraptions instead of fighting the dragons that attack his village. When one of his inventions actually works, Hiccup can't bring himself to kill the young dragon he's brought down. He names it Toothless and befriends it, although he's been taught to fear all dragons. The bond they form enables them to defeat the monster that truly threatens the Vikings.

*How to Train Your Dragon* ran into trouble during its development: Sanders and DeBlois came in at the last minute, rewrote the story, and finished the film on a breakneck schedule. The resulting film was a delight, and many observers noted that its uplifting tone felt more like Pixar than DreamWorks. The flying sequences of Toothless carrying Hiccup above rocky coasts and into the clouds rival the 3D effects in James Cameron's *Avatar*.

The charming mime sequences of Hiccup befriendng Toothless showcase the extremely subtle animation. When Toothless chases a spot of sunlight reflected off Hiccup's hammer, like a giant kitten attacking the beam of a laser pointer, the humour comes from the characters' personalities instead of one-liners. It makes the film feel less timely and more timeless. Although it failed to duplicate the financial success of *Shrek 2*, *How to Train Your Dragon* ranks as DreamWorks' most satisfying feature.

Blue Sky, a small studio specializing in commercials and effects that was acquired by Fox in 1997, made an impressive feature debut in 2002 with *Ice Age*. Manny the mammoth, Sid the sloth, and Diego the saber-toothed tiger form an uneasy alliance as they seek to return a lost human baby to its tribe. Scrat, a small squirrel-like mammal who struggles to keep a single acorn, provides slapstick humour. The diminutive character's antics are clearly modeled on Wile E. Coyote's unsuccessful bids to capture the Road Runner in the Warner Brothers cartoons, but the new animation feels like an affectionate homage rather than a pallid copy.

The most successful animated feature of the year, *Ice Age* offered a cartoonier, less realistic approach to CGI. Director Chris Wedge (b. Binghamton, New York, 20 March 1957) and his artists were obviously working with a smaller budget than their Pixar and DreamWorks counterparts, but what they lacked in money they made up for in imagination. The designs were simple, angular, and appealing. Sid looked like a frayed theme park

walk-around figure. Instead of rendering every individual hair of Manny's pelt, the filmmakers gave it the texture of an old chenille bathrobe. The human characters were the least successful members of the cast, and the artists wisely kept their presence to a minimum.

The success of *Ice Age* led to sequels: *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown* (2006), *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* (2009), and *Ice Age: Continental Drift* (2012). The films did well at the box office but failed to recapture the scrappy charm of the original. The sequels were obviously made on larger budgets, which enabled the artists to create more detailed backgrounds and characters. But more elaborate didn't necessarily equal more imaginative.

The runaway success of the Pixar and DreamWorks films led other studios to begin making CGI features, just as the success of the Disney features in the early 1990s motivated studios to produce drawn animation. Once again, the results were decidedly mixed. Too often, directors used simulated three-dimensional camera moves to take the audience on protracted roller-coaster rides through caverns, machinery, ice, and so on. These sequences quickly degenerated into clichés that halted, instead of advancing, the story.

Many CGI films suffered from a problem that a depressing number of drawn films also exhibited – a tendency to talk the audience to death. Viewers weren't subjected to endless chatter because the characters had something to say but because filmmakers and studio executives were afraid to let them be quiet. When the eager young metal hero arrives in Robot City in Blue Sky's *Robots*, the audience should share the excitement he feels as he enters the metropolis of his dreams. But any feelings of wonder are crushed under the nonstop verbiage of the robot Fender, voiced by Robin Williams.

Sony made an unimpressive debut in CGI films with *Open Season* (2006), a film that suffered from a plethora of bodily function jokes. *Surf's Up* (2007), directed by veteran artists Ash Brannon and Chris Buck, was more appealing. But the mockumentary about surfing with a cast of penguins felt like the filmmakers were trying to juggle one concept too many.

The other CGI penguin movie, *Happy Feet* (2006), was produced at the Sydney-based visual effects and animation studio Animal Logic. Mumble is a misfit penguin who retains much of his juvenile down as he grows up. Unlike other penguins his age, he dances rather than sings. It would have been more entertaining to see tap dance wizard Savion Glover perform the steps that were used for the motion capture than it was to watch an animated penguin with distorted legs dance without seeming to touch the ice.

However, the film scored an upset win in the Animated Feature Oscar category, beating out *Cars*.

Animal Logic followed *Happy Feet* with *Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole* (2010), a portentous, overblown saga that borrowed heavily from *The Lord of the Rings* and other fantasy adventures.

The Hong Kong-based studio Imagi's *Astro Boy* (2009) attempted to update Osamu Tezuka's 1963 adaptation of his long-running manga *Tetsuwan Atom* (literally 'Iron-arm Atom'). The original *Astro Boy* was the first Japanese animated series to air in the US. It was an iconic work, beloved on both sides of the Pacific, and the series launched the postwar Japanese animation industry.

The Imagi *Astro Boy* centres on a redesigned title character who looks more like a teenager than the innocent child that Tezuka had envisioned. The naïve charm of the original black-and-white visuals is replaced with elaborate but undistinguished special effects that echo countless other science fiction films. *Astro Boy* pleased neither fans of the original nor devotees of American CGI, and the film died at the box office.

Brad Bird's *The Iron Giant* (1999), which Bird made prior to his Pixar films, was the most successful attempt to combine three-dimensional CGI and traditional drawn animation. Bird adapted poet Ted Hughes' story *The Iron Man* by moving the story of a robot who crashes to Earth to a setting in Maine in the late 1950s. Hogarth Hughes, the adolescent son of a widowed mother, befriends the Giant, who suffers from amnesia after his fall. The Giant's bond with Hogarth transcends his programming as an instrument of destruction. The robot sacrifices himself to save Hogarth and his family in the film's moving finale.

The contrast between the CGI Giant and the drawn characters emphasizes the differences in their natures. Bird and his artists imbued the Giant and the very likable Hogarth with good humour and genuine pathos. Made on a modest budget, *The Iron Giant* excited many animators who felt its powerful story, honest emotions, nonmusical format, and lack of wisecracking sidekicks embodied the kind of film they wanted to make. Unfortunately, Warner Brothers mishandled the release and the film fared poorly at the box office despite ecstatic reviews. *The Iron Giant* enjoys a loyal following and remains popular on DVD.

Disney had less success blending diverse media in *Treasure Planet* (2002), a sci-fi retelling of Kipling's *Treasure Island*. Long John Silver is a cyborg whose robotic limbs were

created in CGI. Although the computer imagery was well matched to Glen Keane's drawings of the character, the elaborately detailed, constantly moving appendages call too much attention to themselves. The results proved less satisfactory than the drawn animation of Edward Elric, a character with similar prostheses in the popular Japanese series *Fullmetal Alchemist*. Michael Eisner's dismissal of *Treasure Planet* as a failure within a few days of its opening sealed the film's fate.

*Flushed Away* (2006), a cocreation of DreamWorks and Aardman Animations, attempted to infuse CGI with the charm of Aardman's celebrated clay films. But the story of Roddy, the spoiled pet rat of an upper-crust British family, and his adventures in the London sewers with Rita, a scavenger-entrepreneur, proved less than enchanting. The artists failed to capture the illogical, handmade appeal, wonderful silliness, and engaging personalities of *Chicken Run* and *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*.

As computer speed and power increased almost exponentially over the years, it became possible to make a CGI feature on a smaller budget and with a smaller crew than the Pixar or DreamWorks films utilized. *Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius* (2001) served as a lead-in to the Nickelodeon series (*The Adventures of Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius*) that debuted the following year. The animation never approached the subtlety and polish of Pixar, but the filmmakers made good use of their limited resources. Instead of rendering individual hairs, they gave the title character a solid coif that looked like soft-serve cream. While not a great film, *Jimmy Neutron* showed that reasonable quality CGI could be produced on a restricted budget.

## Tim Burton, Henry Selick, Mike Johnson<sup>62</sup>

There are few directors who take their first steps into animation and then choose live-action. This is probably because, as Alfred Hitchcock once said, some directors want to be animators, but most animators are happy to sit at their desks and take advantage of all the possibilities animation offers.

The directors who side with live-action seldom have the strength, the skills, or the opportunity to conceive their films *as if* they were cartoons or puppet films while also winning favour with audiences and critics.

<sup>62</sup> By Anna Antonini.

## Tim Burton

Born on 25 August 1958 in Burbank, California – also home to The Walt Disney Studios – Timothy Walter Burton was not in tune with the typical 1950s suburban way of life. He found an escape in painting, drawing, and watching movies. He especially liked Hammer's horror films, the works of Ray Harryhausen, and Ishiro Honda's *Godzilla*. Not surprisingly, he tried to give life to his imaginary world using animation.

After attending CalArts, he began work in the concept art department at Disney Studios, where he befriended Henry Selick and Rick Heinrichs. Together, they made *Vincent* (1982), Burton's first black-and-white puppet animation short film.

The short, based on a poem written by Burton himself, depicts Vincent Malloy, a seven-year-old boy who wants to be Vincent Price. He plays the role so seriously that he scares himself to death (or at least he dreams that he does).<sup>63</sup> Vincent's little world is a theatre of horrors, described in an expressionistic style. There are never-ending stairs, light and shade effects, curved lines, leaning walls, and other visual effects to paint the child's anguish and dread. The voice of Vincent Price himself emphasizes the drama and provides the audience with shivers and (bittersweet) smiles.

From the beginning, Burton showed a rare ability to show horrible things with grace and frankness, being artistic and popular at the same time. However, his dark humour and his love of horror films didn't help him at Disney, where he submitted several projects only to see them rejected. However, he was able to write and direct *Frankenweenie* (1984), a live-action short about a boy (called Victor Frankenstein) who resurrects his bull terrier Sparky. Actor Paul Reubens<sup>64</sup> liked the film and asked Burton to direct a feature film based on the comic character of Pee-Wee Herman, played by Reubens himself.

With *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* (1985), Burton started his career in live-action and didn't direct an animated feature film until *Corpse Bride* (2005). However, he produced several animated series for television, including *Beetlejuice* (1989–1991) and *Family Dog* (1993), and he also made series for the Web, including *The World of Stainboy* (2000). The *Beetlejuice* series only superficially resembles the live-action film directed by Burton in 1988 and is less biting and

gloomy. It can be viewed on one level by small children and on a deeper, more sophisticated level by adults. However, the animation is unimaginative and the show relies on verbal more than visual gags.

*Family Dog* made its debut as an Amazing Stories special in 1993. It was written and directed by Brad Bird and produced by Steven Spielberg<sup>65</sup> and Tim Burton (who was also the character design consultant). The special was beautifully made by television standards, but when it was turned into a CBS series things changed. Bird had to leave, Dennis Klein took his place, and the scripts became crude and the animation poor.

The six episodes of *The World of Stainboy* (2000), a Flash animation series for the Web, were completely under Burton's control. The main characters came from Burton's book *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy and Other Stories* (1997), in which poems are illustrated by drawings of freaky kids. Stainboy is a young sleuth working for the Burbank police department and investigating cases involving characters such as Roy the Toxic Boy and the Girl with Many Eyes. Stainboy wears a superhero suit but has no superpowers except that he leaves nasty stains. Like Burton's other creatures he is a proud social outcast.

Burton's set design, costumes, and makeup are strongly influenced by comics, cartoons, and Burton's own drawings. The vivid, primary colours of *Beetlejuice*, *Mars Attacks!* (1996), and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) alternate with the black and white of *Ed Wood* (1994), *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), and *Planet of the Apes* (2001). Sometimes this bright world lives together with the gloomy world, but not for long. In *Edward Scissorhands*, a crumbling building is surrounded by a ruffled park and everything is black, white, blue, or gray. On the other side of the gates there are new terraced houses, flowery meadows, groomed poodles, and smiling housewives. Edward and his home are like a black spot on a tidy apron.

*Frankenweenie* (2012), Tim Burton's feature-length puppet animation remake of his 1984 short, has the same plot as the original though it is developed further. The meaning is the same: how far can we go to preserve friendship and/or love from death, and how hard is it for the freaks to live with common people? Burton, like young Victor, cannot leave the faithful Sparky and so he keeps redesigning, rewriting, and reanimating him. Calling back Sparky from

<sup>63</sup> In *Vincent* there is a clear homage to Bobe Cannon's *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (1951). The verses of the poem sound similar to the ones written for the earlier film by Dr. Seuss.

<sup>64</sup> Real name Paul Rubinfeld (b. New York, 27 August 1952).

<sup>65</sup> It was Spielberg's first animated project, a year before the creation of DreamWorks SKG.

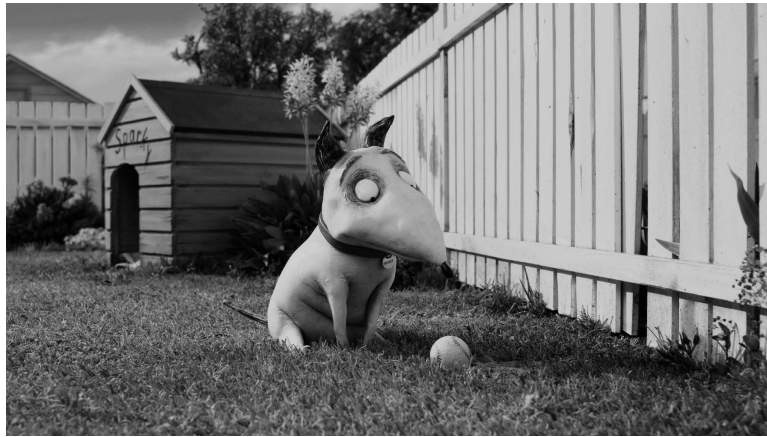


Figure 2.3 Tim Burton, *Frankenweenie*, 2012. © 2012 Disney.

death and from live-action, Burton claims the grown-up's right to keep alive the child's dreams and nightmares through animated films.

Little, meaningful details reveal how deep is the link between puppet and live-action films. In *Frankenweenie*, the human puppets have human hair, while in live-action films such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), *Planet of the Apes* (2001), and *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), heavy prosthetic makeup, wigs, and unrealistically designed clothes cover the faces and bodies of the live actors. From *Vincent* to *Beetlejuice*, from *Edward Scissorhands* to *Batman*, from *Ed Wood* to *Sweeney Todd*, there is always a continuity between Burton's animated characters and his flesh-and-bones actors (for example, between the Johnny Depp-like puppet in *Corpse Bride* and the actor in *Edward Scissorhands*). As in *Big Fish*, the point is not whether to lie but rather to turn reality into something more interesting.

Burton's animated features are on the same wavelength as his live-action features, though *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1996) was directed by Henry Selick and *Corpse Bride* (2005) was codirected with Mike Johnson.

## Henry Selick

Henry Selick (b. Glen Ridge, New Jersey, 30 November 1952) did little but draw in his early years. After seeing Lotte Reiniger's silhouettes and the puppet 'creatures' by Ray Harryhausen, he decided to follow his fascination

with animation. He studied experimental animation under Jules Engel at CalArts.

After his studies, he worked at Disney as an inbetweener and animator. He was on the team working on the alien creature in the live-action *The Watcher in the Woods* (1980); he animated the main titles of the feature cartoon *The Fox and the Hound* (1981); and he storyboarded the clay animation sequence in *Return to Oz* (1985). At Disney he met and worked with Tim Burton, Rick Heinrichs, Brad Bird, and John Musker – and also the veteran Eric Larson, from whom Selick learned how to improve his drawing, animating, and storytelling.

With a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Selick made *Seepage* (1981). It was a combination of expressionism, Picasso collages, abstractionism, and Rodchenko's works. Over several years, Selick worked as a freelance artist. He made *Slow Bob in the Lower Dimensions*, which used puppet animation, cutouts, and live-action, for MTV. Selick showed a talent for combining visual innovation with accessible narration.

His first feature was *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1991),<sup>66</sup> based on an idea that had inspired Burton to write a poem in the early 1980s.

The film told the story of Jack Skellington, the pumpkin king, who is tired of Halloween and fascinated by Christmas. It was conceived as a short film, but in 1990 Disney and Burton made a development deal for a puppet animation feature film. In rewriting the project, Burton decided to turn it into a musical.

<sup>66</sup> The film was promoted under the title '*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*', giving the misleading impression that Burton, rather than Selick, directed the film.

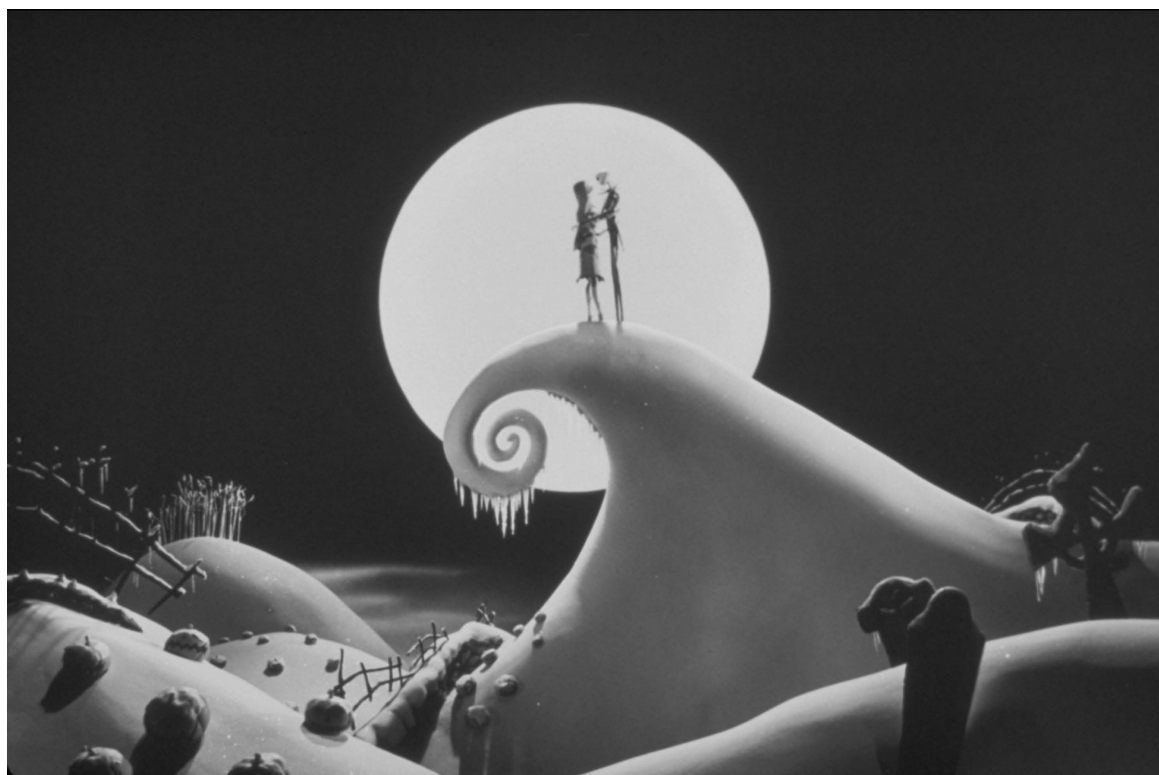


Figure 2.4 Tim Burton and Henry Selick, *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*, 1991. © 1993 Touchstone Pictures.

Together with his longtime collaborator Danny Elfman, Burton created a rough storyline and then Selick and his team wrote and rewrote the screenplay and storyboard. For the sets, Selick referred to expressionism for Halloweentown and Dr. Seuss' illustrations for Christmas Town. The palette is washed out blacks, oranges, and green, with some neon colours. The puppet animation gives the film a restless look. On the making of the film, Selick said, '[Burton] laid the egg, and I sat on it and hatched it.'<sup>67</sup>

Predictably, the film seemed risky to Disney officials – too scary for kids, too childish for adults. However, it earned 50 million dollars in the US on its first theatrical run. In a short time *Tim Burton's The Nightmare*

*Before Christmas* became a cult classic, and Disney has reissued it every year since 2006.

*James and the Giant Peach* (1996), Selick's second feature after *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*, used puppet animation, cutouts, 3D graphics, and live-action. It was based on a classic children's story by Roald Dahl. James is an orphan who lives with two sadistic aunts. A peach in their garden magically grows to an enormous size and is inhabited by friendly talking insects. They help James escape from his aunts and cross the ocean to New York. Richard Corliss wrote in *Time* magazine that Selick's film was better than Dahl's story because the filmmaker had 'reconciled the tale's realistic and surreal elements'.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Leslie Felperin, 'Animated Dreams', *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 12 (1994): 26–29.

<sup>68</sup> Richard Corliss, 'Taking Out the Bugs', *Time*, 15 April 1996. This article can be found at [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).

*Monkeybone* (2001), based on the comic *Dark Town* by Kaja Blackley and Vanessa Chong, used both animation and live-action. The complexity of the plot and the numerous visual and mythological references didn't appeal to audiences or critics. In 2004, Selick joined Laika Studio as the director for feature film development and the next year he made his first computer-generated short, *Moon-girl*. It had a lot in common with his subsequent *Coraline* (2009) – a friendship between a boy, a girl, and their pet friends; a journey into a parallel, mysterious world; a key that passes from hand to hand; and malicious creatures trying to do harm.

*Coraline*, Selick's fourth and possibly best feature, was shot with a double digital camera. This meant the 3D effect was obtained not through splitting bidimensional images but rather by shooting stroboscopic images; it used three-dimensional depth without resorting to cheap tricks. Coraline Jones lives with her very busy parents in an old house. She finds a little door that leads through a womb-like

tunnel to a parallel world. Here, the Other Mother awaits her – a benign-seeming double of her real mother who has buttons for eyes and a terrible secret purpose.<sup>69</sup>

Selick's films are faithful to the books and drawings that inspired them, but in a creative, nonliteral way. There are marked differences between the character designs for *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and *Coraline*. (For example, the characters designed by Selick are 'pointier' and have bigger heads than those designed by Burton.) However, Selick can always find a balance between his own creative world and the worlds of the authors he adapts.

## Mike Johnson

While working on *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) – a live-action film so unreal that it gently slides into animation – Burton returned to puppet animation with



Figure 2.5 Henry Selick with *Coraline* puppet.

<sup>69</sup> Following is an excerpt from a review of the film by Justin Chang (*Variety*, 1 February 2009):

Eerily inhabiting the netherworld where a young girl's wildest dreams become her cruellest nightmares, *Coraline* is a dark delight. Although it coarsens some of the details in Neil Gaiman's popular 2002 children's horror novel, this eccentric and deliriously inventive fantasy finds puppet auteur Henry Selick scaling new heights of ghoulish whimsy, buoyed by a haunting score that works its own macabre magic. [ . . . ] Like the novel, the film functions as a crafty cautionary tale on the perils of getting what you want, whether it's a pair of gloves or a new family. Yet the dazzling colors and unhinged imagination of Selick's visual palette also have the effect of rendering *Coraline's* fantasy world that much more eye-ticklingly and dangerously seductive.



*Corpse Bride*.<sup>70</sup> He was the credited codirector, but the ‘on the ground’ work was done by the film’s other director, Mike Johnson (b. Austin, Texas).

Johnson had left Austin for San Francisco to become an assistant on Tim Burton’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *James and the Giant Peach*. In 1996 he set up his own animation company, Fat Cactus Films, and produced several shorts, including the excellent *The Devil Went Down to Georgia* (1996). This energetic, colourful, and humorous music video tells the story of a boy, Johnny, who is challenged by the devil to a battle of fiddle-playing. The song, originally by the Charlie Daniels Band, is played by Primus, who wrote and played the theme of the animated series *South Park*. In 1998 Johnson directed three episodes of Eddie Murphy’s animated sitcom *The PJs*. After that, he taught puppet animation at CalArts and eventually directed *Corpse Bride*, his first feature, with Burton.

Based on a Russian folk tale, *Corpse Bride* features a man, Victor (the puppet is voiced by Johnny Depp and obviously resembles him). Nervous about his upcoming wedding rehearsal, he goes to practise in the woods and puts the wedding ring on a twig. This ‘twig’ turns out to be the finger of the Corpse Bride, who was murdered by her

sweetheart on the day of the wedding. With her killer still unpunished, she can’t find peace.

Johnson described his collaboration with Burton:

I felt like I was there to help [Burton] realise the film that he would want to make if he could sit there for three years and do it himself. I think we had a sort of mutual respect. I was grateful that he treated me that way. Basically, we would meet and he would have ideas of where he wanted it to go and then he would give me the space and the time to develop those options and come up with those ideas. I would meet with him again and he would dial it in from there. It was a good collaboration that way.<sup>71</sup>

## The Independents<sup>72</sup>

There is really no definition for ‘independent’ or ‘experimental’ animation, except that it is self-published, often made by one artist, and stretches formal conventions. These umbrellas cover a broad spectrum of practice – from entrepreneurs in the popular comic idiom to makers of visual music and conceptual installations

<sup>70</sup> Here we’ll take the opportunity to pay tribute to an outstanding contributor to current animation, the Catalanian layout artist Carles [‘Carlos’ in Castilian] Grangel (b. Barcelona, 1963). Charles Solomon writes:

Casual viewers may find little to connect the egotistical lion and hip-hop zebra of the DreamWorks computer-animated *Madagascar* with the macabre puppets of Tim Burton’s *Corpse Bride* [. . .] But animation aficionados will see in both the fine hand of Carlos Grangel, a Spanish artist whose designs are coming to define the cutting edge of big-studio animation. [. . .]

Mr. Burton first saw Mr. Grangel’s work at the model-making studio Mackinnon & Saunders Ltd. in Manchester, England. He [. . .] noticed drawings Mr. Grangel had done for the puppets in Steffen Schäffler’s short *The Periwig-Maker*, which would be nominated for an Oscar in 2001. [. . .] ‘So I felt quite connected with Carlos before I met him’.

[*On collaborating on Corpse Bride*:] Once the designs were approved by Mr. Burton and his codirector, Mike Johnson, Mr. Grangel worked with crews at Mackinnon & Saunders, who built the puppets. The main characters are about 18 inches [45.72 cm.] tall, half again the size of a Barbie doll. Puppets are more than interesting-looking sculptures: they need armatures, jointed steel skeletons that enable the animators to adjust their positions in minute increments. The *Corpse Bride* puppets’ heads contained mechanical devices that the artists adjusted through the ears to change the models’ expressions.

‘The puppets for *The Periwig-Maker* were very simple’, Mr. Grangel said. ‘The ones for *Corpse Bride* represent a new generation of puppet that is so expressive, they may change people’s thinking about the possibilities of animation’. [. . .] The living characters look as bizarre as the spectres. Victor, the reluctant groom, has the long, skinny legs of Jack Skellington in *Tim Burton’s The Nightmare Before Christmas*. But his expressive eyes and prominent chin resemble those of Johnny Depp, who supplies his voice. [. . .] ‘The eyebrows and eyes, and the very shy mouth make the character sympathetic’, Mr. Grangel said. ‘You care about him because he looks vulnerable’. (Charles Solomon, ‘How a Puppet Master Brings Life to the Comically Dead’, *The New York Times*, 14 August 2005.)

<sup>71</sup> Mark Osborne, ‘Interview: Mike Johnson’, *FramesperSecond*, last modified 26 October 2006, [fpsmagazine.com/feature/061026johnson.php](http://fpsmagazine.com/feature/061026johnson.php).

<sup>72</sup> By George Griffin.

to obsessive creators of hermetic alternative universes. Rarely self-sustaining, independent animation is less a discipline or profession than it is a calling.

## Outside Animation

‘Experimental animation’ may refer to cartooning, abstraction, or virtually any innovative approach to the formal elements of film. Some who do it identify themselves as avant-garde filmmakers rather than animators. Lewis Klahr’s<sup>73</sup> collage films, for example, rip images from a dazzling array of found media (advertising, comics, pornography), recomposing them into compelling, spiky narratives with underlying sexual undertones. The animation is abrupt and indelicate compared, for example, to Larry Jordan’s.<sup>74</sup> There is little effort to create articulated characters, but subjective personae abound, and the jolting reinventions are riveting.

Klahr’s 1993 *Pharaoh’s Belt* grapples with the dream of American consumer culture. Janie Geiser’s<sup>75</sup> work is more multilayered, using puppets, silhouettes, and antique graphics with her signature drawings of lonely women searching through deep, enigmatic dream spaces. The animation is often glimpsed peripherally through superimpositions and soft-focus fabrics, as in *Ghost Algebra* (2009).

Stan Brakhage<sup>76</sup> spent his last years returning to his early direct strategies, painting and scratching on film. Stephanie Maxwell and Jennifer Reeves continue this practice while adding sophisticated variations with digital compositing. Phil Solomon appropriates and recomposes existing footage such as computer-animated games. He creates a meditative counternarrative, a moody dream-scape of meta-animation (*Last Days in a Lonely Place*, 2008).

## Duration: Long Form

Given its compression and intensity, is there an optimum length for an animated film? The ideal standard of seven minutes arose in the days of studio hegemony and still has a hold on our expectations. As with any long performance, pacing is everything. Independent animators may look to historical precedents for feature-length productions, including Lotte Reiniger, Jan Lenica and, more recently, Bill Plympton.

Another precursor is R. O. Blechman’s<sup>77</sup> 1984 *The Soldier’s Tale*, the one-hour PBS special based on the Stravinsky opera. Blechman’s signature Everyman comes to life amid the hopes and delusions of post-World War I modernity, including forays into medieval castles, advertising, and conspicuous consumption. The wiggly-lined Blechman character introduces a spirit of introspective modesty, tinged with modern angst, whether he is acting as a worried stomach in a TV commercial or as a perplexed American voter in a Web cartoon.

Through his legendary studio, Inktank, Blechman carried on an avant-garde New York tradition that had been established by John and Faith Hubley, discussed in *Volume II*. He advanced animation by perfecting a minimal



Figure 2.6 R. O. Blechman, *The Soldier’s Tale*, 1984.

<sup>73</sup> Born New York, New York, 1956.

<sup>74</sup> Born Denver, Colorado, 1934.

<sup>75</sup> Born Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1957.

<sup>76</sup> Stan Brakhage (Kansas City, 14 January 1933–Victoria, BC, Canada, 9 March 2003) was the most important American vanguard film artist of the twentieth century. He began his career during a period of artistic ferment which included Maya Deren and John Cage. Brakhage created an unsurpassed body of work, including *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), the *Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1971), *Text of Light* (1974), and theoretical writing (e.g. *Metaphors on Vision*, 1963), all based on the poetics of personal vision. Of interest to animators is Brakhage’s artistic approach to the material support of film through burning, scratching (*Chinese Series*, 2003), painting (*Chartres Series*, 1994), and appliqué (*Mothlight*, 1963).

<sup>77</sup> R. O. Blechman (b. Brooklyn, New York, 1 October 1930), illustrator, writer, and director, applied a personal, idiosyncratic touch to *The Soldier’s Tale*. He collaborated with the character animators Tissa David (1921–2012) and Ed Smith and with Pop iconoclast Fred Mogubgub (1928–1989), with his unique sensibility. The film was line-produced by Blechman.

approach to design, which always looked like a casual sketch brought to life. His work deals with serious themes and classics of high culture with a sly wit and subtle touch. It is a sophisticated antidote to what passes today for ‘adult’ animation.

Nina Paley<sup>78</sup> is a natural cartoonist. She can make a flurry of effortless rough gestures snap into a character. Paley burst out of her syndicated comic strip world by drawing directly on film. She then progressed to drawing directly in Flash, which seems custom-ordered to her agile talent. A string of shorts, one of the highlights of which is *Fetch* (2001) – a bouncy riff on Escher’s spatial conundrums – led to her ambitious feature *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008).

The film melds the personal (Paley depicts how she got dumped), the mythic (the Indian national epic poem, the *Ramayana*, told from the viewpoint of the jilted wife and mother), and the political (gender politics on a historic scale). The film also has a witty reflexivity (a babble of contemporary Indian voices provides ironic interpretations). Sita (all bosom and hips with Betty Boop mannerisms) sings her bluesy tales of woe, sashaying through extravagant Bollywood settings. Cutout, hinged animation with florid air-brush gradients and Art Deco detail set a high standard for what used to be called stylized, or limited, character animation.

Meanwhile, the first-person story of ‘Nina’ is told as a generic, unfinished sketch. Various retellings of the legend resemble clumsy paintings, as if to suggest the primitive burden of national myths. Key musical passages are garnished with astonishing psychedelic effects based on a rotoscoped dancer and pulsating images of popular Hindu iconography, projecting Sita’s flaming rage. Paley is the pioneer in the ‘one-person, one-feature film’ field. In her spare time, she continues championing the concept of the Creative Commons.<sup>79</sup>

In 2009, Paul (b. Ashiya, Japan, 15 March 1936) and Sandra (b. Westport, Connecticut, 16 November 1953) Fierlinger released their feature *My Dog Tulip*, based on J. R. Ackerley’s eponymous memoir. As mentioned previously (see Vol. 2), Paul Fierlinger made the Oscar-nominated *It’s So Nice to Have a Wolf around the House* (1979). From his roots in Czechoslovakia to his work on *Sesame Street* and his sophisticated engagement with inner narrative, Paul’s work is characterized by a refinement of his loose drawing style. This is coupled with a canny sense of timing, which fills his baggy characters with subtle grace. Sandra’s role extends well beyond colour and production to include cowriting and codirecting in this ‘paperless studio’ of two.

Early adopters of the digital workflow, the Fierlingers made their first autobiographical feature, *Drawn from*

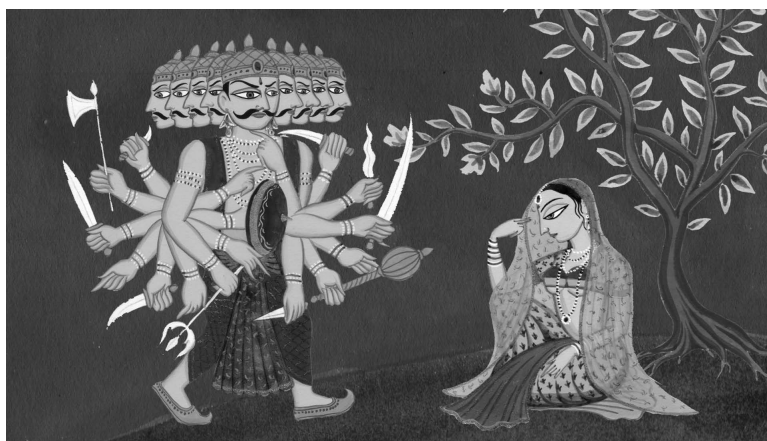


Figure 2.7 Nina Paley, *Sita Sings the Blues*, 2008.

<sup>78</sup> Born Urbana, Illinois, 3 May 1968.

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