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Animating Aesthetics: Pixar and Digital Culture

Eric DuWayne Herhuth
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

ANIMATING AESTHETICS: PIXAR AND DIGITAL CULTURE

by

Eric Herhuth

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ABSTRACT
ANIMATING AESTHETICS: PIXAR AND DIGITAL CULTURE

by

Eric Herhuth

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In the pre-digital age of cinema, animated and live-action film shared a
technological basis in photography and they continue to share a basis in digital
technology. This fact limits the capacity for technological inquiries to explain the
persistent distinction between animated and live-action film, especially when many
scholars in film and media studies agree that all moving image media are instances of
animation. Understanding the distinction in aesthetic terms, however, illuminates how
animation reflexively addresses aesthetic experience and its function within contexts of
technological, environmental, and socio-cultural change. "Animating Aesthetics: Pixar
and Digital Culture" argues that the aesthetics that perpetuate the idea of animation as a
distinct mode in a digital media environment are particularly evident in the films
produced by Pixar Animation Studios. As the first studio to produce a fully computer-
generated animated film, Pixar has had a large and lasting influence on the
standardization of computer animation. Rather than relegate animation to the domain of
children's entertainment or obfuscate its distinction from live action film, this critical
study of Pixar demonstrates how its films build on an aesthetic tradition that interrogates
nature, challenges epistemological stability, and explores the effects of technological
change. This study includes investigations into the uncanny integrity of digital

commodities in the *Toy Story* films, the technological sublime in *Monsters, Inc.*, the exceptionality of the fantastic in *The Incredibles*, and sensorial disruption in *Ratatouille*. Each chapter explores aesthetic experience and how it operates as a contested domain in which norms and values are challenged, reconfigured, but also reproduced. Overall, this dissertation demonstrates how popular animated media can engage contemporary philosophical questions about how we know the world, how we understand technology and our environment, and, finally, how aesthetics are fundamental to humanistic inquiry and critical thought.

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Introduction: Animating Aesthetic Experience

Within the fields of film and media studies there is a growing consensus that animation has been unduly marginalized in one form or another. This includes polemical claims that all moving image media, including film, ought to be studied under the rubric of animation and that digital technologies prompt a shift to this more appropriate position.[1] Bolstering such positions are claims that film theory has overly emphasized photo-indexicality and has neglected the theoretical study of motion, movement, and animation.[2] Animators and producers of animation frequently complain about the inaccurate categorization of animation as a genre as opposed to an artistic medium or mode of production.[3] But there are also scholars who have found the marginal status of animation within cinema a productive opportunity for thinking about margins, exclusions, and all sorts of topics with an in-between or neglected status.[4] This recent, marginal history may become less applicable given today's media environments where software and screens are so ubiquitous that it is difficult to intelligently ascertain where and when animation ends and begins. Further, the experience of viewing animated media, of observing movement produced through static elements, to put it crudely, is too pervasive and differentiated to tie an assortment of media into a single historical category.

Nevertheless, there are remarkable consistencies across diverse experiences with animated media that are related to the marginalization consensus. Scott Bukatman, for instance, finds that cartoons and comics serve as an archetype for other "genres in which physics and conditions of everyday life are transposed into a new register (and sometimes simply revoked)." These media "set about overturning established orders and hierarchies, frequently pausing to meditate on their own possibilities" (Bukatman, *Poetics* 2). The prevalence of interpretations and

theories of animation that focus on the transposition of the physical "conditions of everyday life," and focus on subversion and reflexivity mark an obvious fact that is often overlooked or taken for granted in studies of animation: that many of the films and cartoons that influence animation traditions address aesthetic experience explicitly. They are able to address aesthetic experience in part because of the expectation that they will break with order and challenge hierarchies. For this reason, our judgment of animation as different from other moving image media, even when it could refer to all such media, draws attention to the old dynamic relation between aesthetics and judgment.

This is not to say that animated films tend to be about encounters with art, but rather that they frequently depict or examine aesthesis, the making sense of sense experience, which is a process that integrates thought and feeling. The metamorphoses, the visual metaphors, the caricatured characters, and the artificial worlds address dynamics between sensorial perception and conceptual understanding. This does not mean that they do this exclusively or systematically, or that animation's supposed others—i.e. live-action film—do not address aesthetic experience as well. What it does mean is that animated films have functioned as an opportunity to see media differently, to watch moving images in a less scripted mode, which, of course, can become a script in itself. This accords with the general marginalization of animation to the extent that aesthetic experience is conceived as an exception to routine, instrumental, and procedural experience. Analyzing animation in terms of aesthetic experience illuminates particular modes of expression concerned with perceiving and knowing differently.

By returning to a Kantian notion of aesthetics in conjunction with theories of animation and animation experience, this introduction will examine how animated films address aesthetic and political judgment through an interrogation of nature and a relief of conceptual burdens. My

contention is that many of the films produced by Pixar Animation Studios build on this legacy of animation and deploy it to address the company's history and explore the effects of socio-cultural and technological change. Despite an ongoing interest in realistic animation, Pixar's features indicate that the digital era does not amount to a fixation on simulation or the suppression of playful, cartoon presentations. Whether depicting a boy frightened by his toys coming to life, or a rat becoming a great chef, these films explore aesthetic experience and they express the challenges of living in a plural world in which knowledge is limited and nature is subject to change. This thesis complicates assumptions that family films are inherently conservative given their concern with the development of social norms. Instead, it treats the aesthetic experiences afforded by and depicted in animated films as opportunities for criticism.

Research about Pixar tends to fall into a few basic categories: biographical, commercial, fan-based, and academic. This project exists within the last category, but unlike technical publications and industry studies, it deploys a critical humanistic mode of inquiry. This means that rather than relegate this animation tradition to the domain of entertainment, this study takes seriously the aesthetic experiences bound up in these entertainment media and seeks to remove the insights of those experiences from the domain of pure entertainment. While the philosophy of aesthetics has a problematic history that suffers from elitism, anthropocentrism, racism, and sexism, among other shortcomings, a turn to aesthetics now is appropriate given the plight of the humanities in higher education. The defunding of public institutions and the expanse of neoliberal culture generates amnesia around the centrality of the arts and humanistic inquiry. Or, more insidiously, neoliberal culture treats the domains of non-quantifiable, affective, subjective, metaphysical, and speculative experience as opportunities for market expansion. Aesthetics, in this context, remains a contested domain. Thus, my interest in examining how the anti-normative

capacity of animation aesthetics and animated films operates within a genre associated with developing and establishing norms is as much a philosophical and political exercise as it is a cultural studies project.

John Lasseter, chief creative officer at Pixar and Walt Disney Animation Studios, explains that his primary goal and artistic passion is to provide entertainment for children and families. Lasseter has described Pixar's mode of production as one in which storytelling drives technological innovation, believability is preferable to realism, and emotionally compelling character growth serves as the foundation to every film. According to Lasseter, the creative process at Pixar is about building an animated world around this emotional core and finding ways of telling the story visually.[5] This approach to making animated films is indebted to the Disney animation tradition, Hollywood cinematic conventions, and character animation more broadly. Rather than analyze Pixar's visual and narrative conventions formalistically to illuminate the means by which the studio has consistently delivered entertainment to global audiences, this study challenges the instrumental logic behind that mode of inquiry by analyzing Pixar features in order to understand how they address aesthetic ideas and tropes in respect to the historical and cultural context in which they were produced.

Pixar's emphasis on storytelling is historically quite significant given that it leads the industry in what Alla Gadassik refers to as the "story defense" of animation. This defense is a response to the propensity for computer animation, and its commentators, to eclipse the embodied artistic practices of animators by focusing on technical labor, automation, and simulation (Gadassik 233-4). The story defense contends that the humanity and human trace of the medium persists through the story and characters. It also dovetails with claims that digital cinema retains the legacy of film through audiovisual narrative conventions (Rodowick, *Virtual*

Life 184). In the case of Pixar, the response to the highly automated, digital, disembodied context of computer-based production leans heavily on the character animation tradition. Lasseter's emphasis on believability over realism echoes the "illusion of life" approach articulated by Disney animators Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, and as Lasseter describes, this approach makes obvious to an audience a level of artifice that prevents mistaking the moving images for reality or live action film, and yet this approach aims at creating movements, characters, and stories that are captivating enough for audiences to forget about that explicit artificiality to varying degrees. This approach to animated film results in a stylized realism suitable for bildungsroman storytelling because it facilitates the presentation of worlds with rules to be discovered by both characters and audiences. Such a mode of presentation expresses both the disruption and exploration associated with aesthetic experience.

In general, aesthetics opposes utilitarian, procedural, or routine modes of relating to the world and the things within it. Film, whether digital or analog, is one of the best examples of how these modes operate in modern contexts in that moving images have the capacity to be experienced as a precise historical trace but are not confined to this experience. Consider, for example, how many instructors explain film theory's adoption of the concept of the index by referring to bullet holes and footprints, which bear an imprint of a past impression comparable to chemical photography. Bullet holes and footprints can serve as compelling evidence of past events, but they do not need to be read this way. When a person experiences a footprint aesthetically, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the appearance could just as well resemble a face or conjure up any sort of image. Aesthetics is about subjective experience and, as historians and theorists have described, experience is shot through with numerous historical, cultural, and bodily factors.

For example, Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey* is a frequent referent in technology and media studies because he describes historically how people learned to see through the window of a moving train through a kind of "panoramic perception," and this mode of looking lent itself to a variety of commercial and technological modes of seeing and relating to the world (193). Historicizing cinema specifically, Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* attributes the fascination with indexicality and contingency to the context of modernity. The rationalization of time under capitalism and industrialization created conditions that made film's indexical capacity particularly meaningful in the sense that film enables people to think about the contingency of time by witnessing and presenting the seemingly arbitrary details of temporal life and reality. Of course, Doane details how this function of cinema is also a modern form of rationalization (11). The point here is that experience is itself contingent upon historical and cultural variables, and more specifically, cinema, even after narrative forms became dominant, addresses modernity by facilitating the contemplation of modernity—i.e. the rationalization of time and space among other aspects. Animation's mechanized forms equip it to address similar dynamics between technology, experience, culture, and other domains, but it has predominantly focused on artifice and aesthetic experience.

Pixar continues this tradition and is particularly well-suited to address these dynamics because it was the first studio to produce a computer-animated feature film and has become the leader in standardizing the styles, conventions, and techniques of the computer animation field. This does not mean that the films' explorations into aesthetic experience are simply laudatory creative endeavors. These films are products caught up in commercial, technological, ideological, and philosophical discourses which inform and undermine their formulaic, conventional and, depending on one's political orientation, objectionable structures and themes.

Explicating the contradictions and contentious formulations contained within the films' tight narratives, polished visuals, and market strategies requires a dialogical, interdisciplinary mode of analysis. But this mode of analysis also relies on close reading, which helps to disrupt automatic and conventional modes of reception. Such critical disruption of reception remains crucial in media-saturated environments, and it is precisely the move to criticism that aesthetic experience can prompt. This study of Pixar and aesthetic experience complements broad investigations of digital media by taking a step back and looking closely at a series of films. This methodology helps reassert the significance of that which is obvious but has been deprived of its significance through habit and routine.

The aesthetic experiences depicted in Pixar films consistently involve epistemological crises and encounters with radically new phenomena, which lead to reconfigurations of communities and characters. For example, in *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008) a solitary sentient robot travels from an abandoned, desolate earth to a spaceship that hosts what remains of human civilization. The robot WALL-E is an autonomous, Chaplinesque character who proceeds to bump into and disrupt the programmed and conditioned behavior of both robots and humans, which leads to a revolution aboard the spaceship. Such an encounter with a new, unexplainable phenomenon opens up an aesthetic space that is at once liberating and playful, but also ideologically efficacious.[6] Similar encounters occur in the other films and they contribute to depictions of new community formations, that is, depictions of political change. The chapters that follow each examine aesthetic-related categories addressed by different Pixar films: the uncanny integrity of digital commodities in the *Toy Story* trilogy, the technological sublime in *Monsters, Inc*., exceptional bodies and spaces in *The Incredibles*, and sensation and processes of becoming in *Ratatouille*. These chapters rely upon theories of aesthetic experience relevant to

socio-cultural change and animation theory and the animated film tradition that Pixar builds upon. But they also take aesthetic experience to be explicitly related to political thought and judgment. These chapters examine how aesthetic experience disrupts order and convention, but they are also about genres that continue to resonate in popular culture—objects and machines coming to life, commodity fetishism, new technological spaces, exceptional bodies, and creativity and art.

The Aesthetics of Judgment and the Politics of Animation

Before discussing theories of animation and a few noteworthy experiences with animation, I will briefly discuss Kant's formulation of aesthetic experience and its service to contemporary theories of politics and philosophy. While this book is invested in bolstering humanistic inquiry through philosophy and aesthetics, it also reflects my belief that discussions of aesthetics and philosophy ought to not neglect the politics embedded within them. The Kantian aesthetics alluded to throughout this project remain useful today because they position aesthetic experience as a critical resource. That is, aesthetic experience opens up the limits of reason and habits of thought and action, and it illuminates how experience itself is constructed by the world. The *Critique of Judgment* has been read as a work that attempts to reconcile Kant's moral philosophy with an aesthetic relation to the world, but also as a work that initiates a critique of Kant's own transcendental logic and subject-oriented position (Shaviro, *Without Criteria* 13). Steven Shaviro argues that this "critical aestheticism," which can be observed in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze, offers valuable insight into contemporary developments in media, art, technology, science, and economics (xv).[7]

Instead of a subject who thinks and legislates, the subject of aesthetic experience feels and responds.[8] According to Kant's well-known formulation, aesthetic judgments are

disinterested and reflective. A person judging a beautiful object, for example, has no interest in it and finds no purpose for it, but likes it all the same. Further, that person finds no concept, no practical theory learned from society or science to explain the liking of the object. It is not that the qualities of beauty reside in the object, but the judgment is ultimately based on subjective feelings informed by an experience with the world, and, in Kant's formulation, this leads to suppositions about shared feelings or a sensus communis (53-4). Philosophers such as Whitehead and Deleuze build on Kantian aesthetics in order to critique philosophy itself. But the notion of judgment, which involves comparing particular experiences to general rules, also invokes politics.

Hannah Arendt famously borrowed from Kant's formulation of aesthetic judgment to propose that aesthetic experience is essential to thinking and living in a pluralistic society. It is on this theoretical terrain that the politics of animation aesthetics can be observed through forms of animation that are well-suited to engage reflective judgment, or judgment that precedes or reconfigures concepts and rules for thinking. This idea resonates with the puerility of animation to the extent that children must judge their environments constantly as they learn and develop rules about them. Animation can remind audiences that explicitly stated criteria are not necessary for judging moving image media, and that there are diverse responses to films even within a culturally-aligned, film-going community. And at another quotidian level, animation can remind audiences that their everyday sensing and perceiving of the world need not be comprehended by utilitarian logic and strict cultural scripts.

Arendt's general idea is that aesthetic judgment reckons with new experience, produces new ideas, and forms new communities, which means it is political judgment as well. Conceptual and procedural judgments, "determinate judgment" for Kant, are necessary, but they are not

superior to reflective judgment. For Arendt, reflective judgment addresses the problem of the new in that it is how humans understand their perceptions and sensations that do not have ready-made concepts available. This is critical for Arendt given her overarching concern with the inherent potential newness present within unique persons and, therefore, present in pluralistic society.[9] It is this kind of judgment that individuals marshal to make sense of their daily experiences in the world that are not explicitly familiar and repetitive, or to experience in a new way that which is familiar. Encounters with new objects, environments, appearances, and encounters with other unique persons require imaginative work, whether to make up names, concepts, or to make comparisons with more familiar things. Linda Zerilli explains how this imaginative, reflective process of judging the new in its particularity and contingency contributes to community formation: "To judge objects and events in their freedom expands our sense of community, not because it tells us what is morally or politically justified and thus what we should do, but because it expands our sense of what is real or communicable" (54).

Here, aesthetic judgment supplies two opposing inclinations. First, it reminds individuals that the world consists of elements and relations beyond their control, for which they do not necessarily have concepts or explanations. Second, the imaginative work of understanding such new experiences orients a person toward living in plural society. In short, this kind of reflective judgment frees thought from its situatedness and helps a person imagine other situations. Here Arendt builds upon what Kant refers to as "enlarged mentality." But rather than argue, as Kant does, that enlarged mentality designates the universal identical organization of mental faculties involved in aesthetic judgment and an ideal common sense, Arendt focuses on the worlds and circumstances of others, not their subjective, mental states (Markell 85).

Patchen Markell provides a useful gloss of Arendt's position:

Since worldly circumstances do not *determine* the actual judgments of those who inhabit them—two people in the same circumstances might well judge the same object differently—the judgment that I imagine I would make if I were in someone else's place cannot be anything more than the *possible* judgment of that other. In Arendt's usage, therefore, the gap between the possible and the actual is not a sign of corruption but a marker of the irreducible fact of human plurality, a way of defusing the expectation that common situations will issue in common experiences. (emphasis in original, Markell 85-6)

This passage is concerned with differentiating Arendt's formulation from Kant's, but it contains a formulation remarkably useful to a discussion of animation. That is, the disparity between the possible and the actual contributes to a generative understanding of human plurality, and more precisely in the case of animated films, a plurality that includes nonhumans. The extent to which animation invokes the possible over the actual, that which we do not know but could imagine knowing, also invokes the incommensurability of people's experiences and determines the extent to which its aesthetics stimulate reflective judgment. The experience of not knowing a thing, of not having a concept available to deal with the immediacy of its presentation, is a liberating form of ignorance; at least to the extent that it elicits the imagination to create and invent concepts and explanations and then to reckon with the fact that one's conceptual mastery of the world is limited and particular. It is the feeling of creating a concept or judging without a determinative concept that gives shape to an idea of freedom in the individual that is distinct from the notion of freedom as sovereignty. Again, Zerilli summarizes Arendt:

'We feel our freedom,' as Kant put it, when we judge aesthetically or, as Arendt shows, politically … *What gives us pleasure is how we judge, that is to say, that we judge*

objects and events in their freedom. We don't have to hold these truths to be self-evident any more than we have to hold men and women equal or the rose beautiful; nothing compels us. There is nothing necessary in what we hold. That we do so hold is an expression of our freedom. In the judgment, we affirm our freedom and discover the nature and limits of what we hold in common. This is the simple but crucial lesson to be learned from Arendt's account of political judgment. (emphasis in original, 59)

Zerilli's reading of Arendt emphasizes the role of the imagination and the pleasant feeling of freedom, but her example of the statement of equality between men and women is particularly illuminating. Zerilli refers to the 1848 *Declaration of Sentiments* as an example of aesthetic judgment mobilized into political action. It demonstrates the significance of new concepts—equality between men and women in this case—that persist even when they contradict the concepts and rationality of their historico-cultural context. The possibility of holding such countercultural, irrational truths rests upon an understanding that political judgment is fundamentally aesthetic; that it does not need to follow a pre-given concept or rational logic.

Animation can figurally express aesthetic judgment when it maximizes its expression of possibility; that is, when it reflects on its own lawlessness and capacity for expressing processes of becoming and transformation. Motion is critical to this aspect of the medium in that the expressions of change, morphing, and becoming occur through time and space. Experimental, abstract animation is an obvious corollary here, but even more orthodox, representational forms, usually have elements that trouble an audience's use of determinate judgment—e.g. cartoon physics or blurred bodily boundaries. In other words, even representational forms of animation can prompt experience outside of conceptual and social rules or it can remind audiences of such experiences. Even in representational and narrative-driven animated films, the potential

lawlessness of the medium typically influences the narrative and characterization and audience reception.

Of course, animation, or any art form for that matter, does not have a monopoly on aesthetic experience. Arendt acknowledges in "The Crisis in Culture" that objects in general cannot be judged exclusively in utilitarian terms (*Between Past and Future* 207). There is always the possibility to remove an object from the realm of utility or consumption and to judge it aesthetically. This does not mean placing your hammer in an art gallery, but noticing that your hammer has a pleasant, even beautiful look that has nothing to do with an appreciation of its function. Such a transformation of the relation between subject and object prompts questions about the appearance of the world: how do these relations and the concepts that organize them change?[10] Creative media often reflect on such experiences, but animated films offer overt references to this experience through depictions of metamorphosis and visual gags, and through their created worlds. Animation has a tradition of making obvious the aesthetic worlding of an aesthetic world. The creation of diegetic time and space through cinematic and animation techniques is a kind of worlding, but so too is the revision and creation of perceptual and conceptual rules and routines. This is an abstract way of describing animated worlds like that of the television show *The Flintstones* in which elephant trunks serve as gasoline pumps and so on.[11] This kind of animation offers an aesthetic experience about the role of aesthetic experience in everyday life. It investigates or plays with the process of developing concepts and rules about how the world works, and it makes explicit that such rules can be revised when our experience demands it or when we are inclined to use our imaginations to do so. Thus, there are two experiences of concern here: that of the viewer and that depicted within the animated diegesis, and how the latter might resonate with the former.

Aesthetic judgment, as outlined above, moves from the particular to the general, whereas determinative judgment moves from the general to the particular. I am not endorsing Kant's symbolic relation between beauty and morality, which adds a moral imperative to community building through aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience cannot be proven true or untrue, or good or bad, but it does prompt criticism and conversation, and efforts to find agreement through explanation and persuasion. Animated worlds focused on aesthetic experience tend to depict processes of becoming, of transformation, but also the failure of epistemological mastery. That is, not only do they depict the experience of learning the rules of an environment, or of a community, they also depict moments in which a character discovers that they were wrong about what they thought the rules were. While this builds on the freedom associated with animated media, it is not the freedom of the sovereign subject permitted to act as she pleases, but the freedom of the subject who must use her imagination to reckon with a plural world, a world made up of things and relations that are not of a person's choosing. As I will demonstrate, Pixar engages this animation tradition through narratives about the formation of new communities and through characters reckoning with new experiences, sensations, and bodies. Many of their films set out to explore the very rules governing the reality of a world.

Judgment within the domain of aesthetic experience differs from judgments that precisely rely on laws and conceptual rules. "Law" within this discourse refers to a fixed framework to which subjects under the law can appeal. Law is not subject to the designs of individual decision-makers, but can be natural or artificial and reliant upon democratic procedures. The relation between law and nature is that in everyday activity, these are taken as a given. Aesthetic judgment is more exploratory and treats both natural and artificial law as subject to change. This discussion of exploring and interrogating rules and laws evokes the role of animation in games.

While I suspect that many of the discussions that follow will have purchase on that field, it is beyond the scope of this project to give them proper treatment. In fact, the scope of this project is decidedly narrow given the expanse of moving image media more generally.

"Animation" is a term with a vast and rich etymology that occasionally appears in the domains of science, media, art, and religion. "Animated film/media" is narrower, although influenced by the broader term, and denotes the media forms that typically fall under the rubrics of film and media studies. The word "animated" when modifying "film" or "media" has frequently referred to a medium stylistically distinct from live action film, rather than, for instance, photography or another static medium. This awkward formulation is rendered obsolete by digital production, which extends animation techniques such as compositing and morphing to live action recordings. But the awkwardness leads to interesting questions about the styles and aesthetic forms that solidified during the period of animation's marginalization. These styles and forms constitute an animated film tradition that developed in contrast to live action film.

Animation History: A Few Notable Experiences and Theories

While I recognize animation scholars' efforts to avoid comparing animated film to live action film because this contributes to animation's marginal status and it obscures animation's distinct vocabulary, I also recognize that animation's distinct terms, conventions, and effects develop in dialogue with other media. The significance of this comparative aspect becomes clear when we examine film and animation theory and scholarly commentary on animated films. There is a legacy of animation viewing and theorizing based on uncertainty and aesthetic judgment that can be traced back to modernity, and to early divisions between animated film and live action film. The particular aesthetic experience that this tradition evokes is one that

facilitates experimentation, exploration, theorizing, and thinking in political and philosophical contexts. This is evident in Pixar's workplace philosophy and in their films.

The current global, commercial, and convergent structure of popular entertainment provides its own series of suggestions for how to watch and judge animated films. This includes building on the legacy of photo-indexicality and the myth of total cinema through the photorealism goals of computer animation and digital capture. However, the emergence of computer animation into the feature film platform during the 1990s and 2000s did not serve these goals exclusively. It also presented an opportunity for challenging the fixation on simulating photographic cinema, but this tends to garner less attention from scholars and audiences given the marketing and media hype surrounding photorealism and the uncanny valley, or those presentations that trouble discernment between biological and mechanical movement. These foment a lucrative technological race to produce images that simulate human perception and discernment of photographic film or even real life. The pursuit of photorealism through computer animation can be considered an ironic reversal of the early history of cinema in which the photographic nature of film prompted some audiences to question its status as an artistic medium. This in turn led many filmmakers to conspicuously display their craft and creativity through cinematic illusion and tricks. In reverse order, many computer animators conspicuously simulate photographic realism to achieve recognition in visual media fields. Photography may have relieved human hands from the work of visually recording reality and enabled them to pursue abstraction, but the computer has renewed interest in the mythic quest to draw reality.

But then many studios, including Pixar, employ a stylized realism that utilizes cartoonish exaggeration as well as the simulation of naturally occurring movement. Pixar's stylized realism will at times simulate the look of natural phenomena, such as flowing water, with impressive

precision but then feature anthropomorphic animal characters with caricatured features. The first act of *WALL-E* presents a meticulous level of photorealism in depicting a desolate, waste-filled earth that functions in tension with the cartoonish humans who appear in the film's second act. This stylized realism differs significantly from straight photorealism, which is exemplified by the 2001 production *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (Hironobu Sakaguchi). *Final Fantasy* received much attention from scholars and computer animation aficionados for fully committing to photorealism and then failing—in terms of aesthetic goals and box office. Intrigued by this failure in juxtaposition to the success of other early computer-animated films, Vivian Sobchack asks:

> If we're willing to accept animation's 'irreality' in its *representation* of human beings (a tradition that continues in the CGI of *Toy Story* and *Monsters, Inc.*), why, then, is there such a problem with accepting *Final Fantasy*'s 'hyper-real' *simulation* of human beings? (emphasis in original, 174).

In addition to identifying Pixar's productions as adhering to an alternative tradition from that of strict simulation, this poignant question leads Sobchack to two more questions that illuminate the grounds of animation success and failure beyond the terms of representation-versus-simulation. The first question is what do we want from animation, and the second question is what does animation want for itself?

To answer the first question, Sobchack quotes an anonymous comment on IMDB that explains why *Final Fantasy* failed:

> 'Animation films are entertaining when we know that they are animation films. They are something different from reality, and all the imperfections we find in them don't count. All the holes we … find are filled with our imagination … But, when the level of

perfection of an animation film crosses the line between animation and reality, then we change our scale of values, and we judge the film by comparing it with non-animation film. [This] is when we notice … that there is still an abyss between a real and a virtual actor.' (172)

This comment offers a clear distinction in expectations between animation and non-animation, and how these expectations affect how audiences judge and assess what they view. This notion of different expectations runs through Sobchack's essay, and it runs through traditional distinctions between animation and live action cinema within film studies and film theory. Sobchack's elaboration on the comment is also worth quoting:

what the majority of spectators seem to want and value from animation is not a gloss on 'metaphysical effort' but rather, as film theorist Noel Carroll has said of 'trick films', 'metaphysical release' – that is, the vicarious playing out of the 'plasmatic' possibilities for subverting and/or substituting the laws of physics (and here I might add, the laws of mathematical calculation) with the laws of imagination. (172-3)

Animation's substitution of the laws of physics for those of the imagination can certainly elicit something like "metaphysical release," but an animated world is of a larger spatio-temporal order than a momentary, situational gag. A sustained animated world, as the previous comment indicates, produces expectations that differ from films with fantasy components or hybridized features with live action and animation.[12] The laws of a fully animated world are discovered over the course of the film to a substantially greater degree than live action. Sobchack's use of the IMDB comment reveals the functionality of distinct interpretive traditions for animated and non-animated films, and it shows that this tradition of judging animation differently involves

dispelling with many assumptions about the givenness of physical laws and standards of measure—"the imperfections we find in them don't count."

To answer the question "what does animation want," Sobchack, following classic animated films such as *Pinocchio* as well as *Final Fantasy*, concludes that it is either to become real or to become the ultimate illusion, indecipherable from reality. The rhetoric of ultimate illusion contributes significantly to the downfall of *Final Fantasy*, in addition to its internal diegetic contradictions, as Sobchack explains:

> we, as viewers, also get caught up in the film's 'argument of unlimited (photorealist) development'. And thus we spend a large portion of our own time (dare I pun?) 'rendering' judgment and 'splitting' ontological hairs. Unfortunately, then, our attention – and that of the filmmakers – is greatly misdirected from a focus on 'the illusion of life' to the 'dis-illusion of life.' (180)

Given that the film's promotion and marketing hinged on interest in photorealism (especially the protagonist's hair), it was hyperbolically judged according to photorealism, which is incongruous with the animation tradition based on fewer laws and standards—a more aesthetic form of judgment. Sobchack's focus on the effect of this rhetoric on viewing experience reminds us of the film's industrial context, but also the tensions within film history around perfecting technologies of illusion and adhering to dramatic conventions. Clearly, studios and producers are of a mind to navigate this field profitably. The failure of *Final Fantasy* and its viewers to build on the illusion-of-life, cartooning tradition to which Sobchack alludes is not simply a commercial failure. When considered in conjunction with the success of Pixar, it marks the perpetuation of an animation tradition that judges animated worlds differently from live action worlds.

To delineate an animated film tradition with vastly different expectations and aesthetic experiences than live action film perpetuates a narrow definition of animated film that overlooks the diversity of animated media forms. With respect to film studies, the history that traces divisions between early trick films and live-action, between fantasy and realism, and then between classical narrative cinema and those experimental or medium-conscious productions that expose their constructed artificiality, has created a contradictory set of positions for animated film. Many animated films are described as naïve fantasy, yet these films also make for efficacious propaganda and pedagogical material. Animation production is supposedly "other" to the photographic, indexical production of live-action, yet pro-filmic animation (any mode of animation that utilizes frame-by-frame photographs of manipulated things—nonhuman or human) is ontologically equivalent to live-action; it is equally photographic and indexical. As Suzanne Buchan observes, this state of affairs can be attributed to a confluence of dominant forces in film studies that include an ideology of realism, the industrial-backed dominance of narrative cinema, and the fact that the animation canon taught and studied remains dominated by male animators and industrial production. Additionally, the digital shift in cinema has tended to conflate digital production with animation, which eclipses diverse animation practices (Buchan, *Pervasive Animation* 4-7). This conflation builds on the misrepresentation of animation attributed to the popularity of animated cartoons and to the commercial and cultural influence of the Disney Company.

In addition to these factors, the history of film theory contributes to this narrow animation tradition through the dominance of ideas about the photographic basis of cinema. In general, a photographic understanding of cinema emphasizes the construction of history, a reconnection with the external world, and the ethical promise of the camera as a machine for historical

specificity—a tool for record keeping and a witness to history. On the other hand, theories of

cinematic motion or animation are typically more forward-looking and present-focused than

photo-indexicality or strict theories of correspondence, which privilege historical record and

looking backward (Gunning, "Moving Away" 47). Complicating this bifurcation, however, is the

fact that cinematic realism relies on both photographic historicity and cinematic motion in

conjunction with artifice, or aesthetic styling. Photography and film may have an affinity with

historiography, but, as recent scholarship on André Bazin demonstrates, this does not preclude an

equally prominent affinity with aesthetic styling, even within the domain of realism.[13] Not only

are there numerous realisms then, but they include various forms of artifice and fabrication.[14]

The lesson here is that delineating the key attributes of the narrow animation tradition epitomized

by Sobchack's discussion of the IMDB comment is likely to be more nuanced than a simple

distinction between non-animated and animated film.

Consider, for instance, Bazin's analyses of long takes and depth of field. These aesthetic

techniques are thought to enact a mode of realism by engaging the attention of spectators and

enabling them to choose where and how to focus their attention. This mode of realism preserves

the "ambivalence of reality" within the moving image, which is, inevitably, a framed and

stylized production.[15] These aesthetics preserve the freedom to judge a moving image that is

ambiguous and indeterminate, and in doing so they approach a familiar, quotidian indeterminacy

and freedom that we experience whenever we explore reality through perception. Hence, Bazin

finds a philosophical expression of everyday life, with its uncertainty, ambiguity, and need for

interpretation, through an examination of Welles' *Citizen Kane*. Without debating the extent to

which the fictional reality presented in *Citizen Kane* is ambiguous and open to interpretation, I

want to acknowledge that this formulation resembles the reflective, aesthetic judgment that

escapes utilitarian logic and determinate procedures, and, indeed, underscores the ambiguity of reality.

Animation is equally capable of such philosophical expression, but the ambiguity experienced in animation tends to function differently from that described by Bazin. In the IMDB comment and Sobchack's elaboration of it, animation's lawlessness is not described as ambiguous reality, but as "irreality" or as "different from reality." The ambiguity of animation, in terms of viewer experience, seems to exceed the threshold for cinematic reality. The philosophical implication is that instead of elucidating the ambiguity of reality at the core of everyday experience, animation tends to elucidate ambiguity more generally, without as much or as many references to a concept of reality. Given that reality is not a neutral concept, this is a significant distinction. An experience of ambivalent or ambiguous reality, by retaining greater referentiality to a familiar reality or common world, does not interrogate reality or nature to the extent that media experiences that are not "of reality" are capable.

Animated films certainly bear a strong relation to reality. But even within the narrow tradition dominated by cartoons and industrialized animation, the theoretical descriptors of animation have more destabilizing connotations than the terms "ambivalence" and "ambiguity." Sergei Eisenstein famously compared the protean quality of Disney's early animated films to plasma and to fire, which express the "unity of oppositions," forms of becoming and unbecoming. The dynamics of movement imbue the medium of drawn animation with a capacity to both continuously present a reality and subvert it (Eisenstein 58). Like Eisenstein, most contemporary animation theorists do not define animation in terms of movement alone, but movement in tension with static elements.[16]

Animation historian and theorist Esther Leslie uses Walter Benjamin's term "petrified unrest" to describe animation's dialectical relationship with social, political, and economic formations. Since animators frequently use drawings and other static forms to indicate movement, their work relies on human perception mixed with the knowledge that makes sense of perception—e.g. the contour shape of a flexed muscle can convey movement without any actual movement. Unlike the relative autonomy of photography, drawing emphasizes how human concepts and understanding give vitality to images ("Petrified Unrest" 78). Since the movement of film and pro-filmic elements work with static markers of movement to convey a promise of possibility and change, Leslie concludes that this practice correlates with the alienating, industrial promises of capitalism, and a contradictory expression of stagnation within movement: "Animation's petrified unrest is a formal sign of its ambivalent renderings of the real—it is stuck in a form of life and world simulation, which can be read symptomatically—or critically—as an inability to move on socially, to sketch out new lives and worlds" ("Petrified Unrest" 92).[17]

For Leslie, animation is equally capable of interrogating nature—exposing the alienation of capitalism and modern life—and naturalizing those same cultural practices and ideals. She writes, "Animation is the medium that allows for a dramatization of a skirmish with nature. This skirmish is not the fascistic one of subjugation. It is rather a wrestling with what is natural about nature, and what is historical, which is to say, changeable, about it" ("Animation and History" 29). Leslie's theory of animation engages with the usual questions in film theory about artifice, history, nature and reality, but instead of photo-indexicality, the primary terms are movement and dialectics. Drawn animation relies on human concepts to convey motion through static form, but animated drawings also rely on mechanical movement and automation. This gives drawn animation a different or other nature and this otherworldliness does not express age (i.e. the

historicity of photo-indexicality) as straightforwardly as live-action film. Unless a technical innovation gives away the precise period of production, there are typically fewer historical markers, or indices, in animated film. Leslie does not deny the historicity of animated film, but declares it messy and animated itself: "Animation evokes history, plays with it, undermines it, subverts it, but it does not have it, just as it does not have nature. It has second nature. Or different nature. It has different history. It models the possibility of possibility" ("Animation and History" 35). Animation, as an artistic practice, is capable of subversive forms given its mix of human concepts, perceptual knowledge, and automatic, technological processes, but this also equips it to work in the service of dominant ideology. In other words, when history and nature are thrown into obvious play—"a dramatization of a skirmish"—there is a temptation to acknowledge what remains as a stable, reliable, natural ground.

For Leslie, animation operates through a mix of conceptualized and unconceptualized forms. It is at once unfamiliar and strange, and very familiar and natural. It invokes the phenomenon of not ever really being able to encounter the new because encounters rely on concepts and perceptual knowledge. The totally new is either unnoticed or utterly confusing. Animated worlds that do not seem to have the rules of reality or nature do end up having many of these rules. Hence, they naturalize as much as they denaturalize. Following Eisenstein and others, Leslie's dialectical approach connects the experience of viewing animation to social and political contexts that may not appear to be immediately relevant to an animated film that is expected and designed to be disconnected from reality. This disconnection from reality itself can provide artistic expression of modern forms of alienation attributed to industry, consumerism, or the pervasive technological mediation of digital culture.

Paul Wells uses a very similar articulation to define animation's modernist legacy: "More than any other means of creative expression animation embodies a simultaneity of (creatively) re-constructing the order of things at the very moment of critically de-constructing them" (*Animation and America* 17). In the context of modernity, the animated cartoon and the abstract, nonrepresentational animated film encourage audiences to attend to the medium of animation itself. The forms of transformation and becoming, and the comic elements of cartoons, effectively subvert and challenge the solidity of orthodoxy and convention. Wells claims that while grounded in artistic responses to the mechanization, urbanization, and commercialization of modernity, the modernist aesthetics of animated film have not been exhausted:

> such art becomes a symbolic inflection of changing models of experience and is not
>
> confined to any one historical period, but social moments which insist upon revising
>
> existing rules and consensual guidelines which have arguably been naturalised in a way
>
> that sustains outmoded ideological frameworks. (*Animation and America* 24)

Here, then, the modernist tradition of animation can be understood as having a basis in "changing models of experience." Representational cartoons tend to incorporate these revisionary and transformational elements into narratives as well as visual sequences.

When informed by the comments of Leslie and Wells, the narrow tradition of animation under discussion entails an expectation that the spectator's experience of reality and nature will be thoroughly challenged, that there will be "a dramatization of a skirmish with nature" to use Leslie's phrase. And the dialectical challenge to nature offered by the medium, which frequently contains a narrative or series of gags that challenge the diegetic nature of the animated world, correlates with real-world contests over what is natural. Leslie focuses on capitalism's claims for naturalness, but any ideology that appeals to the status of nature can be addressed through

animated film. As Wells suggests, this kind of animation is well-suited for addressing "changing models of experience" in general.

While not a theorist of animation, Stanley Cavell provides another famous, pre-digital example of an experience with animated film that reinforces this particular tradition of animation but also considers cinematic experience with respect to philosophical questions. Cavell's comments are like those of Bazin's in that they help delineate more precisely the subtle but significant distinctions between animated and live action film. Focusing on cinematic experience more than technical specifications, Cavell omits animation from his reflections on film's ontology and its relation to reality. The omission is poignant because it indicates that he deems watching animation a very different experience from watching live action film, even though the modernist formulation of animated film as addressing "changing models of experience" approaches Cavell's interest in film as addressing the skepticism prevalent in modernity.

In the expanded edition of *The World Viewed*, in a dialogue of much interest to animation studies scholars, Alexander Sesonske questions Cavell about the world that animated cartoons bring into view. Cavell is quick to explain that animated cartoons do not project the world and therefore, do not accord with his definition of cinema: "a succession of automatic world pictures" (168). They do not bear the same relation to reality and perception as live action cinema. Nevertheless, when describing the "animated world" that cartoons do present, Cavell describes his experience in terms that evoke a more lawless form of aesthetic judgment:

The difference between this world and the world we inhabit is not that the world of animation is governed by physical laws or satisfies metaphysical limits which are just different from those which condition us; its laws are often quite similar. The difference is

that we are uncertain when or to what extent our laws and limits do and do not apply

(which suggests that there are no real *laws* at all). (emphasis in original, 169-70)

It is the uncertainty of applying laws that concerns me here. The first sentence accords with Leslie's dialectical understanding of animation: strange animated worlds have similar laws to our own and therein can contribute to naturalizing social contexts and ideology. But Cavell adds that the viewer's experience of not knowing when and what laws will be applied/naturalized indicates a real absence of laws. Comparable to Sobchack's analysis of *Final Fantasy*, Cavell locates an uncertainty in the animation viewing experience that contributes to a general suspension of judgment of the animated world.

Cavell's emphasis on the radical lawlessness that he perceives in the animated film medium is informed by his judgment of live action film. It is unlikely that Cavell would describe live action film as providing viewers with certainty in contrast to the uncertainty of animated cartoons, but the implication is that there is less uncertainty in live action film. The viewer of an obviously animated world has less recourse to the concepts and perceptual experience that typically define a sense of reality—including the familiar ambiguities of perception. The hyperbolic absence of laws or nature explicitly invokes aesthetic judgment, a mode of making sense of experience without the direct application of rules and procedures. As Kant and Arendt explain, aesthetic judgment moves from the particular to the general. It involves the act of taking deeply subjective experience, what a person experiences as beautiful, and believing and arguing that it ought to be shared by others.

Kantian aesthetic judgment has a significant role in Cavell's philosophy, which includes the study of art and literature because, Cavell contends, philosophy is like aesthetic experience in that it aspires to objective answers through impossibly subjective means. Cavell turns to aesthetic

judgment to explain how art and its criticism escape the logical positivism of analytic philosophy (*Must We Mean* 96).[18] Cavell's neglect of animation, then, is appropriately tied to experience because, for him, cinema's live-action projection of reality has the "force of art" (*World Viewed* 165). The projection of reality that Cavell experiences through film addresses the philosophical problems associated with modern skepticism that are exacerbated by logical positivism. As D.N. Rodowick explains, for Cavell, photography and film, "pose both the condition of skepticism and a possible road of departure, the route back to our conviction in reality" (*Virtual Life* 69).

We can understand this through Cavell's claims that film presents a "human something" in a way that is roughly analogous to how all humans are present to each other in a limited sense: "It is an incontestable fact that in a motion picture no live human being is up there. But a human *something* is, and something unlike anything else we know" (*World Viewed* 26). The moving image on the screen breaks an object or person from its worldly context while presenting it as an object or person to be considered by viewers. Since the experience consists through a screen, there is no reciprocation; the viewer cannot access the other presented and that "other" does not know who sees them (*World Viewed* 102). The time and space separation between actors onscreen and audiences exaggerates the basic separation between persons experienced every day. As political theorist Davide Panagia explains, for Cavell, this correlates with the basic incommensurability that troubles subjective human experience: "our willingness to regard an other requires our admittance that we can never get at what is fully human in an other and that the best we can do is to see a human *as* a human something" (emphasis in original, "Blankets" 260). Cavell treats knowing the world in comparable terms: "Whereas what skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be *accepted*; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but

acknowledged" (emphasis in original, *The Cavell Reader* 92).[19] Approaching Arendt's claims about the pluralistic virtues of aesthetic experience in which a subject gains opportunity to think about objects in their freedom, Cavell's comments about film describe the medium as a subjective opportunity for thinking about our objective, skeptical condition.

For Cavell, film's world projections, its affected presentations of reality onscreen that are at once present but absent, are an exaggerated rendering of modern experience in which we have limited knowledge of each other and the world around us. Cavell also stresses the automaticity of the motion camera and its capacity to relieve a "burden of perception" to use Rodowick's phrase.[20] Film's automaticity fulfills the human wish to view the world as it is and remain unseen. Films do this "not because they are escapes into fantasy, but because they are reliefs from private fantasy and its responsibilities; from the fact that the world is *already* drawn by fantasy" (emphasis in original, *World Viewed*, Cavell 102). The experience of cinema that Cavell appreciates relieves humans from the expanded sense of artifice unleashed by a modern understanding of subjectivity as an epistemological problem. Perception becomes burdensome precisely when it is understood as a kind of personal fabrication, which, in the passage above, Cavell relates to drawing. Rather than settling for logical approaches that only resolve verifiable phenomena, film offers an opportunity to think about unverifiable and incommensurable knowledge and experience. The idea is not that film relieves humans from this condition, but that film relieves humans from the burden of this condition by enabling them to experience it in an exaggerated, aestheticized form.

There are animation forms that arguably approach reality in this way, but Cavell and Sesonske's discussion is focused on animated cartoons designed to do something different from conventional live action film (Pierson 21).[21] That something different includes building on the

dialectical and modernist traditions of animated film already discussed. Cavell's experience of animated film as too lawless can be attributed to his overall approach to film, which works to relieve the burden of living in a world "drawn by fantasy." As a medium that produces drawn fantasies, animation does not illuminate modern skepticism in the same way, and Cavell's comments imply that there are simply basic laws present in live action film that are absent from animated film. The assumptions that take place when viewing live action films, such as Cavell's contention that there is a "human something" on screen, can become routine judgments (prejudices?) that constitute another burden which, in turn, can be relieved by animation. Elements of determinative judgment continually develop in concert with media environments; media practices become habitual and the particulars of perceptual experience do not disrupt general concepts and norms but reinforce them. The concept of a "human something," akin to Bazin's "ambivalence of reality," carries with it a host of rules about human bodies and personalities. Animation, then, presents a something, but it frequently resists the concept of human that Cavell finds valuable.

I use the term burden loosely, but relief from perceiving a "human something" designates a disruption that leads to insightful aesthetic experience and this emerges in the numerous descriptions of animation disrupting the rules that guide viewing live action film. For example, animated characters relieve the tension of the mimetic paradox that exists within human performers who are at once a historical record of a person and a creatively imagined character.[22] Admittedly, this animated/non-animated character distinction ignores the forms of micro resistance and nonhuman agency that exist within animation that work against the animators' intentions. But there does seem to be a greater remove from the "flesh and blood" of the actor and, as Bazin noted when comparing cinema to theater, an audience's proximity to living

performers results in a more demanding ethical relation (*What is Cinema?* 102). In other words, whatever cultural and moral feelings of obligation/responsibility one has toward their fellow human, these are significantly influenced by proximity and perceptual recognition. In addition to this ethical distance, animated film can be a distinct departure from cinematic modes of simulation and similarity, as in the case of body genres that seek to trigger visceral reactions from audiences. Certainly, there are animated films that engage the body through conventions developed within pornography, horror, and melodrama, but in many cases animated characters avoid the bodily standards necessary for orgasms, gore, and tears.[23]

Granted, the point at which the fiction of animation is liberated from the indexical and historical traces of human presence varies across audiences, contexts, genres, and modes. But this is also the plural reality that Arendt's formulation of aesthetic experience addresses, and it is this address of plurality that constitutes the politics of animation. Individuals do not judge the world and reality by the same rules given that these are shot through with difference—class, race, sexuality, and other cultural and bodily differences. This tension between generalized and particular experience is at the core of Kantian aesthetics. In the context of cinema, unique cinematic experiences facilitate the critique of generalized cinematic experience. Animation's distinction from live action is an exercise in resisting the imposition of general rules and concepts. This tradition is well-suited for expressing under-represented and unacknowledged views of the world.

Since animated worlds have been less human, less real, and judged differently from live action film, these worlds are capable of disrupting live action viewing habits and reminding audiences of the reflective work of aesthetic experience. It is not that one form is aesthetic and one is not, but rather that the animation tradition outlined above addresses the conceptual

disruption found in Kantian definitions of aesthetics in part through its distinction from live action film. Thus, it remains significant that the distinction between animation and live action retains its usage in digital culture when there are no longer the same medium-specific grounds to assist in differentiating the two modes. It is not clear how long these distinct interpretative traditions can last given digital production's ubiquity and its vast potentialities.[24] Given that aesthetic judgment is considered vital to political and philosophical thinking, as Arendt and Cavell argue respectively, animated film's aesthetic space is a significant opportunity for various forms of critical thinking and theorizing.

Gertrud Koch describes this theorizing through animated film as a form of aesthetic experimentation. Unlike scientific experiments which pursue repeatability, aesthetic experiments open different horizons to each spectator; they are exploratory:

> To form a theory is to react to the experience of reaching a limit of understanding and wanting to get beyond it. Presumably, we construct theories where our curiosity runs up against something that escapes the empirical descriptive capabilities of our ordinary consciousness. ("Film as Experiment in Animation" 132)

It is this understanding of animated film as an opportunity to experiment and explore for both animators and audiences that is politically and philosophically productive. This opportunity relies on aesthetic experience that is less burdened by determinative concepts of "human somethings" and the "ambivalence of reality," which is to refer to experience that "escapes the empirical descriptive capabilities of our ordinary consciousness." Through this experimental and theoretical mode, animated film continues to address modernization, or "changing models of experience," and computer animation has increased purchase on this process given the newness of the medium. The early Pixar films are explicit explorations of the computer animation

medium and socio-cultural change. The new animation medium once again provides opportunities for viewers to interrogate nature, and the animators, following suit, to use characters and narratives to investigate the assumptions and rules governing their own created worlds.

Pixar

The activity of exploring the world through aesthetic experience is directly related to Pixar's leadership, creative culture, and organization. Pixar President, Ed Catmull is a well-known pioneer in computer graphics and computer animation. In his book, *Creativity, Inc.*, Catmull describes how Pixar's organization and practices are oriented around "protecting the new" and "learning to see" the world as artists do, which involves applying the skills of animators to the philosophy behind the organizational structure of the company. For example, all new hires must attend Pixar University and learn basic lessons in drawing. This includes teaching employees to see and draw an object without thinking about the concept they use to give it meaning. According to Catmull, this results in a more realistic drawing because it avoids concepts that distort reality, and employees learn "to suppress that part of [their] brain[s] that jumps to conclusions" (210-213). When describing the task of drawing a chair without seeing a chair, Catmull adds, "The real point is that you can learn to set aside preconceptions. It isn't that you don't have biases, more that there are ways of learning to ignore them while considering a problem. Drawing the 'un-chair' can be a sort of metaphor for increasing perceptivity" (214). These lessons help Pixar workers resist routine and habitualized modes of understanding and perceiving the world, and they offer a reflexive source for the themes prevalent in Pixar films.[25]

Catmull explains that animators must understand how the human perception system works in conjunction with conceptual knowledge to fill in the many details that make up our

experience of the world. When explaining how this knowledge about perception and aesthetics functions in the context of management and animation, Catmull refers to the work of philosopher Alva Noë, a notable figure in studies of perception and consciousness. Noë offers a skill-based or actionist approach to perceptual consciousness, which maintains that a person's awareness of what is present is an active process that relies on sensorimotor and conceptual understanding that develop in concert with one's experience. What things are present and available in the world depends on a person's experience, contextual knowledge, and a variety of sensorimotor skills as well as the brute existence of those things. For Noë, "perceiving is *exploring the world*" (emphasis in original, 59). Sensorimotor and conceptual modes of understanding are skill sets that develop through usage and art is a resource for cultivating them.

Building on the work of Kant and Cavell, Noë appreciates art for creating a space for aesthetic judgment, which does not use prescriptive rules or criteria to judge, but involves the "nonjudgmental use of concepts" and criticism, or those efforts to convince others of the validity of one's experience through "justification, explanation and persuasion" (126). Noë writes, "Crucially, as I would put it, the critical inquiry that the art work occasions and requires is the very means by which we exercise the understanding that brings the work of art into focus and so allows us to feel it, to be sensitive to it" (126-7). Art provides a kind of fine-tuning of the sensorimotor and conceptual modes of understanding involved in knowing the world. It explicitly positions knowing the world as experimental and exploratory, and prompts reflection on the processes of knowing. This formulation leads Noë to compare art to philosophy. Philosophy, like aesthetic experience, is not a strict application of rules or criteria. It involves probing the meaning of what humans do and think and the processes involved.

Figuring perception as a "skillful exploration" of the world reasserts art and philosophy as activities that directly impact everyday life through their capacity to refine and examine the exploratory skills used to know the world and judge experience. Pixar's animated worlds can be understood as thought experiments in this fashion. They vary in their specific themes and environments, but, in accord with the ideas of Catmull and Noë, they depict changes to modes of knowing the world and they depict the reconfiguration of communities. Many of the characters, often nonhumans, suffer from epistemological crises as their perception and understanding change. This is the case when the robot WALL-E disrupts the programmed routines of robots and humans living aboard a futuristic spaceship, and it is the case in *Toy Story* when the toys face their potential obsolescence and the vulnerabilities of being toys. These crises map onto contemporary situations, including anxieties about new technology, media, and globalization.

Nevertheless, as Noë remarks, art and aesthetic judgment are occasions for critical inquiry, they do not enact criticism automatically. Animated films for children frequently present revolutionary themes, but such "Pixarvolt" films, to use J. Halberstam's term, do not demand critical interpretations even if their aesthetics facilitate them (*Queer Art* 29). Further, Catmull's own appreciation of animation aesthetics has not spared his management style from reproach. Pixar is one of many technology companies subject to antitrust litigation and a class-action lawsuit for conspiring to form secret no-poaching agreements with other companies. Catmull had a leading role in managing these agreements, which effectively suppressed employee wages by avoiding market competition (Ames). This is an interesting case because it demonstrates how aesthetics-based organizational thinking can be absorbed and instrumentalized by surrounding power structures.[26]

The Limits of Animation Aesthetics

There are many positions from which a person can critically or uncritically interpret animated films produced and marketed for families and children. One can assume that these productions are of little consequence because of their lack of realistic representations and their reductive, simplistic themes and stories. This is often presumed the case even if a collective of less-than-human characters are depicted overthrowing authority and establishing an alternative political system. On the other hand, such forms of animation have been able to circumvent censorship and express subversive ideas because they were perceived as lighter fare (Wells, *Understanding Animation* 64).[27] Another position is to claim that animated family films are of tremendous consequence because they are expressing messages, values, and ideas to vulnerable child audiences. Within this position there are arguments about subversive themes in children's films that have gone unnoticed, and arguments about dominant, oppressive ideologies that have not received due criticism.

One of the major criticisms of animated films for children is that the critical expressions they may raise are foreclosed upon by their own didacticism, which is a form of self-judgment. This structure provides child viewers with an authoritative reading, and it reduces the need for audiences to creatively judge the action and world of the film. Coupled with the dialectical propensity of animated films to challenge nature and naturalize norms and culture, animated films with didactic or propagandistic framing are capable of quite pointed messaging. As the animated cartoons of the twentieth century demonstrate, playful, childish fare can be ideologically efficacious. A lawless ethos can contribute to a suspension of historical or reality-based judgments that can help audiences focus on particular references to reality. For instance, the *Private SNAFU* educational films for World War II soldiers were designed to entertain young men (they contain many sexist depictions of women) and demonstrate dangerous behaviors that

soldiers should avoid. The goal of this design was to partially relieve the angst and gravity of war, which would help audiences digest a variety of messages—be they sexist, racist, patriotic, or pragmatic. The relief that animated cartoons have offered during contexts of war relates to contexts of death and violence more broadly. The sting of death is certainly relieved when static elements are continually brought to life (even though death remains close to many animated forms), but there is also the sense that the resilience and plasticity of animated characters expresses a kind of training in violence.[28]

Within the history of animated cartoons there are numerous examples of hyperbolic sexist, racist, ethnocentric, and nationalistic depictions. The roots of such depictions in the U.S. can be traced to the influence of burlesque, vaudeville, and black minstrelsy. Early cartoons proved themselves capable of extending stereotypes (simple caricatures were relied on to mitigate the intense labor, and the animators were mostly white, European Americans) and cultivating racial segregation in the imagination. Cartoon allusions to black minstrelsy were able to connect an array of worlds associated with American conceptions of blackness—e.g. Africa, the plantation, the urban underworld, the ghetto—in a fluid, trans-historical fashion that could not happen as easily through the less malleable bodies of stage performance (Sammond 276). Likewise, wartime propaganda expertly vilified enemies through racial and ethnic caricature, and cotemporaneous children's entertainment tended to retain a variety of these discriminatory depictions since many of the same animators worked on both forms (Sharm 78-82).[29] With this history in mind, the stakes are actually quite high for animated films.

This is not helped by the popular tendency to relax critical attention toward animated films that distance themselves from identifiable socio-cultural contexts. Paul Wells believes this is one of the reasons why classic Disney films have maintained an overwhelmingly positive

popular reception despite a robust body of criticism (*Animation and America* 103-123). An animated world's distance from reality and determinative concepts, while at once generating a space for aesthetic judgment, also generates a space vulnerable to the perpetuation of prejudices. Critical attention requires a variety of skills and motivations, and aesthetic experience is an opportunity for critical attention not an imperative for it.

Likewise, Pixar's productions warrant a robust critical discourse appropriate for the studio's historical and cultural context. To recast my argument about aesthetics and socio-cultural change in different terms, my contention is that the Pixar narratives, characters, and worlds are engaged in what Jack Zipes calls a "civilizing process" or the human need to adjust society and adjust to society in the midst of a changing world (*Fairy Tales* ix-x). Zipes observes this process in his studies of fairy tales, but it relates to Pixar films as well. Pixar's only fairy tale, *Brave* (2012), is set in a magical, pre-modern society, but the majority of their films present nonhuman characters and allegorical narratives in contemporary or futuristic settings that are more technological than magical. These films continue to imagine alternative social and communal formations, or "the reconstitution of home on a new plane" (Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen* 4), but with greater proximity to a contemporary, everyday reality. The reflexivity of Pixar films, or their "technical self-consciousness" to use J.P. Telotte's words, is particularly pronounced through their contemporary and futuristic worlds that resonate with real world contexts during the 1990s and 2000s. This reflexivity is attributable to the creative teams at Pixar learning and exploring their medium, and it is attributable to the aesthetically oriented culture led by Ed Catmull and John Lasseter. Thus, it is appropriate to think of the films as contemporized fairy tales that retain an exploratory, experimental orientation toward knowledge and politics.

This reflexivity builds on the "self-figuration" found in early animated cartoons in which an animator interjects herself into the diegesis (*Before Mickey* Crafton 11). Granted, instances in which the animator's person and tools inform/enter the diegesis do not necessarily reveal the inner-workings of the medium: Pixar's features may reflect on technological living but they do not reveal their own production processes directly. The reflexivity involved in the narrow animation tradition I have discussed, does not disclose purely technological or material distinctions, but discloses alternative modes of thinking about and experiencing technological and media environments. And this reflexivity helps bridge the two experiences of concern in this project, that of the viewer and that depicted within the animated diegesis, which enables the "civilizing process" of the characters to resonate with that of the spectators. It is not that the adjustments and crises of the characters necessarily represent or reflect a reality outside the film, but that they provide an opportunity for audiences to think critically about their reality through the film.

In an essay examining the history of the photographic instant, Tom Gunning argues that the instant exists at the core of both animation and photographic technologies ("Instant" 49-51), and his conclusion supports my own, which is that the distinction between animation and live action is hardly technological. Gunning refers to the super-genre of moving images as "animation[1]" and the mode of animation distinct from live action film as "animation[2]." The distinction between live action and animation, while ontologically and practically inaccurate, lends itself to an important point about aesthetics—that it involves judging differently and can refer to the experience of not being able to apply the procedures and concepts at hand and being forced to invent new modes of judgment or reappropriate other modes of judgment. It is the switching of modes that is significant. As Gunning argues, animation and film share a

photographic nature, but that nature can be employed and approached differently. If the film medium ends up designating a filmic age within a larger history of the moving image, then going forward we will need to think about the variety of traditions that persist but took shape during that filmic age. This is one of the major adjustments that both the spectators and characters of Pixar films engage.

Animation aesthetics that distinguish themselves from live action film by "dramatiz[ing] a skirmish with nature," addressing "changing models of experience," and providing opportunities for thought experiments and theorizing present a form of critical aestheticism. This formulation submits that "aesthetics" does not strictly refer to encounters with art, but refers to our sensorial and thoughtful integration with an environment, which is also a political integration. Animated films address this aesthetic relation and provide an opportunity to think critically about it, which is a significant activity during contexts of socio-cultural and technological change. While Pixar's management has effectively exploited the creative freedom of their employees, their productions remain opportunities for critical analyses capable of expressing how their world too is an aesthetic one and its rules are also subject to change.

Academic criticism of the films remains relatively limited and more can certainly be said about the role of Pixar's technological, aesthetic, and market innovations in the context of the early twenty-first century than what is discussed in the following chapters. The Pixar features that I have chosen to analyze are those most conducive to traditional terms from the history of aesthetics. Each chapter addresses the basic disruption of determinative, procedural judgment that has remained central to aesthetic experience and the animation tradition delineated above. Expressions of such moments can be found across animated films produced by different studios, but there are consistent themes and tropes that thread through Pixar's *oeuvre*. The computer-

animated features consistently offer narratives and characters capable of expressing ideas about how technological transitions effect changes in how people know themselves and the world around them.

The first chapter explores the uncanny life of digital commodities through the *Toy Story* films. The term uncanny, by denoting a disturbing uncertainty, refers in this case not only to the premise of living toys but to the series of contradictions expressed by the toy characters. As nostalgic, transitional objects, the toys provide an opportunity to compare the fetishistic consumer logic of the pre-digital era to more recent instantiations of commodity fetishism. This enables the films to demonstrate how commodity logics can thrive in highly automated contexts that render technology intensely personal and relational while being mass produced and alienating. The computer animation aesthetics enhance these contradictions by employing a stylized realism that presents a recognizable world, but one in which the toy characters and their audiences must discover the rules along the way.

Monsters, Inc.'s relation to the sublime is comparable to the uncanny in the *Toy Story* films—namely, it presents some doubt or question about a subject's capacity to know the world. The second chapter examines how the film's treatment of fear, interpersonal intimacy, and technological structures offers an opportunity to contemplate how the ego-affirming sublime associated with Kantian aesthetics and in turn the technological sublime differ from postmodern formulations of the sublime. These latter formulations are utilized in the film to develop rationalizations for the fear experienced toward others and how sublime encounters can contribute to reconfiguring divisions between communities. The polymorphic bodies of the monsters, the cartoonish child characters, and depictions of complex industrial structures also demonstrate the enhancement of sublime aesthetics through computer animation.

As a film primarily about family, *The Incredibles*' (2004) portrayal of 1960s era superhero characters is an example of a male fantasy about the promises of a competitive, liberal society. The third chapter considers how these liberal promises include privileging exceptional bodies and spaces, and how the logic of exceptionality that operates through the film invokes the disruption of procedures and rules. The highly stylized superhero characters serve as visual figurations of exceptionality through their super powers and caricatured, symbolic bodies. This exceptionality correlates with the film's portrayal of efforts to realize equal treatment for all citizens under the law and it illuminates how democratic capitalism facilitates an intensely competitive culture.

The final chapter takes up sensation as another category of aesthetic experience and explores how *Ratatouille* (2007) can be read as an allegory about the relationship between sensation and democracy, and the relationship between sensation and mediated creativity. In the world of the film, sensation disrupts rules and conventions, but also leads to reconfigurations of bodies, relationships, and the perceptual and epistemological habits that determine political possibilities. The animation in *Ratatouille* is again highly stylized and blends cartoon aspects with more conventional forms of realism. This continues the Pixar aesthetic mode in that audiences learn the rules of the world as the characters' stories unfold.

In myriad ways, Pixar's aesthetics begin with *Toy Story* and persist throughout their films, at least those with modern or contemporary settings. *A Bug's Life* (1998) is Pixar's second feature and while not discussed in this project, it continues this world-exploring aesthetic mode and features allusions to modernity and industrialization. These allusions make it an effective prelude to the thematically more contemporary *Monsters, Inc.* (2001). *Finding Nemo* (2003) was released before *The Incredibles* and is not discussed in this project, but it does explore an

underwater world and focuses on an alternative family formation. On the other hand, this film provides little explicit commentary about technological modernization and features fewer explicit aesthetic tropes than the other films. *Cars* (2006) was released before *Ratatouille* and addresses the waning of car culture and recent forms of urbanization, but its lack of human characters impedes asking the same sort of relational questions as the other movies, which tend to query definitions of the human in relation to nature and technology. The films I have chosen to analyze provide a balanced critical discussion in that I find the *Toy Story* films and *The Incredibles* as more conservative, but I find *Monsters, Inc.* and, especially *Ratatouille*, to be less conservative and more radical.

The Uncanny Integrity of Digital Commodities (*Toy Story*)

Many of Pixar's earliest animation shorts feature everyday objects—for instance, a toy in *Tin Toy* (1988), a unicycle in *Red's Dream* (1987), and a desk lamp in *Luxo Jr.* (1986). These were practical characters for early computer animation with its plastic-looking textures and crisp, three-dimensional interiors. But the character choices also resonate with the continued proliferation of automated objects and animated images during the age of digital media. In 1992, architectural theorist Anthony Vidler described the contemporary domestic world of things as uncanny. Traditional objects that filled houses had been redesigned and reinserted into a new technological order. Private space became public as objects were networked and acquired gazes of their own (Vidler 163). Vidler's description foreshadows the coming Internet of things and it outlines the shift from modernist, clean living to a mechanistic home with a life of its own: "A 'machine for living in' has been transformed into a potentially dangerous psychopathological space populated by half-natural, half-prosthetic individuals, where walls reflect the sight of their viewers, where the house surveys its occupants with silent menace" (Vidler 161).

This uncanny, technological domestic life contextualizes not just Pixar's shorts, but the majority of the Studio's feature films. It is a context specific to more developed regions, but is also constituted by global networks that facilitate the exchange of information, goods, and services. This kind of networked, cybernetic domestic space de-privileges the gaze of other humans as it approaches giving parity to the gaze of all objects. Given that humans in part know themselves and their worlds through the reciprocated gazes of other people and objects, computer-animated narratives about autonomous objects have a rich capacity to express shifting

ideas about knowing one's self and world in the digital age. As many commentators have noticed, Pixar's productions address contemporary commercial and media landscapes, but the films also evoke nostalgia through depictions of older media, technology, commodities, and cultural and economic practices. The films' representational mode renders Vidler's uncanny observations less threatening and more playful. The uncanny, as a moment of uncertainty that confuses the past and the present, is a form of aesthetic experience in that it disrupts determinative judgment.

Since Vidler wrote about this personified homestead, digital devices have become more prominent and more interactive. At the same time, many theorists and philosophers have made new efforts to investigate the agency and vitality of the objects and environs that we live with and within in an effort to critique longstanding anthropocentric assumptions. This reality of interactive things and human assumptions can be addressed through the *Toy Story* trilogy (1995, 1999, 2010), through its lively toy characters that reciprocate the care of their child owners and through its narratives about epistemological adjustments. These toy stories have thrived in this technological, post-human, uncanny context, but they also bring to the fore an obvious component too often taken for granted: that the contradictory logics of consumer culture also thrive in this context.

Akin to other Pixar productions, the *Toy Story* trilogy ameliorates the technological fervor of digital culture through nostalgic references to old toys and technologies from the analog period of the twentieth century (Montgomery 12). This prompts a comparison of the commodity logics of the digital age to the commodity forms common to earlier parts of the twentieth century. The trilogy also maintains Pixar's adherence to popular gender/sexual conventions and stereotypes. While presenting characters with more complex identities than those in many family

films, upon investigation, most of these identities are conventional and socially conservative (Wooden and Gillam xxv-xxvi). But the trilogy addresses broader traditions of animation and modernization through its depictions of characters that experience psychological and epistemological transformations as they adjust to a newly perceived reality. These transformations express an open space for reflective judgment when the characters learn they are mistaken about their world and its rules. But rather than leaving open the possibility inherent in this aesthetic relation to the world, these epistemological adjustments function within narratives that naturalize their premises and related social conventions. The films rely on forms of product essentialism and commodity fetishism to serve as logics used to give order and meaning to their animated world. The films, then, as popular entertainment, are a valuable and rare opportunity to examine the cultural form of digital commodities in relation to previous commodity forms, and in relation to recent post-human questions about embodiment, personhood, and the agency of things. This cluster of relations will be illuminated through a discussion of the basic premises of the films, the philosophy underlying their production, the historical transition to commodity culture that the films build upon, and close analysis of the narratives and characters.

*   *   *

The *Toy Story* films are built around two major premises: first, that toys are alive but tirelessly work to hide their animated world from humans; second, that the fulfillment of a toy's life comes through being loved and played with by a child. The first premise sets up reoccurring scenes where toys come alive or wake up, where they scatter like roaches across a bedroom floor to hide before a human enters the room, or where they collapse and play dead beneath the gaze of human eyes. These scenes smack of a childish intuition—or a philosophical one—that our objects are keeping something from us or that there is some opaque field blocking us from truly

perceiving their world. The second premise, that a child's love defines the life of a toy, structures the films' narratives around the point of view of the toys. Instead of emphasizing the child's entertainment and fetishization of toys, the narratives emphasize the toys' pleasure in and loyalty to their child-owner. The child-owner becomes a stabilizing, ideological or theological figure to which the toys express varying levels of fidelity and devotion. The drama of each of the three films unfolds through this structure as the toys find themselves in situations that threaten their secure place with their child-owner. In the first film, the toy characters Buzz Lightyear and Woody find themselves separated from their child-owner Andy and must navigate back to his house before he moves to a new home with his family. In *Toy Story 2*, Woody is abducted by a toy collector and faces becoming part of a museum exhibit. Buzz and Andy's other toys must rescue Woody and return him to Andy once again. Finally, in *Toy Story 3*, Andy has grown up and is about to go to college. The toys find themselves donated to a daycare center, but this time Woody alone tries to get back to Andy while the other toys attempt to adjust to life at the daycare. The film is resolved when the toys are reunited with Andy and he donates all of them to another individual child-owner.

These narratives portray the tension between the different life cycles of humans, things, and commodities. The toys face the challenge of maintaining value as child-owners age and as they wear down, which complicates their child-loving character and their mass-produced, market-based identity. The *Toy Story* trilogy portrays living toys as capable of reciprocating affection and recognition with humans, albeit surreptitiously. But it is significant that that these agential objects reckon with their commodity status as well. They are not exclusively objects or things or commodities or persons, but a tenuous combination of all of these. Steve Jobs, CEO of

Pixar during the production of *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2*, maintained a product philosophy that aligned with the premise of the films, as his biographer Walter Isaacson relates:

> [*Toy Story*] sprang from a belief, which [director John Lasseter] and Jobs shared, that products have an essence to them, a purpose for which they were made. If the object were to have feelings, these would be based on its desire to fulfill its essence. The purpose of a glass, for example, is to hold water; if it had feelings, it would be happy when full and sad when empty. The essence of a computer screen is to interface with a human. The essence of a unicycle is to be ridden in a circus. As for toys, their purpose is to be played with by kids, and thus their existential fear is of being discarded or upstaged by newer toys. So a buddy movie pairing an old favorite toy with a shiny new one would have an essential drama to it, especially when the action revolved around the toys' being separated from their kid. (285-6)

The essentialism described in this summary locates the purpose of an object in its design and therefore, its essence is derived from its designer/creator. More than physical properties, the essentialized element is the authority of the producers, and, according to the producers, toys' integrated designs are meant to entertain children. The toy characters in the *Toy Story* trilogy contemplate their origins to an extent, but most of their activity focuses on the future and their ability to live out their purpose of being toys committed to playing with a child. The drama of the narratives depends on the characters' (and audiences') acceptance of this purpose as the foundational ground of the *Toy Story* world. The epistemological adjustments depicted in the films are about characters coming to terms with this foundational principle.

A form of product essentialism informs the characters' personalities, as indicated in a promotional book authored by Lasseter and Steve Daly:

The task of bringing the *Toy Story* cast to life began with looking through each toy's

physical and conceptual essence. How is it made? What was it built to do? What are its

physical flaws and limitations? Out of this exploration came a cast of characters as

diverse as the materials from which they were made. The key to defining each of the

toys' personalities, says Lasseter, was to try always to derive their traits from the realities

of their construction, respecting what he calls the 'physical integrity of the object.' (16)

This passage illuminates how Jobs' product essentialism can be combined with character

animation. As an animator, Lasseter thinks through what happens to an inert body when it gains

the movement of life, but also how to relate that moving physicality to personality. Lasseter and

his animators study the material reality of bodies in conjunction with commercial reality to

discern the distinguishing traits that constitute character.

The two passages quoted above describe processes of anthropomorphization and they

demonstrate that such processes are not simply about imbuing things with human traits, but that

they also facilitate the contemplation of the materiality, design, and origin of those things. For

Lasseter and the animators, the instrumentality of an object is considered in combination with

that object's autonomous existence. Developing character with a respect for the "physical

integrity of the object" is an imaginative practice interested in presenting non-human agency.

This practice incidentally affiliates the animators with theorists such as Vidler and others

attending to the non-human agency of networked things and matter itself. These different

inquiries share the practice of closely attending to objects. In her investigation into the vitality of

matter, political theorist Jane Bennett endorses moments of naïve or childish realism and small

amounts of anthropomorphism: "A touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyze a sensibility

that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects)

but with variously composed materialities that form confederations" (99). The idea that it is a "sensibility that finds a world" illuminates the practice of attending to objects that Lasseter describes. Although using much more than a touch of anthropomorphism, the animators are deploying a sensibility that attends to objects and things for the purposes of creating a world and creating characters. Moreover, the idea that a sensibility is a changeable orientation central to knowing the world resonates with the *Toy Story* narratives which feature characters reconfiguring their knowledge of self and world.

Unlike Bennett's sensibility, the animators working on the *Toy Story* trilogy retain the dominance of human modes of creation through characterization grounded in a product essentialist philosophy. The *Toy Story* trilogy does not separate its consideration of non-human agency from its consideration of commercial culture; it thinks these aspects together. Anthropomorphization ought to be distinguished from characterization in this context. The former refers to non-human bodies imbued with human attributes and the latter refers to the process of making or presenting a character, which typically involves determining the character's essential attributes and presenting those through an artistic medium. In this sense, anthropomorphization refers to a process of input whereas characterization refers to a process of extraction for the purposes of re-presentation, which accords with Lasseter's description of deriving personality traits from "the realities of [the toys'] construction." The two processes often coincide, but in this case the distinction highlights that the animators are not considering the commercial elements of the toys to be human elements peripheral to the objects. Instead, the commercial elements are presumed to be intrinsic, essential characteristics.

This form of characterization opposes philosophical attempts to contemplate an object apart from dominate discourses that distort human perception and experience. Consider, for

instance, Martin Heidegger's famous essay "The Thing," which advances an understanding of the thing as opposed to the object through a kind of characterization that considers a jug's function along with its material shape and presence. The void of a jug holds the contents it contains, and this holding of contents is oriented toward the act of pouring/giving: "The jug's jug-character consists in the poured gift of the pouring out" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 172). The formal attributes of the jug—as a container, as something that pours—create a character apart from what it was produced or manufactured to be and do. In Heidegger's essay, characterization displaces scientific or market definitions of the jug with the goal of apprehending the thing character of the jug rather than its object utility. The essay resists the dominant scientific and market discourses that for many modern individuals organize the world and its objects. The Pixar animators however, do not use characterization to escape modernity and gain access to the world of things obscured by the commodity form and instrumentalist thinking; instead, their imaginative process caricatures and projects the obscurantist nature of the commodity form itself.

Given the ongoing discussion among scholars such as Bennett and Bruno Latour for expanding democratic politics to non-humans, the *Toy Story* trilogy serves as a cautionary tale about the commercial forces that are quick to speak on behalf of things. It is important to acknowledge this component of Pixar's *oeuvre* given the ease with which viewers can make explicit ties between animation and vital materialism or animation and post-humanism. It can be easy to overlook analyzing the obvious commercial elements. Such is the case when Kyle Munkittrick writing for *Discover Magazine* in 2011 claims that Pixar films have been preparing audiences for new forms of personhood. Munkittrick's argument relies primarily on the narrative structures of the films and the worlds the characters inhabit. He notes that Pixar worlds are not

magical, they are realistic, human worlds, and they feature at least one intelligent, non-human main character. The human characters and narratives present two recurring structures that lead Munkittrick to his thesis: the human as villain and the human as partner. *Toy Story 1* and *Toy Story 2* have human villains and present non-human characters coming to terms with their status within the human world. The common narrative that emerges through the human-as-partner structure is that non-human protagonists who deviate from their communities are able to bond with humans who have likewise deviated from their communities. Munkittrick acknowledges what he calls "character teams" which are rewarded for forming new relationships with "others"—e.g. Remy the rat and Linguini the human in *Ratatouille*, or the monsters Sulley and Mike with the human child Boo in *Monsters, Inc*. His thesis demonstrates how Pixar films can be easily applied to discourses associated with post-human issues. Munkittrick's account does not consider the longer history of representations of humans partnering with non-humans nor does it consider animation's legacy of challenging static definitions of personhood and nature.[1] But more consequential is that the eagerness to utilize the cultural capital of Pixar's work results in a failure to attend to the precise forms of alternative personhood that the films present.

Munkittrick's account does not examine the personhood based on product essentialism that emerges in the *Toy Story* films. This characterization of the commodity form still offers insight into post-human experience—specifically the development of virtual bodies composed of information. After all, what does it mean to respect the physical integrity of an object and translate that integrity, which includes commercial elements, into digital information? Foremost, the development of the commodity-characters builds on the antecedent logics of pre-digital consumerism. The nostalgia that most *Toy Story* commentators address relies heavily on a historical and personal familiarity with intimate consumer-commodity relationships. The

twentieth century featured the radical expansion of the commodity form, which included the predominance of exchange value over other forms of value and the expansion of commodity fetishism into all aspects of cultural life. For Marx, commodity fetishism refers to the seemingly mystical properties of exchange value that mask the human and material relations that contribute to the value of a commodity.[2] This condition in which the majority of objects are commodities first and tools or art second has been criticized for inducing social conformity and a dangerously regressive political consciousness among consumers (Horkheimer and Adorno).

The *Toy Story* trilogy's focus on contrasting temporalities between products and persons and its focus on family/community draw attention to questions of commodity fetishism's relation to cultural transmission. Modern consumerism marked the diminution of a cultural realm established through the production of traditional goods and goods capable of passing on tradition—e.g. art, literature, and their respective commentaries (Arendt "Crisis in Culture"). Consumerism diminishes this force and becomes its own set of cultural practices that is preserved and passed on to future generations, through media forms like the *Toy Story* films, for instance. Theodor Adorno, in his well known essay on the fetish character of music, gives numerous examples of everyday moments in which market value is used to mark enjoyment, resolve quotidian judgments, and assess intimacy. In regard to the familiarity of arranged music compilations, Adorno writes:

> It is a compulsion similar to that which requires radio favourites to insinuate themselves into the families of their listeners as uncles and aunts and pretend to a human proximity. Radical reification produces its own pretence of immediacy and intimacy. (*Culture Industry* 42)

Although about music and not visual media, this statement adumbrates the uncanny domestic

space described by Vidler in the 1990s, which suggests some continuity based on commercial

efforts to make products familiar. It also highlights the casual inattention to mediation—"radical

reification" amounts to consumers losing awareness of the commercial power structures that

mediate and administer their experience. For Adorno, if a consumer recognizes a piece of

popular music, then it is experienced as palatable and pleasant and it confirms the consumer's

knowledge of the marketplace, the new standard of measure. Instead of being a matter of taste

and eduction, judgment of cultural goods and art objects becomes a matter of familiarity and

market knowledge (Adorno 30). Consumers are able to feel empowered through their

identification with the producers of the entertainment who have prestige in the marketplace.

Hence, products and brands become intimately bound up with individual identity and self-

esteem.

The longstanding intimate role of commodities in everyday life informs the nostalgic

appeal of the *Toy Story* films and broader developments in digital culture. Digital culture

involves accelerated commodity consumption through the increased circulation of and access to

digital goods in private and public spaces. This includes the re-circulation of older media still in

demand within niche markets—e.g. vintage programming on Youtube. It also features enhanced

modes of interactivity through networked devices and DIY production and distribution. In this

context of intense global (re)circulation, original content continues to appreciate as a seed for

producing an array of commodity progeny. The speed and scale of production and circulation

contribute to overlooking both material and virtual waste—the things themselves are neglected.[3]

There is also the uncertainty of the location of power and authority among networks surveilled

by corporate, state, and independent actors which, echoing Vidler's remarks, can be traumatic for the individual constantly engaged in online activity.[4]

The *Toy Story* trilogy engages with these aspects through its nostalgic themes, its awareness of media convergence, its attention to things and their fate, its depiction of commercial authority, and its recognition of the weight of relational intimacy. More specifically, the trilogy's historical sensibility demonstrates how prevailing consumerist logics become a means for presenting a comprehensible digital and fictional world. The toy characters rely on product essentialism and commodity fetishism as guiding logics to make sense of their own world and the relationships therein. In this form, commercial forces maintain authority within everyday life, and digital goods still pursue "human proximity" as well as "immediacy and intimacy." Further, the films offer insight into the contradiction between commodity disposability and fetishism, and how digital culture works to resolve this contradiction through brand building. Admittedly, the continuity of commodity forms through the shift to digital media contributes to the seeming permanence of late capitalism and the *Toy Story* films certainly contribute to this continuity. However, there is a subtle suggestion that it could be otherwise in the fact that the trilogy's animated world does not immediately disclose its premises or commodity logics, the toys and human characters must test and discover what these are.

Commercial Authority and Commodity Integrity

Although they mark significant innovations in computer animation and digital cinema, these toy stories have numerous antecedents, many of which have a history of addressing philosophical questions about modernization, human development, and the physical properties of our world. Lois Rostow Kuznets' book *When Toys Come Alive*, published just prior to the release of *Toy Story*, makes a case for the enduring presence of the human desire for objects to come

alive, and relates this desire to the human impulse to create in general. Within her argument, Kuznets reviews how toys and objects of personal significance tend to be involved in processes of transition, especially during early child development.[5] Representations of inanimate toys coming to life can "embody human anxiety about what it means to be 'real'—an independent subject or self" (Kuznets 2). This longstanding practice of relating toys to personal transitions and life questions renders toys appropriate for coping with modernization and rapidly developing technology (Kuznets 19). Objects from childhood, whether collected or passed on to one's offspring can mitigate the anxiety involved in transitioning into new phases of life and can symbolize an effort to perpetuate the meanings and practices of the past. Also, the miniature aspect of toys conveys the great vulnerability that people feel in the midst of social change, and their smallness is capable of suggesting the secret worlds that exist beyond our perception (Kuznets 80).

In short, toy stories are associated with the metamorphic, developmental, existential, relational, technical, and spatiotemporal experiences of life. Pixar's *Toy Story* trilogy certainly builds on this tradition through simulating the world from a toy's point of view, focusing on family and home life, and examining how relationships change over time. The first *Toy Story* film focuses on the relationship boys have with their toys. The film introduces the boy character Andy, who owns the toys that the film is about and who lives next door to Sid, a boy whose name and demeanor allude to punk icon Sid Vicious. Sid serves as a foil for Andy; Sid is the bad child, and Andy is the good child. Sid's room is messy and dark while Andy's is bright and clean. Both boys are highly imaginative and enjoy playing with toys. Sid, however, prefers to blow his up or disassemble them and reconfigure them using different toy parts.[6] The juxtaposition of the boys has significant implications for reading the trilogy because they are the

most developed human characters in the first film, although peripheral, and they contribute to the child-owner ideology at the center of each film. The boys' parents are even more peripheral, but their limited depictions provide crucial framing for the epistemological adjustments in the narrative. Andy's mother, for instance, briefly appears in a handful of short scenes—including Andy's birthday party and Christmas—but always in the background and with very little dialogue. The peripheral role of parents has facilitated other commentators reading the toys as comparable to stand-ins for parents since the toys are bound to the child by love and a concern for the child's well-being (Wooden and Gillam 11). The insight of these readings, in which toys must learn to be domestic caregivers for children, is less compelling given that children have tremendous power over the toys in the films and the characterization of the toys is strongly influenced by product essentialism. From their peripheral locations, both the adult and child characters demonstrate that the story is about a family of things in which parental authority is subsumed by commercial authority—where the world of children and their toys is structured primarily by companies such as Pixar, not mothers and fathers.

The core conflict of the first *Toy Story* emerges from the relationship between two toys in particular, the space ranger Buzz Lightyear and the cowboy Woody. Buzz is Andy's newest toy and threatens Woody's place as Andy's favorite. As a new toy, Buzz is not yet aware that he is a toy and, therefore, has not learned the basic premise that a toy's greatest desire is to be played with and loved by a child. Woody helps Buzz learn this, but not before knocking Buzz out of Andy's bedroom window during a fit of jealousy. After his defenestration, Buzz sneaks into the family vehicle before they leave for dinner and confronts Woody, who is accompanying Andy, when the family stops for gas. During their fight, the family car pulls away and the two are stranded. Their adventure to reunite with Andy at the local restaurant arcade, Pizza Planet,

functions as a rite of passage narrative and buddy story. However, at Pizza Planet, Buzz and

Woody are abducted by Sid and transported to his dystopian bedroom. With band posters

plastered on the walls and a workbench with tools for modifying toys, Sid's room looks more

adolescent and less supervised than Andy's room. Buzz and Woody quickly escape the room but

find themselves in a house unlike Andy's. While Andy's father is absent from all of the *Toy*

Story films, Sid's father, or at least an adult masculine presence, is partially depicted from

Buzz's point of view lounging in a chair in front of a television.

Figure 1 Buzz's point of view inside Sid's house.

Figure 2 Andy's clean, bright house, and newer television.

The implicit point here is that Andy's profound affection for his toys is supported by a home and family that differ from Sid's. Sid's pleasure in destroying and manipulating his toys is bolstered by his seemingly present but apathetic father. Most of Andy's toys are coded masculine, and Sid's destructive masculinity is carefully presented in contrast with Andy's. Sid's destructive propensities resemble those of a bully who afflicts others as a means for coping with his own vulnerability. The room where Sid's father watches TV is full of markers that can be read as working class as well.[7] It is possible to read an economic vulnerability being passed on from father to son even though Sid's violence seems to be a masculine privilege secured in part by the presence of his father. The room where Sid's father watches TV, like Sid's room, is juxtaposed with the clean, polished space of Andy's home. And it is in this former room that Buzz sees a commercial for Buzz Lightyear action figures and learns that he is a toy.

The scene portrays an alternative mirror stage.[8] Instead of the subject experiencing a reflection that presents a coherent image of self separate from but autonomous within the external world, Buzz's encounter with a visual representation of himself disintegrates his

subjectivity. He is forced to convert epistemologically from knowing the world as a space ranger to knowing the world as a toy. Alluding to old claims that television desensitizes and corrupts passive viewers, this scene combines the TV with the peripheral presence of Sid's father sitting motionless in a recliner to mark a space of demystification. Buzz shares the view of the adult, Sid's father, as he watches the commercial. It is this demystifying rationality that is parodied by Sid, who repeatedly rehearses the process of demystification with each toy that he disassembles or explodes. In Sid's house, masculine adult space secures a nexus of violence and knowledge, which is directly contrasted with the fatherless space of Andy's house and Andy's obedience to his mother.

To escape from Sid's possession, Woody and Buzz must take advantage of the other captivating premise of the films—i.e. toys are living agents. In the film, toys can reveal their life and world to humans, but doing so is taboo. With multiple allusions to horror films, the escape scene unfolds in Sid's backyard as the toys come alive in front of Sid and disrupt his preparations to launch Buzz Lightyear into the air by way of an exploding firework. Sid is horrified by his toys emerging from the sandbox and elsewhere, and by Woody who speaks and demonstrates the full extent of his humanoid facial expressions.

Figure 3 Woody discloses his vitality to Sid.

The toys' disclosure of their being to Sid destabilizes his knowledge of the world, and he learns

that toys are not lifeless objects subject to his will. Observing the toys moving autonomously,

Sid no longer has command over reason or matter, and he learns that the violent, adult

masculinity he has inherited is not a force of demystification but of mystification. *Toy Story* pits

the fatherless, imaginative play-space of Andy against the more destructive, masculine play-

space of Sid. Despite the appeal of Sid's creativity and subversion, which likely resonates with

many of Pixar's own animators, the character is portrayed as fundamentally misunderstanding

his environment. The narrative champions a childish form of play more in line with the essence

of toys—i.e. the product essence as described by Lasseter. The narrative presents a reversal of

adult rationality by way of childish imagination that reinforces the commodity fetishism at the

center of mass-produced toys and children's entertainment.

The notion that a naïve realism or fascination with objects can illuminate nonhuman agency and vitality is an idea that reinforces claims by animation theorists that animated media are ripe for philosophical study, not simply children's entertainment (Buchan, "Cinema of Apprehension" 167). While I agree with this contention, a close reading of *Toy Story* illuminates how a form of naïve realism is very active in commercial production. The vilification of Sid's unorthodox refashioning of toys aligns the toys' points of view with that of their creators/manufacturers. This creates an ethos of commodity integrity that opposes that of digital cultures that celebrate re-engineering, hacking, and re-mixing. Instead, the vilification of Sid reinforces the Disneyfication and fetishization of toy commodities as special and valuable just the way they are when opened from their packaging. The film relies on a justifiably pejorative nexus of scientific rationality-control-violence-masculinity-boyhood to champion a supposedly alternative boyhood that is playful, imaginative, cooperative, affectionate, loyal, and loving. But the latter is a fatherless form used to bolster commodity fetishism and the fetishism of production—in other words, what Pixar puts together, no one should take apart. Authority, in this case, resides with the producers and accords with a basic capitalist hierarchy.[9]

The ethos of commodity integrity supports commercial authority, which is reinforced by the parental framing, and this context provides the backdrop for a series of disturbances to the integrity of the personalities, identities, and bodies of the characters. The character Buzz, after seeing the commercial of himself as a toy, jumps from the top of a stairway in Sid's house in a final effort to determine if he can fly like a real space ranger. When Buzz falls and crashes, his arm is completely separated from his body—a physical, material indication of his toyness. Buzz must adjust to this newly discovered reality and natural order of toys, owners, and producers, and he must contend with the limits of his plastic body. This is an ironic twist given the character's

digital construction, but it also allows the character to metaphorically stand in for a contemporaneous angst about disembodied information. As Katherine Hayles argues, the information age and the digital age have exacerbated the Western humanistic habit of disembodied thinking which neglects the significance of bodies in cognitive processes and social activity (*My Mother* 2). The more extreme forms of digital utopianism are usually criticized for reducing consciousness and life to codes and patterns, but there are also more quotidian concerns about digital media innovation out-pacing our understanding of the developmental and physiological effects of increased contact with digital media. The body in *Toy Story* becomes a link to a natural order at a time when nature is, once again, interrogated and disturbed through technological innovation. But this reliance on the body to stabilize reality and order is also a reliance on commercial authority via product essentialism. Buzz begins to understand his toy essence through his own plastic body; he conforms to the product essentialist philosophy of Lasseter and Jobs.

Sid's psychological fragmentation follows that of Buzz, and likewise, has epistemological implications that can be related to post-human discourse and digital commodification. Both Sid and Buzz are no longer sure about their ability to know the world and their place in it, but this uncertainty is more of an uncanny experience for Sid because the toys, whose vitality he pretended to give and take away, disclose their actual life to him.[10] This portrayal of the uncanny is probably received by most audiences as humorous and does not evoke uncanny experience in the audiences themselves. As Freud notes in his essay on the topic, to make a fictional sequence seem uncanny an author must create a world that is commensurate with our reality (156). Computer animation is on one hand capable of and famous for uncanny effects because it can simulate portions of our perception of reality and confuse our perception

system.[11] But Pixar's stylized animation and the *Toy Story* narratives avoid this simulation and confusion through dramatic irony, when an audience knows more about the fictional world and action than the characters. Freud explains a comparable avoidance of direct uncanny experience in reference to a literary scene, "The audience, knowing what has led up to this scene, does not make the same mistake as the character; hence, what is bound to seem uncanny to him strikes us as irresistibly comic" (158). This kind of uncanny hinges on an audience "knowing" the fictional world better than a given character. Film scholar Paul Flaig locates this "comic uncanny" in a variety of animation film sequences, but points out that the sequence of toys coming to life and terrorizing Sid in *Toy Story* appears quite tame when compared to more plasmatic animation aesthetics "infused with a grotesque immortality beyond realism or irony, a life lived by gelatinous ghosts, funny phantoms and absurdly mobile things" (4).[12] *Toy Story* is not "beyond realism or irony" but based in irony. Aligning with Freud's explanation, the audience knows very well that living toys are a part of Pixar's fantastic, plastic world, but they enjoy watching Buzz and Sid discover a reality of living toys nonetheless. Uncanny experience suggests to a person that she might be wrong about the world and that an obsolete epistemology may not be obsolete after all. For Freud, this space of doubt is opened up by a return of repressed childhood memories or forms of primitive knowledge. The comic uncanny, however, is an experience in which this epistemological slippage is presented within a diegesis, which highlights the audience's status as more knowledgeable than the characters. The status of the knowing audience is significant given that *Toy Story* was the first computer animated feature film, and, at that time, computer animation was mostly reserved for specialists with advanced degrees in computer science and computer graphics. Many audiences in 1995 did not know much about the animation

they were watching; hence, the effectiveness of a sequence that enables an audience to laugh at a character's misperception of a reality.

Pixar's computer animation does not present "gelatinous ghosts" or the plasmatic figures that interested theorist and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Instead, Pixar's aesthetics suppress the potential for exaggeration present in many animation techniques. Lasseter's imperative to respect the integrity of the object instills parameters for creating realism and character. This realism is commensurate with the goal of verisimilitude prevalent in computer graphics culture (Manovich 190), but it is hedged by Lasseter's efforts to make computer animation a more familiar medium for large audiences outside the computer graphics industry (Price 263). Pixar chronicler David Price describes Lasseter's approach:

> At the dawn of the medium of computer animation, early projects shown by other artists at SIGGRAPH [Special Interest Group on GRAPHics and Interactive Techniques] and animation festivals tended to exploit the power of computer graphics to create novel, often abstract imagery. Lasseter had gone in the opposite direction. In his short films and in *Toy Story*, he had relied on quotidian objects: a desk lamp, a ball, a snow globe, toys. He believed that audiences would accept a new medium *if* it was rooted in the familiar. (emphasis in original, 263)

Lasseter perceived the gap between the technoculture at SIGGRAPH and that of audiences outside the computer graphics industry as an opportunity for mainstream animated entertainment. Lasseter's approach accords with the logic of remediation present in most new media at that time in that it involves a process of familiarization in which computer animation resembles popular animated and live-action film, but it also involves promoting the newness of the visual experience of computer animation.[13]

Early on in the field of computer graphics, technicians and artists took particular interest in this balancing of old and new when generating detailed representations of textures and surfaces. Katherine Hayles relates her observation of skeuomorphs at SIGGRAPH (where Lasseter showed his early computer animation shorts) in her seminal work detailing the waves of cybernetics in the twentieth century. A skeuomorph, Hayles explains, "is a design feature that is no longer functional in itself but that refers back to a feature that was functional at an earlier time." A common example is the wood-grain finish that appears on many plastic and synthetic surfaces. As she goes on to say, "it calls into a play a psychodynamic that finds the new more acceptable when it recalls the old that it is in the process of displacing and finds the traditional more comfortable when it is presented in a context that reminds us we can escape from it into the new" (*Posthuman* 17). While a common trope in writings about modernity, Hayles borrows the skeuomorph concept from archaeological anthropology where material objects delineate transitions in technology and culture as they embody marks of a past and a future.[14] The abundance of these objects in everyday life indicates the strong psychological and social function of skeuomorphs and popular design that balances old and new elements. For Hayles' history of posthumanism, each wave of cybernetic theory utilized skeuomorphic concepts in a series that increasingly disembodied information.

Pixar films are certainly skeuomorphic with textures, lighting, characters, narratives, and worlds that resemble familiar film and video conventions and everyday physical objects. Lasseter's own insistence on respecting the physical integrity of objects when representing them digitally is akin to skeuomorphic logic. In animated worlds, everything must be built from digital elements and the rules governing these processes are those of computer space—software, hardware, and mathematics. Pixar's computer animation involves a process where an

informational, digital morphology is wielded to build a morphology that is representational of the analog morphology that human's perceive through photogenic media and in everyday life. Like cel animation, basic bodily properties, such as the laws of motion, are representational choices that are at times difficult to simulate. And such properties, e.g. inertia or texture, can be simulated to convey the impression of watching an actual moving body. The reflexive narratives of Pixar, then, tend to operate in correlation with or analogously to the technical process of morphological conversion. The *Toy Story* films allegorically address the groundlessness of this context of disembodied information through characters that discover the reality of bodies and the sense of purpose and meaning provided by product essentialism. The character of Buzz presents a successful disillusionment and readjustment, and the character Sid presents a traumatic disillusionment without a successful readjustment. Proper to postmodern media conditions, skeuomorphic logic implies the need for a familiar foundational referent precisely when there is uncertainty about whether an original referent even exists.

Lasseter's approach emphasizes situating the audience in a position of knowledge. The idea being that an audience ought to recognize what they perceive especially when they may not know what they are, in fact, perceiving. A familiar order must be supplied even if fabricated. The impulse to respect physical integrity compensates for angst about digital disembodiment and it accords with commercial authority, product essentialism, and commodity fetishism. Steve Jobs famously insisted that the original Macintosh computer look "friendly" (Isaacson 129) and his "whole widget" or "end-to-end" approach to design and manufacturing tightly interwove software and hardware in an effort to prevent consumers from reshaping or retooling his technological products (Isaacson 137).[15] Although the irony and comic uncanny of *Toy Story* flatters audiences with the notion that they know better than children that toys are not alive and

do not care about their owners, the pervasive presence of personified, black-boxed technical commodities produced by Apple, and Pixar's other Silicon Valley neighbors, suggests that the *Toy Story* trilogy should be read as a more perverse ideological expression that addresses these technological toys. It is not that the irony points to audiences knowing better that toys are not alive, but that even more literally, audiences, as consumers, typically assume that their toys have a life and are quite capable of reciprocating a lively, personal gaze. The uncanny valley that scientists and engineers in robotics and animation study marks a lag in the adaptation of the human perception system behind well-established, consumerist, fetishist norms. Another way of thinking about the push for verisimilitude in computer graphics culture is to think of it as an effort to align perception with fetishism. Can the look of computer graphics be as lively as our relational intimacy with digital commodities? In respect to *Toy Story*, the films avoid this question by using the anthropomorphic characterization of animation to create a reciprocal fetishism in which the things we care about care about us in return. If a toy is capable of caring, then it need not look like a person or even move like one to become an entertaining and intimate relational object.

Brand Building: Relationships, Value, and Abstraction

This compounding of animated anthropomorphism with commercial authority, product essentialism, and reciprocal fetishism has a paradoxical relationship with mass production, planned obsolescence, and media convergence. The character Sid is a minor villain in the trilogy in comparison to the more systemic market, material, and social forces that determine the lifespan and value of toys. Even though the toys are haunted by their own disposability, the trilogy avoids becoming a critique of consumerism. The toy characters believe that if they break, wear out, or are displaced by other entertainments, then their child-owner will no longer value

them and their lives will become meaningless, that is, if they continue to live at all. Further, mass production and media convergence challenge the toy characters' unique identities and originality as they encounter duplicate copies of themselves in both physical and representational forms. The premises of the *Toy Story* films contradict the consumerist principles of disposability and replaceability. Consumers who care too much about a commodity are bad for business—they tend to collect rather than consume—and consumers who care about the uniqueness of a commodity are more sensitive to the alienating effects of mass production. The contradiction inherent to a consumer's intense valuing of a disposable, fleeting commodity is maintained in part by the fact that many commodities are treated as never really alive or really dead, but their continual reappearance and circulation enhances their value. Here again the anthropomorphism of animation contributes to media and market logics that seek to build lasting brands and commercial icons that are deeply embedded in the memory and cultural life of consumers.

In *Toy Story 2*, the character Woody undergoes a psychological transformation that parallels that of Buzz in the first film. This narrative is set up early in the film when Woody's arm is partially torn when Andy is playing with him. Andy's mother shelves Woody and reminds her son that "toys don't last forever." Worried about his future and whether Andy will still play with him, Woody feels compelled to rescue another toy from the family yard sale. During this rescue effort, Woody is abducted by a toy collector perusing the yard sale tables. The collector, Al McWhiggin, owns Al's Toy Barn and has collected massive amounts of memorabilia from a 1950s television show called *Woody's Roundup*. Woody learns that he is based on the show's protagonist, Sheriff Woody Pride, who was quite famous for a time. After Woody bonds with the toys based on the show's other characters—Bullseye the horse, Jessica Jane ("Jessie") Pride, and Stinky Pete the Prospector—he seriously considers living out the rest of his life as a collectible.[16]

For Woody, life as a collectible becomes a legitimate alternative to life devoted to a child-owner because his newfound fame and family operate as a salve to his physical and psychological wounds. This new family reinvigorates Woody with a purpose and rescues him from the peril of becoming an undesirable toy.

Once again, the perspective is that of the toys and it highlights a non-human temporality: Andy's mother is correct that toys do not last forever, but artifacts in a museum do last much longer. Al intends to sell Woody, Jessie, Bullseye, and the Prospector to a Japanese museum where they can reside in a glass showcase with their iconic value secure for ages. *Toy Story 2* emphasizes collecting as a practice capable of re-commodifying toys after they have been out of the marketplace and out of circulation. Of course, the sale to the museum is not completed and Woody is rescued by Buzz and Andy's other toys. The rescue moves Woody to recommit to Andy and the child-owner, and Jessie and Bullseye join Andy's other toys as well. The narrative is reminiscent of the two masculinities in the first *Toy Story* in that two types of commodity value are pitted against each other: one is the enduring value of the pristine artifact and the other is the fleeting value of a child's toy. Both types are distinct but involve the toy becoming unique (or gaining aura, which will be discussed momentarily), either through preservation or through play. The latter is a more personalized, interactive form of value and wins out in the film, but this form of value presents a significant complication in respect to the product essentialism and naturalized premises of the trilogy.

There are numerous scenes in *Toy Story 2* that illustrate an angst associated with competing origins and forms of value. These include the toys' references to Andy's name, which the child-owner writes on the feet of his toys to mark his unique possession of them (a literal re-branding of the toys). Woody is tempted to renounce this possession when the mark of the child-

owner is effectively erased during a sequence in which Woody is restored to "like new" condition by an elderly artist, Geri the Cleaner. The character Geri introduces a level of craft into toy making not explored in the first *Toy Story*. Modeled after the character from the Pixar short "Geri's Game," this aging artisan endows Woody with a unique, hand-painted newness. Geri also serves as an allusion to a well-known group of classical Disney animators, the nine old men, or Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston more specifically, from whom Lasseter and other Pixar animators learned much of their craft (Price 59). Geri is a restorer and not a producer, and although hired by Al, Geri protests Al's demands for urgency, "You can't rush art" he says. The joke about the market's demand for speed and efficiency conflicting with artistic production surely resonates with animators who work for high-profile studios like Pixar. But the sequence is also about a commodity regaining more than pure market value. Woody's value shifts from personalized, plaything to handcrafted artifact, and his purpose shifts from reciprocating a child's affection to returning the gaze of museum-goers.

Parallel to this scene is a sequence in which Buzz and Andy's other toys enter Al's Toy Barn in an effort to rescue Woody. Here they are confronted with their mass produced, globally distributed origins. While Woody is being repaired, the other toys face shelves full of new toys and are reminded of their distance from being new. Becoming "like new" restores purpose to Woody, meanwhile, Andy's other toys have their old, nostalgic value juxtaposed with the commodity value of new toys. The group must face the lure of commodity value: of desiring to become like new or of envying the value of a new toy. The toys begin to lose their initial commodity value once they belong to a child, and that commodity value is replaced by the value and purpose of maintaining a relationship with a child-owner. Commodity value is derived primarily from exchange-value and the desirous gaze of the consumer, but the reciprocal gaze of

the toy takes on a more unique relationship after the toy is purchased and becomes the property

of a single child. Hence, the toys reclaim a form of aura through their diminishing commodity

value and increasing value as personal, fetishized property.

The pursuit of value (exchange value, the aura of a collectible, and the aura of a child's

toy) complements contemporary media saturation and entertainment capitalism that threaten

senses of origin and authenticity. For literary scholar Alan Ackerman, the *Toy Story* films

demonstrate how this condition in which "images upon images are what we have become and all

that we can hope to be" creates a need for new modes of perception (*Seeing Things* 119).

Ackerman points to numerous scenes in *Toy Story* and *Toy Story* 2 that present diegetic

confusion between media platforms—in these scenes versions of the toys appear on television or

in video games and are visually indistinguishable from the actual toys owned by Andy. The

computer animated characters appear exactly the same across media platforms, and, in a

comparable fashion to audiences considering the computer animation medium as non-indexical,

the toys must learn to cope with the lack of origin and authenticity that their production entails

(*Seeing Things* 115). In respect to the medium, Pixar distinguished itself early on from other

computer animation studios working on film production for not over-committing to the

simulation of photo-indexicality; as was the case with the box office failure *Final Fantasy: The*

Spirits Within (2001). Over-committing to the simulation of photo-indexicality can betray an

effort to compensate for digital production's lack of photogenic origin or contact with reality

(Lamarre, "New Media Worlds" 138-140). Pixar has been successful imitating cinematic camera

movement and other effects through software to give the impression of a camera capturing an

animated world, but their willingness to play with the inability to discern origin within digital

media indicates an interest in establishing an authenticity that does not involve duplicating live

action cinema.[17] In the *Toy Story* films, the animators' attention to the physical bodies of toys and the characters' acceptance of their toy bodies serves to naturalize the films' premises and to bolster commercial authority. Likewise, the toys become accustomed to their toyness by acknowledging that their value derives from interactivity and relationality, the direct consequences of being played with by a child.

Woody's dilemma between residing with his "original" roundup gang and returning to Andy underscores the constructed nature of family life. It is not clear which community is natural or right for Woody, but he is inclined toward that which provides him with value and meaningful relationships. This identity-community dilemma expresses how commodification reaches the core of the toys' being, and it leads Ackerman to read the film's themes of resurrection and redemption as about capitalism not metaphysics:[18] "The fantasy of resurrection that *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2* depict is a fantasy of unlimited commodification and redemption (i.e., profit)" ("The Spirit of Toys" 911). Ackerman expands on this idea and aptly refers to Walter Benjamin's concept of the decay of aura:

> Apparently made of dead matter (plastic and chemicals), these toys enact a fantasy of continual resurrection, an idealizing revival of the dead, not only in the games of an individual child but also in the processes of production and marketing, of which both movies are highly self-conscious. Walter Benjamin's definition of aura, which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction, as the ability of the inanimate object to return the human gaze, suggests such an idealizing of humanity in the phantasmagoric return of toys. (Ackerman, *Seeing Things* 100-1)

Ackerman emphasizes the concept of aura as it is articulated in Benjamin's essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in which aura marks the instance in which an art object returns a person's

gaze.[19] This version of the concept is applicable to the *Toy Story* films in that each film naturalizes the reciprocal, caring relationship between toys and their child-owners (even if the children characters don't know the extent to which their toys care, the audience knows). The toy commodity becomes most valuable through its becoming unique through an interactive, auratic relationship with an individual owner. This relationship brings the commodity to life, and without the relationship, the commodity is reduced to pure exchange-value. Reciprocation and interactivity are the drivers of aura and value as they cultivate unique relationships.

As film scholar Miriam Hansen shows, Benjamin's use of "aura" is not semantically consistent throughout his work, but his use of the term is an effort to recoup it from its earlier theosophical and metaphysical contexts, and to redeploy the term in a Marxist discourse to help explain the effects of modern technology on the arts (*Cinema and Experience* 104-107). Likewise, the *Toy Story* films serve as foundational myths for reviving a form of aura as authentic relationship, which is well-suited for an age of global media, capitalism, and posthumanism. The digital constitution of the characters and images contributes to relationality becoming more valuable than physical materiality. The material distinctness of an object becomes less significant in a highly interactive relationship capable of producing unique forms of engagement and memory. The elevation of interactivity over materiality facilitates replaceability in that the object is not an auratic container of value, but the human relationship to the object is. Thus, for parties interested in profiting from the commodity, the relationship between consumer and commodity needs to be maintained through resurrection and redemption, to use Ackerman's terms. The commodity bodies can come and go as long as the relationship is kept alive and animated. The liveliness of the nonhuman-commodity-agent is co-created through reciprocation and interactivity.

Even though thematically the *Toy Story* films do not endorse replaceability, the trilogy is part of a global brand and franchise that operates through forms of aesthetic continuity and media convergence. If anything, the films' explicit references to the horrors of replaceability betray their own digital economic reality. Lasseter's rhetoric about respecting the physical integrity of the object serves as ideological fodder for rendering palatable the disembodied ethos of digital representation and its conduciveness to media convergence and market logics. The fear and alienation inherent in consumerism, in which cultural goods are enjoyed for brief moments before their disposal contributing to a widening gap of meaningful experience, enhances the attachment to digital cultural goods that never die. The digital commodity is more fecund than the analog commodity. By the time this chapter is published, the *Toy Story* franchise will include additional films, television specials, shorts, and video games. By foregrounding their market aspects the *Toy Story* films render obvious the contradictory presentation of integrated, embodied, personalized toy commodities that are simultaneously abstract, disembodied, mass-produced, media objects. The narratives show the disappointing and alienating lives of non-human commodities, but this condition is redeemed by the toys' unique characters and loving commitment to their child owners.

This contradictory presentation becomes even more obvious in light of the fact that computer generated feature films frequently share the practices and aesthetics of industrial product design and advertising—this includes three dimensional modeling, the precise automation of computer programming, as well as the application of lighting schemes and other practices used in product photography and product cinematography (Gurevitch, "Computer Generated" 138). This is not surprising given that before Pixar produced feature films, the studio produced computer animated advertisements. Further, the computer animation of major studios,

such as Pixar and Dreamworks, utilizes digital algorithms that enable detailed imaging and

"dimensional consistency foreign to traditional live-action film and cel animation." This creates

an "aesthetic of continuity" that in turn facilitates an experience of "viewing an impossibly

continuous, impossibly complex world that nevertheless appears to adhere to the laws of

physics" (Gurevitch, "Computer Generated" 134). These elaborate worlds feature aesthetics that

are continuous across companies and platforms, generating a mediascape with consistent

aesthetic principles based on design and advertising practices (Gurevitch, "Computer Generated"

145). Thus, many of the visual effects in Pixar animation are employing the stylization of

product advertising as well as repurposing the processes involved in making three dimensional

products.

This is most obvious in the *Toy Story* and *Cars* films which feature leading character-

commodities, and it accords with Lasseter's approach of making computer animation familiar for

general audiences. Of course, Pixar films are not simple 90 minute commercials for merchandise.

The feature-length platform itself allows for character development and storytelling significantly

more nuanced than conventional advertisements.[20] But the continuity with commercial aesthetics

does contribute to a particular form of advertising that does not sell a commodity, but sells

instead the unique relationship that the consumer can have with a series of commodities. In other

words, the aesthetics of Pixar's computer animation are highly conducive to brand building.

Computer animation effectively functions in this context in part through drawn

animation's legacy of exploring the relationship between figuration and abstraction. Media

theorists Scott Lash and Celia Lury are convinced of animation's definitive position within

contemporary media environments because of its capacity for expressing forms that are at once

fixed and dynamic. For instance, drawn animation can present recognizable figures with

nonrepresentational lines that disrupt those figures while maintaining some unity—think of an animal's neck becoming unbelievably long while remaining a neck. Building on this principle, *Toy Story* presents a tension between figuration and abstraction through characters' identities and narratives in relation to the media convergences facilitated by digital technology. The toys are abstract as iconic media objects—Woody is a cowboy and television star, and Buzz is a space ranger and videogame character—but unique as characters with personalities and bodies. The celebrity voices contribute to this contradiction by being unique and traceable to a specific time and place of recording, but also extremely familiar because these voices have been recorded many times and presented through numerous media forms. The tradition of animation as protean, plasmatic, and unreal yet very much alive, engaging, and interactive provides a visual figuration of the contradictory logics of media products.

The integrated product of *Toy Story* is a particular arrangement of media parts.[21] Characters like Buzz Lightyear can become products and icons in their own right. Pixar and Disney benefit from the capacity of media products in that like the toys children play with, the various components of their animated productions can be made to perform new roles in different contexts. This can include performances outside the direct auspices of the media conglomerate as in the case of fan fiction. Play gives the user a sense of control and interactivity. But as the original film makes clear, there are forms of play more aligned with the essence of a toy, which is to say its design and purpose according to its producers. However, unorthodox play does not necessarily undermine the company's brand building, but facilitates it, as the brand is not actually a material inscription comparable to Andy's name inscribed on his toys. It is an amorphous concept that gains access to a subject's imagination by becoming a world-making cultural good that is at once consumable yet permanent, abstract but concrete enough to be

played with—hence, Lash and Lury's comparison to the plasmatic aesthetics of drawn animation. It is the maintenance of the relationality that is profitable, not the objects themselves, which, in a sense, remain more aloof than ever.

Branding aims to share a deep, personal structure with consumers and create a series of memories that will influence how new products, services, and slogans are interpreted by the public. This deep structure involves feedback loops in production, reception, and the strategies of both producers and consumers. This cultural embeddedness does not mean that the life of the franchise is entirely planned out, but it does mean that producers work to shape a profitable mediascape by responding to how their products exist in the social imaginary of consumers (Lash and Lury 199). This is evidenced by the success of *Toy Story 3*, which was released 15 years after the original film and depicted the toy characters coping with Andy's move to college, a narrative that deeply resonated with young adults who saw the first film when they were children.

The theme of redemption continues in *Toy Story 3* as Andy's toys are accidentally thrown away, but, able to escape their curbside trash bag, the toys stowaway in a box donated to Sunnyside daycare facility. The daycare presents an alternative social and political order since there are no individual child owners, but random groups of children who play with the toys for short periods of time. The toys who live at the daycare have organized themselves under the authority of a pink, stuffed bear named Lotso. Lotso presents a reasonable ideology to the toys: "no owners, no heartbreak." Through a flashback the film reveals Lotso's traumatic experience of being lost by his child owner and then replaced by a new Lotso bear. But the Lotso at the daycare is revealed to be a ruthless dictator who tricks Andy's recently donated toys into confinement in a playroom for younger children. The young children are hyperbolically violent

and chaotic when they play with toys, while, in an adjacent room, Lotso and his followers are played with by older children who are gentle and friendly. The juxtaposition is reminiscent of that between Andy and Sid in the first film, and it reinforces anxieties about the wear and tear of the toy bodies, which are even more disposable at a daycare where children do not possess the toys but share them.

Throughout *Toy Story 3* there are gags about the toys' bodies that could be analyzed in a similar fashion to moments from first two films already discussed. When Buzz is captured by Lotso's cronies, he is reset to demo mode and forgets his unique identity as Andy's toy and that he is a member of a distinct toy community. He resumes his original identity as a space ranger. To rescue Buzz, Woody and the other toys must reset his play mode, which leads to inadvertently setting him to Spanish mode. There are also several gags involving the modifiable bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Potatohead. These gags continue to utilize the toys' bodies as a means to discern and explore the rules and order of their world. They are toys with distinct capacities and limitations, but also with particular purposes as the trilogy makes clear through the child-owner ideology. The daycare under Lotso's authority presents an alternative society that produces less meaningful lives for the toys. The lack of owners at the daycare is a tempting opportunity for the toys to govern themselves differently and develop a more communal political organization, but this challenges the natural order established throughout the first two films. The villainy of Lotso reaffirms that toys need child-owners and the reciprocal affection between child and toy is the best way to establish a meaningful life for the toys as well as bring profits to their producers and distributors. The depiction of an abusive toy authority facilitates the redemption of the child-owner ideology to which the toys return. *Toy Story 3* concludes, after several sequences

disclosing the horrors of the daycare, by way of a prison escape sequence with Woody taking the heroic lead.

The final film of the trilogy features climactic brushes with disposal and death for the toys, which elevates the tension between disposable commodities and relational characters and culminates in a cathartic happy ending with the digital characters being preserved for future appearances. This narrative contributes to the perpetuation of the intimate, familial commodity form that has its roots in the early and mid-twentieth century. But the most interesting aspect of *Toy Story 3* is the explicit effort to relate the premises of the trilogy to political order. The question of how the toys ought to organize and govern themselves is directly related to the nature and construction of the toys themselves. And here we glimpse the larger contradiction within the films. While the narratives dutifully affirm their premises in order to secure a happy ending and thorough resolution, the audience gets to enjoy watching the toys discover and explore the limits of their bodies, personalities, and various social and political organizations.

Throughout the trilogy, toys and humans misperceive and misjudge their world and its natural order. But through these uncanny aesthetic experiences, the toys develop a keener awareness of that order, which retains a humanistic, commercial hierarchy. These stories are historically significant given their circulation in the midst of a digital and post-human context in which norms and assumptions about nature, technology, and humans are being interrogated. Through these stories, the thingness and vitality of objects remains mostly hidden. Despite the attention given to the physical integrity of objects, the product essentialism at the core of the trilogy bolsters commercial authority and a reciprocal fetishism that more closely ties the consumer imagination to the abstract vitality and power of a brand. Undermining this thesis by a small measure is the idea that it is a "sensibility that finds a world," to return to Bennett's

language, and a sensibility is a changeable orientation. Bennett noted that small amounts of anthropomorphism could influence a how a person thinks about and perceives the things in her environment. This idea is present in the animation production and in the narratives that feature characters reconfiguring their knowledge of self and world. Such depictions express processes of becoming, of transformation, but also of the uncanny and the failure of epistemological mastery. It is not the case that product essentialism and commercial authority are natural laws. They are cultural logics employed to give order to a world without laws.

From the Technological to the Postmodern Sublime (*Monsters, Inc.*)

Figure 4 The Monsters Incorporated industrial park.

Whereas the *Toy Story* trilogy presents epistemological vulnerability through portrayals of the uncanny, *Monsters, Inc.* presents a comparable instability through the category of the sublime. As Scott Bukatman observes, "The sublime and the uncanny are closely related: both stage a confrontation with the limits of human power and agency, and both are heavily freighted with the weight of the unknown" (*Poetics* 137). One area in which they differ is that the uncanny refers to perceptual confusion frequently produced by automata, by mechanical creations of life which tend to be smallish, whereas the sublime is aligned with the gigantic and excessive. Figure 4 illustrates how the eponymous company Monsters Incorporated is portrayed as sublime through a vast industrial landscape illuminated by a beam of sunlight. Bukatman notes that both phenomena are associated with the technological spectacle that was a major draw of early

cinema and was in some respects relegated to the domain of animation.[1] And Bukatman insightfully recalls numerous literary and film examples in which the uncanny becomes sublime in the sense that creation rebels against its creator and becomes an overwhelming, monstrous force—i.e. Frankenstein's monster (*Poetics* 137-140). The notion that the uncanny with its misperception and eerie undecidability is one step removed from terror supposes that perception and judgment are integral to a subject's sense of security and self-assurance. Unlike the uncanny, the sublime typically entails a double move in which a person endures that which is overwhelming and in turn gains insight into her sense of self.

This basic formulation is primarily derived from Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime" in his *Critique of Judgment*. The sublime has a much longer, diverse history however, which includes Longinus' *On the Sublime* from the first century AD. Kant's "Analytic" is more in conversation with Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). These texts by Kant and Burke mark the rise of interest in the sublime during the eighteenth century before and then during the Romantic period, and they capture several of the major tensions that arise in discussions of the concept more broadly. These include oppositions between representation and experience, and between the experience of the beautiful and the experience of the sublime. Longinus' text, for instance, is primarily concerned with rhetorical devices, a sublime style so to speak, but by the time the concept is taken up in the eighteenth century, the sublime refers to profound, overwhelming, or terrifying experiences that may or may not be representable through language and art (Costelloe 5-7). The propensity for abstract experience to challenge representation regains relevance in postmodern theories of the sublime articulated during the late twentieth century (Holmqvist and Pluciennik 724).

The opposition between the beautiful and the sublime, on the other hand, involves adding to the category of aesthetic experience the negative feelings of pain and terror (instead of restricting aesthetics to pleasant experience). It also involves theories about the social function of these different aesthetic experiences. For instance, sublime experience, for Burke, reveals the human condition as one in which the submission to authority is natural. This means that an overwhelming, frightful experience can be indicative of a divine creator's arrangement of the human body and spirit. It also suggests that subordination within society is a necessary counter to the more compliant sociality embodied in experiences of the beautiful (Frank 8-10). The French Revolution ultimately changed Burke's mind about the sublime since it relied on the fervor generated through the grand spectacle of revolution to disrupt social hierarchy and authority (Frank 25).

As Bukatman notes, cinema has been at the center of studies of modern spectacles given the expanse of visual media during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the theories that this expanse indicates an effort to cope with modernity through forms of "scopic mastery" (Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity* 81). Bukatman has this context in mind when he relates contemporary effects-driven films to the presentational mode described by Tom Gunning as astonishment or a cinema of attractions. The prevalence of large screens, conspicuous technological innovations, and entertaining illusions continue the tradition of presenting and experiencing moving image media as a spectacular attraction rather than a primarily narrative medium (*Matters of Gravity*, Bukatman, 90-1). But the idea of cinematic spectacle perpetuates the sublime tension between experience and representation. A feature film can be a sublime spectacle that elicits terror or awe in audiences, but it can also represent some sublime

experience in a tame form (e.g. a character-oriented, framed view of the pyramids in Egypt).

Finally, it can remind us that these need not be separate and distinct media forms.

The imagery of *Monsters, Inc.* is not scary by any means, but it celebrates a vast, industrial scale that evokes a pre-digital technological sublime while its narrative and characters emphasize the intensity of interpersonal bonds.[2] *Monsters, Inc.* has been read by geographers as an allegory about peak oil and about children's independent mobility (Tranter and Sharpe); it has been read by queer theorists as an allegory about the energy of bodily contact (Freeman). Reading the film about sublime experience, on the other hand, enables commentary on both agency and structure. It illuminates the relationship between persons who are vulnerable to change and systems of technology, economics, and culture that are markedly more resistant to change. This reading has the capacity to address both environmental exploitation and the power of interpersonal intimacy, which is significant if we want to think about how the two are related. This chapter investigates how animation's expression of aesthetic experience facilitates the expression of historical transitions in the formulation of the sublime. This includes a technological sublime that bolsters an integrated ego apart from nature and a postmodern sublime that at once promises radical possibility and perpetual vulnerability to power and ideology. *Monsters, Inc.* provides an opportunity to think about how a postmodern sublime marks the demise of the ego- and progress-affirming functions of the technological sublime.

In short, the film depicts a world of monsters parallel to our human world, and presents a comparable technological, industrialized, monster society. The monsters, however, present characters with incredibly diverse morphologies. No two monsters look that much alike, and yet all are monsters. The premise of the film provides an explanation for why monsters hide in bedroom closets and emerge at night to scare sleeping children. According to the film's tagline

"what [children] don't realize is that for these monsters, it's nothing personal. It's just their job." The job requires that monsters enter the human world through closet doors, scare children, and harness their screams to provide the city of Monstropolis with energy. In turn, the monsters are terrified of human children, whom they believe to be toxic—"Our own fears are afraid of us!" the director Pete Docter quips, describing the film's central irony ("*Monsters, Inc.*") Docter's comment and the tagline suggest that *Monsters, Inc.* is about the fear and energy produced through contact with the other, but also that it is about the narratives created to rationalize and control the forces of that contact. It is about how we cope with our fears by watching our fears cope with us.

The monsters' ignorance about children, and their belief that children are toxic, facilitates their exploitation of children**.** Further, the doors that connect the human and monster worlds are regulated by the company Monsters Incorporated which is overseen by the Child Detection Agency, whose job is to contain any child material that passes through a door before it spreads its contagion like a virus. When a child finally sneaks into the monster world, chaos and terror ensue. The invader, a two-year-old girl, immediately bonds with Sulley, the monster responsible for letting her in. In this scenario, what was "just their job" becomes personal. The story, after this event, is driven by the main characters Sulley and Mike as they overcome their fears of children and develop feelings of affection and attachment toward the cartoonish and lovable child that Sulley names "Boo," an onomatopoeic name signifying the child as the object of monster fear. In the process of returning Boo to the human world, Sulley and Mike discover that their deceptive coworker Randall Boggs and the CEO of Monsters Incorporated, Henry J. Waternoose, are developing an even more violent means of extracting energy from children. After exposing this villainous plot, Sulley and Mike reform Monsters Incorporated utilizing their

discovery that a child's laugh is ten times more powerful than a child's scream. The monsters' new job is to sneak into children's bedrooms to make them laugh.

This narrative, in addition to its treatment of labor and exploitation, alludes to angst about globalization, network technologies, and connectivity through the closet doors and diverse monster bodies. The door system provides a visual metaphor for the instantaneous contact with disparate places that globally networked media provide. This renders strangers close even when far away and renders them capable of impinging upon and influencing local culture through media and economics as well as migration. On the other hand, *Monsters, Inc.*'s fictional monster world serves as a hyperbolic representation of a multicultural fantasy where a diversity of bodies with various skin colors, furs, horns and in different sizes and shapes form a community through social ties, not the context of birth. The diverse morphologies of the monsters suggest a utopia without racialization—a place where physical appearances are not overwritten by discriminatory practices. This globally inclusive utopia is then contrasted with the overt othering of the human world, which is held in parallel to the monster world through a technological infrastructure.

Reading *Monsters, Inc.* allegorically about networks and contact with others relates to debates about regulations over the peer-to-peer infrastructure of the internet that contributes to global connectivity. In the film, the door system is controlled by the monsters through corporate management, the CDA governing agency, and the cultural myth about child toxicity. Despite this effort to regulate and control the system through policy, protocol, and ideology, the infrastructure of the door system enables contact that is inherently unpredictable as it facilitates interactions between autonomous agents. This echoes the claims of media theorists who believe that corporations and states do not have the capacity to control communication and media networks across vast regions and diverse communities given the easy, individuated innovation offered by

digital technologies and networked infrastructures (Poster 24). Nonetheless, one important element that disrupts this allegorical reading is that the contact between monsters and humans mediated by the door system is face-to-face, embodied contact, which distinguishes it from the mediated contact, the partial detachment from spatial location, offered by today's communication technologies.

In the most recent phase of globalization brought about by information machines, global networks, and the spread of capitalism, less embodied contact can be beneficial for global business. Many exploitative practices are maintained by ignorance and distance. Theorist Elizabeth Freeman acknowledges this in her prescient reading of *Monsters, Inc.* as an allegory about higher education besieged by neoliberal business practices (it is prescient because in 2013 Pixar released a prequel, *Monsters University*). Freeman argues that the drive for efficiency and profitability in combination with the co-option of humanist values by market logics dissolves the relational impact of face-to-face, corporeal pedagogy. Freeman reads the child character, Boo, as particularly libidinal and therein capable of freeing the monsters from their fear of the other. In short, Freeman's reading illuminates the film's presentation of market logics invading humanist values, but not without humanist values also undermining market logics. Comedy may become the new mode of resource exploitation, but Sulley's intimate, embodied relationship with Boo disrupts the dominance of the company in his life. The physical contact and exchange of affects that takes place exceeds and disrupts the monster ideology and protocols outlined by the corporation and the state.

Freeman's reading is not entirely supported by the film's conclusion, however. At the film's end, even though child laughter has replaced child screams, not much has changed: "Monster hegemony over children has simply discovered a more efficient, a more sustainable

manner of exploitation, but the basic power relation remains intact" (Zornado 9). From this point

of view, *Monsters, Inc.* is about cultural and material reproduction, and it presents corporate

power as natural, and that the "weak have what the strong [corporations] need." This leads to the

"child is oil" metaphor and the naturalization of the exploitation of others, whether through

instruments of fear or pleasure (Zornado 6). Consistent with Pixar's other productions, and many

children's films, this conclusion works to maintain a status quo system of exploitation and

simultaneously maintains the radical alternative capable of disrupting those conditions—in this

case, the relationship between Boo and Sulley.

The film's ending does not actually resolve the tensions that the narrative creates. This

would entail depicting the overthrow of the means of production, which is a violent prospect and

probably explains why producers opted for a prequel instead of a sequel. During *Monsters, Inc.*'s

denouement, after Boo returns to her world, her door is shredded to prevent any future access to

her bedroom. Then, in the final sequence, Mike reveals to Sulley that he secretly rebuilt Boo's

door by reassembling the shredded pieces and Sulley is then able to use the door to see Boo

again. The last shot of the film is of Sulley's face as he enters Boo's room and we hear Boo

joyfully exclaim "Kitty!"—the name she gives Sulley. This final image of Sulley's gaze marks

his response to Boo's interpellation of him, and Mike's rebuilding of the door indicates his

resistance to corporate protocol as well. It is significant that the film ends with Sulley and Boo

being secretly reunited while the shift to extracting laughter establishes a more modern form of

exploitation through entertainment—the idea that pleasure is more effective than pain as a

disciplinary tool. This resolution presents both radical change and the preservation of tradition

and social order. The system of power that emerges at the end of the film has eliminated the

displeasure of the previous practices but not the inequality between monsters and children, and the affective attention of the children remains a metaphor for energy resources.

Figure 5 Final image of Sulley entering Boo's room.

The final scene of Sulley emerging through Boo's door continues the animation tradition of cartoon bodies emerging from impossible places and containers—e.g. Max Fleischer's Out of the Inkwell series. The cartoon body's plasmatic nature enables it to squeeze in and out of confined spaces. Sulley's bulk is clearly too large for the doorway and requires some squeezing for him to cross the threshold. The child's drawing on the wall next to Sulley's face suggests comparing the cartoon body's limitlessness to the primordial nature of the line and figural representation. The child's doodling contrasts with the linear patterns of the wallpaper, the perfect symmetry of the vase, but less so with the flowers, which share a similar orange hue. The caricatured quality of the cartoon body challenges the containment enforced by the built

environment and it harkens back to the child's raw, untrained creativity that likewise challenges the impending cultural constraints of development.

The limitless potential of the cartoon body resonates with the libidinal force that appeals to Freeman, but this body and force exist in tension with the built environment and the practices that perpetuate distance and exploitation. Further, the monsters are less beholden to recognizable morphologies than the child characters. We have fewer criteria with which to judge their bodies in terms of aesthetic judgment. But Docter's comment that "Our own fears are afraid of us" indicates a fundamental commonality between the humans and monsters. The reversed point of view generates ambiguity as to where the infinite possibility of animation resides—is it with the monsters or with the children or both. From a monster's point of view, the children are a dangerous environmental resource. But from the child's point of view, the monster is a frightening threat from an unknown realm. As the points of view elide over the course of the film, a more prominent divide emerges between the technological sublime and the sublime subject/object.

Conventional histories of the sublime have emphasized the concept's usefulness in combating predominate modes of thinking—e.g. the Romantics deployed it against forms of rationalism and postmodernists deployed it against modern positivism (Holmqvist and Pluciennik 722). However, the technological sublime in the U.S. often refers to rhetoric that romanticizes large industrial constructions as part of the discourse of progress. And such rhetoric has frequently sought to generate public support for projects that are primarily designed to serve private companies in the form of structural advertisements and symbols of power (Nye 100-107). This latter form indicates an amplification of the ego-affirming potential of the sublime at least in its Kantian formulation. In respect to ongoing theoretical and philosophical debates in

aesthetics, *Monsters, Inc.* expresses a reluctance to choose between a Kantian sublime that emphasizes the integrity of the subject and the superiority of reason/technological progress, and a postmodern sublime that emphasizes the disruption caused by sensation and unknowability. In the former, Kantian mode, the film presents grand views of the monster factory, and in the latter, postmodern mode, it depicts the psychological and sensorial drama of contact with unknown others. The technological sublime functions to maintain the momentum of development, but the postmodern sublime is less prescribed. It can support the system or it can trouble the system.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

In *Monsters, Inc.* children metaphorically refer to the natural environment in their capacity as an energy resource and they allude to the sublime through their presence as objects of fear. The threatening toxicity of children supports the monsters' rationalization of scaring. The threatening environment calls on the monsters to become threatening themselves, and not just to survive, but to thrive and build an advanced industrial society. On the other hand, Docter's summation of the film's core theme, with its first-person plural pronouns, treats the entire fiction as a rationalization for the presence of fear in the lives of children. The story about monsters is simply a reversed point of view that performs the empathetic task of imagining the perspective of the Other. But this is not a case of interpersonal empathy. It has more in common with a parent telling a child frightened by a spider that the spider was more terrified of her. Likewise the film's narrative negotiates the domain of difference between monsters and children. It seeks to incorporate and rationalize otherness. The film literally features two distinct worlds becoming one world for the leading characters—the monsters Sulley and Mike and the child Boo. The technological infrastructure of the door system facilitates this process and the sublime encounters between monsters and children.

This resolution of otherness by way of a point of view reversal is an instance of anthropomorphism and it resembles traditional formulations of sublime experience in the sense that it reckons with the terror of an encounter with nature and contributes to ego and identity formation. This approaches the basic Kantian formulation of the sublime in which a person is utterly overwhelmed by some large or powerful phenomenon—possibly a storm or a mountain— but then the person's reasoning is ennobled by the experience. It meets the challenge, so to speak, and the person gains insight into her sense of self through the discord of the experience. Kant considers two types of sublime in his *Critique of Judgment*: the mathematical sublime refers to experiences in which perception is overwhelmed by the view of some immense thing, while the dynamical sublime refers to the fear raised during an encounter with nature's might: "nature can count as a might, and so as dynamically sublime, for aesthetic judgment only insofar as we consider it as an object of fear" (*Critique of Judgment* 119). For Kant, sublime experiences are those in which nature overwhelms the mental faculties of imagination and perception, but the mind responds by relying on the faculty of reason to comprehend the unimaginable and unperceivable experience.

The experience of fear in the presence of the natural environment has served humanism and the discourse of progress particularly well. This is because in its Kantian formulation, the experience of the sublime at once reminds humans of their vulnerability and affirms their strength in respect to the faculty of reason. Many postmodern readers of Kant have criticized this formulation for emphasizing the subject's ability to overcome the overwhelming aesthetic experience of nature and to judge oneself independent of, if not superior to, their environment (Buck-Morss 8-9). The technological sublime only exacerbates this assumption by replacing

nature with the second nature of technology. This enables a person to become doubly impressed with human reason and it fosters further detachment from the natural environment.

The disruption of normal perception that occurs in Kant's formulation of the sublime could provide a common bond between animation and the sublime, but animation's capacity to interrogate nature, as in Leslie's "dramatization of a skirmish with nature," suggests that an animated sublime is more properly understood as an interrogation of sublime experience.[3] *Monsters, Inc.* for instance, contributes to a mode of representing the unseen elements of the technological environment. This includes enlarging and opening small, invisible, and black-boxed technologies, and rendering them as entire worlds in which characters can disrupt the standard operations of those technologies through their own agency. In *Monsters, Inc.*, the heroes effectively hack the door system and reveal its hidden structures. Visual representations of cyberspace or electronic networks have taken various forms in a variety of recent animated and effects-driven films such as *The Matrix* (1999), *Tron* (2010), or *Wreck-it Ralph* (2012). These films, like *Monsters, Inc.*, depict small spaces as large—wires and cables become tunnels—or they portray bodies as immaterial—characters have electronic, digital bodies. These depictions attempt to offer a sublime correlative to the relatively small technical devices that we interact with every day. But this representational mode remains a framed, contained version of the sublime without expressing much threatening force.

The sublime visuals in *Monsters, Inc.* feature a built environment, not a natural one. This built environment, the factory containing the door system, encloses the monster characters in a seemingly infinite network that connects to the human world. This sublime, technological infrastructure mediates monster interactions with humans. Rendered in three-dimensional computer animation, the scare floor in the factory resembles an airplane hangar in terms of scale

and shape, but the door system is by far the most sublime element in the film. The space storing

the doors resembles the vast circuitry that large network servers contain, but the scale is much

larger and the structures appear to be made of concrete. Critical to this sequence is that the

storage space for the doors renders the characters incredibly small in comparison. The space

houses an endless network hidden within the factory walls that at once diminishes the

protagonists, but then enhances their courage and agency as they intrepidly jump in and out of

doors and ride them as they speed along convoluted tracks.

Figure 6 The scare floor.

Figure 7 The door system.

The sublimity of the technological environment in *Monsters, Inc.* can be understood as a means of orienting audiences within their own complex, techno-consumerist environment. Leon Gurevitch's notion of computer animation's "aesthetic of continuity" is pertinent here. Gurevitch observes that even in more naturalistic productions such as *A Bug's Life* "the teeming masses of animated objects betray a certain industrial and mass-produced nature" ("Computer Generated" 134). Animation has frequently tried to mask its industrial underside, as demonstrated by the pristine gloss and naturalism of earlier Disney animated features such as *Snow White*. But as Gurevitch points out, the three-dimensional worlds generated through computer animation are so detailed and impossibly continuous that they betray their own complex industrial automaticity regardless of the naturalism employed to mask it. This aesthetic of continuity leads to complex industrial settings entering into many animation narratives, and in Pixar features this includes a

chase sequence on luggage conveyors at an airport in *Toy Story II* in addition to the door system

in *Monsters, Inc*. Gurevitch notes that there are also numerous scenes of big box retail stores that

occur in computer animation features across studios. This mise en scène is conducive to the

industrial aesthetic and consumerist ethos of the studios and their products ("Computer

Generated" 137). Interestingly enough, these automated industrial processes and places are

frequently portrayed as adversarial in the films, which, Gurevitch argues, distracts from the

animation's positioning of the viewer within an "industrially fabricated roller-coaster ride" that

reinforces a consumerist logic and worldview ("Computer Generated" 135).

That Pixar's features are designed products that build on the practices of industrial design

and advertising, and therein provide a kind of consumer training for audiences seems obvious

enough. But the more subtle point related to *Monsters, Inc.* is that the feature betrays a desire to

make visible the common technological environment that drives both consumption and

production, and this visualization process relies on antiquated, industrial imagery. The rehearsal

of the narrative of the individual surmounting the adversarial forces of the system registers the

desire of the consumer or producer to exercise her agency through/over the system whether by

way of hacking or mastery. This popular narrative presents the built environment and the techno-

cultural system it facilitates as weaker than individual agency. This notion is visually reinforced

by the animated characters—as in Sulley's bulky, uncontainable body, and Boo's small,

surreptitious body. The animated characters simply cannot be contained, and as they explore

more and more of the door system, they increasingly challenge its normal operations.

The door system's familiar industrial design mitigates the challenge of representing

capitalism's digitally-supported networks and this correlates with an effort to simultaneously

express the complex machinations of digital animation production. Digital animation's

combination of hand-drawing, automaticity, and mechanical reproducibility is not only well-suited for making moving-image products, it also continues the cinematic tradition of making the invisible visible or representing that which is unrepresentable. Quite often animation techniques come into play when the desired moving-image presentation cannot be recorded.[4] Such is the case when representing the many invisible, microscopic, and technical aspects of digital media. Animation becomes a critical means of representing the digital environment that mediates our lives yet remains largely unseen. *Monsters, Inc.* demonstrates how the impossibly complex continuity of digital animation lends itself to taming the sublimity of digital systems. As has been the case with various forms of the sublime, adding a frame enables further contemplation of the phenomenon.

The aesthetic of continuity of digital animation does not necessarily expose the inner workings of black boxed technology, but it does present complexity more generally through its impossible continuity. The animation presents an immense amount of data in an apprehensible form. The visualization of data flows through computer animation betrays a desire to glimpse the complex digital systems through which power is wielded. An animated presentation, such as that in *Monsters, Inc.*, renders complex, systemic power more palatable and manageable from the point of view of the little guy. As with the reversed point of view narrative in *Monsters, Inc.* that mitigates the fear of the other, this aesthetic of continuity, as a kind of technological sublime, neutralizes the alien menace of the system. The animation provides a frame for contemplating digital media at the overwhelming system level. In cinema studies, the concept of frame has been theorized as a force containing the moving image and limiting its potentially sublime effects. For Anne Friedberg, the cinematic frame unifies perspective and spatiality even more so than narrative: "It is the consistency of the frame that performs the unity of space, not narrative," and

"the frame of the screen serves as the boundary demarcation between the screen world and the material world of the spectator" (84). This line of reasoning leads Friedberg to compare the Graphic User Interface (GUI) of computers to CGI in films more generally. And while CGI is an expression of digital information, it is, like the GUI, a semiotic layer between human users/audiences that reduces and limits human interaction with digital information, processes, and applications (Friedberg 230).

Gurevitch's notion of an aesthetic of continuity emphasizes the function of framing and representation to perpetuate techno-capitalist habits of thought and perception, but this overlooks the point made by the inadequacy of such representational efforts: that it is actually very difficult to represent the conditions of a techno-capitalist environment, hence *Monsters, Inc.*'s industrial look and its metaphorical treatment of globalization and networks. This distinction acknowledges that the delimiting functions of frames and screens vary depending on the broader discourse or logic to which they belong. For instance, this discussion of frames and framing echoes philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of Gestell or enframing, which addresses how technological thinking constructs instrumentalist ideas about the natural environment. A Heideggerian reading of *Monsters, Inc.* could interpret the children as natural material understood as "standing reserve," a resource material for the monsters' use and benefit. Enframing in this case amounts to a perspective that determines the character of children for the monsters. The door system, in addition to being a material structure that advocates for its persistence through its own functional existence, is also part of a techno-ideological ensemble that includes a history of social practices. The monsters embedded in this apparatus understand children through that lens. The intervention of the child Boo disrupts this enframing for the

monsters Sulley and Mike. She challenges how they think about children and forces them to develop another mode of framing children.

This Heideggerian conception is distinct from an aesthetic understanding of a frame. In the aesthetic understanding, the frame facilitates a freer contemplation of sense experience by crystallizing it in a limited, distorted form—e.g. space in a landscape painting or time in a cinematic long take. In this way, *Monsters, Inc.* enables the contemplation of a techno-capitalist environment and its resistance to representation, even though the film is a direct manifestation of commercial interests and practices. With this in mind, it is noteworthy that the door system presents a third conception of frame through its very doors. The monsters and the children are presented as dynamic characters that change over time, but the door system is a more permanent force that organizes space and interpersonal contact. The door frames are delimiting elements in themselves, structuring space and movement, and the systemic network of doors as a whole is depicted as sublime. The transition to laughter extraction at the end of the film suggests that the materiality of the system is not likely to change. Not only does the exploitative relationship between monsters and children remain, the doors and factory continue to function as before.

Comparable to the toys in the *Toy Story* films, it is clear that the materiality of the system constitutes a different temporality from the monsters and children. Although presumably built by the monsters, this technological infrastructure exercises its agency through its enduring material existence. The door is an example of a technical mediator in the sense that activity of structuring of space is delegated to it. In this way it restricts and opens up possibilities to those acting in association with it.[5] In contrast to an allegory about Heideggerian enframing or technological thinking, the door system in *Monsters, Inc.* amounts to a cautionary tale about material structures operating in conjunction with economic and social structures that are "built to last." This

delegation to automated processes and habitual practices suppresses aesthetics and politics, or the fundamental possibility of the new.

In short, *Monsters, Inc.* presents digital complexity in a reduced, nostalgic form, which renders it available for contemplation. More particularly, the presentation makes available for contemplation the agential capacities and interactions of both the characters and the environment. The technological infrastructure facilitates a space of contact that is conducive to both the reproduction of exploitative practices and the disruption and reconfiguration of social practice. The distinction of the doors from screens is most significant in this regard. Their capacity to eliminate distance alludes to the mediascapes of the electronic and digital era, but the embodied contact and transgression of geo-political boundaries facilitated by material doors designates a qualitative difference from social media and its predecessors. Thus, in addition to expressing the desire to make visible the complexity of digital media environments, the film also expresses the desire to penetrate that complexity. This desire seeks to overturn the technological sublime maintaining a given status quo by locating a postmodern sublime that does not affirm technological progress or individualism.

Perhaps the most obvious allusion to a postmodern cliché in *Monsters, Inc.* involves the role of television. As in *Toy Story*, television is depicted as a demystifying, corrupting medium. In the film, Sulley and Mike watch a television advertisement for Monsters Incorporated that attributes children's increased tolerance for scary things to the violent and horrific programming they watch on television. The numbing effects of television disrupt the human-monster system by diminishing the threat of monsters. Now that they have seen numerous monsters on television, children are not afraid of real monsters, and by no longer recognizing the monstrosity of the monsters, children are effectively threatening the existence of the monsters. The monster's job is

becoming even more dangerous as children are becoming more difficult to scare. The desensitization of children has caused a scream shortage and it threatens monster identity. The monsters' exploitative relation to their environment has become constitutive of their identity. If they can no longer act effectively on that environment through scaring, then they lose their sense of self and the sense of superiority it relies on.

It is significant that it is television that has thrown a wrench into the system by derealizing the monster threat to children. Within the film, television marks an earlier expansion of electronic media into domestic and public spaces that serves as a bridge between older electronic media and the new media of digital animation. Television is also associated with postmodern aestheticization or the growing cases in which media only refer to other media and audiences are entertained by the indiscernibility and convergences between platforms. Examples of this occur throughout Pixar's *oeuvre* and include the wallpaper sky at the beginning of *Toy Story* (it appears indistinguishable from a cartoon sky), the Buzz Lightyear videogame at the beginning of *Toy Story II*, and the staged bedrooms and video monitors in *Monsters, Inc.* For children in *Monsters, Inc.*, the monster as a unique, real manifestation has lost its aura now that monsters appear on their screens whenever they want to see them. Children are losing their belief in monsters and are left with representations of monsters only. The monsters, on the other hand, are suffering from a transition to a postmodern context in which they no longer can rely on the technological sublime formulation that supported their terrorism of children.

This point about the desensitizing force of media gestures toward a larger point about the technological sublime and its self-defeating logic. In short, the technological sublime, by being technological, becomes too safe and familiar to maintain its sublime function. When media environments become second nature, their aesthetics shift toward the experience of the beautiful

rather than the sublime. For example, the algorithmic structure of design software tends to pursue a form of intuitive usability more akin to the beautiful:

> the use of algorithms in the design process produces a new solution to the dilemma presented by Kant's demand that a beautiful form stimulate a search for a determining concept, but without ever allowing itself to be captured by that concept. With computational design, the concept determining the form is concealed—literally encoded—so that, standing before one of these forms, we are left in precisely that searching state described by Kant as the experience of beauty. (Keller 47)

Keller's reasoning illuminates how the database ontology of computers and software is made familiar and less overwhelming. This process retains a Kantian subject as long as the human subject intuits a pleasing but undisclosed accordance between software functionality and his or her own thinking. The digital technological sublime is effectively circumvented when the only perceived contact is through the culturally approved graphic user interface (GUI). Through this comfortable, illusory interface, the sublime not only becomes manageable and safe, it becomes beautiful and natural.

The standardization of screens and frames, and other black-boxing components, emphasizes a naturalized, technological beauty as opposed to the sublime. This beautification occupies a central place in the work of Jean-François Lyotard and it influences his rethinking of the sublime for a postmodern context. Lyotard, for instance, describes the paintings of Jacques Monory as parodying the beautification of the sublime typical of post-modernity:[6] "It is only through *too much beauty* that [Monory] attracts attention to the essential fact of post-modernity, the incorporation of the sublime into the beautiful, the synthesis of the infinite and the finite in the figure of experimentation" (emphasis in original, *Assassination* 226). This experimentation

refers to the postmodern condition where Ideals and sensory experience have diminished as technology, science, and capitalism render everyday life more abstract, instantaneous, and less reliant on the human faculties of memory and sensation. The feelings of accord and purpose associated with beauty lend themselves to a culture of expertise void of the transcendental associations of Kantian aesthetics. Gaining expertise entails a fundamental comfort with and confidence in the given world and the tools that define it, which contributes to maintaining the logics of that world.

The science and technology used to map, scan, measure, and reproduce the world are sublime in their own infinite capacity and rationality, but this technological sublime is not transcendental in the Kantian sense. It is an immanent sublime and subsumable by the beautiful. Without transcendental Ideas—God, the Good, Freedom, etc.—and when heavily dependent on machines for information about the world, the subject does not experience the sublime or the beautiful as they were formerly conceived, but only the rationality of the techno-scientific, capitalist, abstract machinery. Lyotard writes, "The experimentation resulting from capitalist techno-science leaves no place for the *aura* of memories and hopes" (emphasis in original, *Assassination* 227). In these apparatuses, the infinite is deposited within finite, axiomatic, operational arrangements. Without sensing the infinite, technical experience is derealized and this contributes to the nihilism of contemporary life in that it devalues sensory experience. Lyotard criticizes semiotics and representations in general for contributing to postmodern nihilism. As with the GUI already mentioned, Lyotard is sensitive to media practices that seemingly narrow cultural knowledge to a series of technical skills that, unbeknownst to a user, contribute to the collective maintenance of the larger media culture and techno-economic system.

In relation to Lyotard's critical comments about the beautification of the sublime,

Monsters, Inc.'s use of industrial imagery supports the idea that the sublime's association with

transcendental experience has been relegated to the past. Figure 7, for instance, depicts sunlight

beaming through a glass ceiling and illuminating the massive concrete structure housing the door

system. The sunlight gives a transcendental connotation to the scene, which, as a scene

expressing the difficulty of representing digital complexity also expresses the difficulty of

maintaining the technological sublime's transcendental associations. To alleviate this

postmodern nihilism, Lyotard advocates for finding new ways of activating the sensible, and this

involves a revised formulation of the sublime. Ashley Woodward concisely glosses the

reformulation:

> while Kant seeks to show that the feeling of the sublime testifies to the power of Reason
>
> and the moral law through the experience of the superiority of Reason over imagination
>
> (the faculty of the presentation of sensations), Lyotard insists on the irresolvable
>
> 'differend' between the two faculties. For him, the feeling of the sublime is the
>
> experience of incommensurability itself. Such a feeling breaks with the ideal of
>
> consensus because it is an experience of *dissensus*. (emphasis in original, 62)[7]

For Lyotard, the sublime is an aesthetic feeling that validates sensory experience without the

Kantian overtures of transcendence or commensurability—i.e. the *sensus communis*. Rather than

interpreting the experience as reason's domination of that feeling, Lyotard claims that the feeling

marks the triumph of the sensible over reason; the agitation of sublime experience promotes the

health and vitality of the subject.

The child character Boo in *Monsters, Inc.* approaches a more postmodern, aesthetic

sublime that at once supports but also challenges Lyotard's reformulation. This revised

formulation of the sublime, which we find in Lyotard's essay "Anima Minima," for instance, approaches the role of Boo in *Monsters, Inc.* "Anima Minima" presents a theory of the subject produced through aesthesis or the sensation of contact with an outside world: "sensation is also the affection that 'the subject'—one should say: the body/thought, which I shall call: *anima*— feels on the occasion of a sensible event" (emphasis in original, 242). The anima or soul is dependent upon outside contact/sensation and is terrified of an absence of sensation, which is death. The precarity of this subject correlates with a precarious sublime: "Either it [the soul/anima minima] is awakened by the astonishment of the other, or annihilated…[the soul is] precarious, unprepared, like the sensible event that awakes it" (Lyotard, "Anima Minima" 243). In these terms, Lyotard locates at the base of aesthetic experience a profound vulnerability as opposed to the transcendental strength of the Kantian sublime. The idea here is that aesthetic experience involves a fundamental energy or innervation, and if not resolved or rationalized by discourse, it remains incommensurable, sublime, and capable of countering postmodern nihilism. It is an expression of the infinite that is other to the subject and therein presents an ethical demand on the subject. This is the kind of sublime that the character Boo presents. That is an experience of encountering the Other, appreciating the aesthetic vitality of contact, and acknowledging that her being exceeds or escapes the ideological scripts used to integrate her presence into a socio-political order.

Obviously, as an animated girl character, Boo does not present abstract sensation through her moving figure, but she does function in the narrative as a more primordial form of sensory contact, a form of contact with the unknown. Her enigmatic, childish presence resembles Lyotard's efforts to strip down aesthetic experience to its most basic level of agitation and discord. But Boo is a narrative version of a postmodern sublime, which is distinct from Lyotard's

rejection of semiotic representation. Lyotard explicitly favors avant-garde art that challenges the sense of mastery over time that accompanies modern ideas of development and progress. For Lyotard, Kant's sublime contains an idea of indeterminacy and discord between human experience and the environment, which sharply contrasts with Kant's definition of beauty and its reliance upon an accord between mental faculties and the natural environment. In cases of the sublime, the imagination fails to account for a given perception of might or scale, it cannot harmonize with reason. Lyotard directly compares this minimization of imagination and elevation of reason to abstract and minimalist art: "optical pleasure when reduced to near nothingness promotes an infinite contemplation of infinity" (*The Inhuman* 98). The virtue of avant-garde art, then, is the capacity to peel back the correlations between image and concept or sign and referent that result from education and socialization. Even though Boo is not an abstract figure, as a child she is able to represent abstraction. After all, she is responsible for the doodles paired next to Sulley's visage in figure 5.

In the introduction to his book *The Inhuman*, Lyotard takes issue with definitions of human that emphasize culture—those customs and values that are passed on between generations. In a postmodern situation in which metaphysics is no longer appealed to in arguments about nature (i.e. the definition of human), the given system gains *de facto* metaphysical status over such questions (4-6). This is a serious problem for thinking about alternatives to capitalism or any entrenched system for that matter. Lyotard appreciates avant-garde, sublime art specifically because it challenges the permanence of any status quo by bearing witness to the "native indeterminacy" that persists within humans. Lyotard's examples include paintings by Barnett Newman and Paul Cezanne, which seek to express the overlooked and inexpressible subtleties of perception. Lyotard admits that the avant-garde approach for which he

advocates undoes all systemization. It does not appeal to a *sensus communis* as in the case of

Kantian beauty: "The task of having to bear witness to the indeterminate carries away, one after

another, the barriers set up by the writings of theorists and by the manifestos of the painters

themselves" (*Inhuman* 103). This statement seems to indicate a contradiction between Lyotard's

preference of avant-garde art that expresses native indeterminacy and therein resists theorization,

and his own writing about art and his appreciation of the texts and statements produced by the

artists. Contradictory or not, the discourse and criticism that discusses (or frames) avant-garde

minimalist art remains valuable even when the interest of the art is pure presence, not theory or

interpretation.

This point can be explicated further through the role of sublime subjects and objects in

Monsters, Inc. which function as abstract, unknowable elements within a narrative and a

representational world. Given that the technological sublime amounts to a beautification of

sublime experience and that the sublime no longer marshals significance through its

transcendental associations, theories of the sublime now tend to focus on the infinite domain of

subjects and objects. Lyotard turns to the basic agitation of sensation, the *anima minima*, but

Monsters, Inc. turns to the basic alien presence of otherness. This is most succinctly described

through the anthropomorphic reversal described by Docter, "Our own fears are afraid of us!" Just

as the meaningfulness of experiencing and contemplating the sublimity of stripped-down

sensation relies on the demise of metaphysics in philosophy and the breakdown of cultural values

and traditions in the realm of art, so too the narrative and world of *Monsters, Inc.* provides a

frame that makes the mutual fear and ignorance of monsters and children conducive to

contemplation. The unknowability of the other emerges as a final vestige and source of hope for

change within a highly rationalized, automated, and exploitative world. In this respect, it is

significant that the domain of unknowability afforded by subjects and objects is also a resource for the reproduction of this rationalized and exploitative world.

The character Boo demonstrates how a postmodern sublime is grounded in an experience of the unknown that reflects back to the subject her own absolute negativity (unknowability or unfinalizability), which contributes to a vulnerability toward change. This form of the sublime relies less on a subject/environment model of experience, but assumes that every object, which includes subjects, presents a basic unknowability or negativity beyond material existence. In *Monsters, Inc.*, children exemplify this form of the sublime in that they are an empty threat, are toxic yet valuable, are mysterious and unable to communicate with the monsters, and are filled in with ideological content. The child-as-ideological-object remains empty and unknown, but is treated as a complete subject or character with a full personality.

The compulsion to imagine a character as an authentic or full personality is not necessarily a process of projection—whereby a subject projects onto a character the integrated complexities that constitute her own experience of subjectivity. Instead, the affinity for totalized aesthetic others can be driven by a need to imagine one's self as whole, stable, and finalized.[8] Treating an other as a full, finalized personality enables a subject to receive the other's reciprocal gaze and use it to stabilize her own precarious subject position. This process of constituting the self through the gaze of the other pervades *Monsters, Inc.* A monster's ability to evoke a scream from a child contributes to the monster's identity as a monster. The toxicity of children and their fearful gazes affirm the corporate-monster identity.

A reconfiguration of this dynamic can be read quite literally in a scene in the latter half of *Monsters, Inc.* in which Sulley gives a scare demonstration to a group of new employees. When Sulley demonstrates his scariest roar, Boo, who is standing nearby, shrieks in terror. Upset that

he has frightened Boo, Sulley looks at the monitors that recorded his scare demonstration and

sees himself anew—that is, as the scary monster from Boo's point of view. This scene is a

critical moment in which Sulley sees his own monstrosity, and where he begins to understand the

perspective of the exploited other (Tranter and Sharpe, "Escaping" 299; Freeman 90). This

formulation establishes Boo as a powerful ideological object capable of reconfiguring Sulley's

identity and defying the corporate-ideology apparatus. The monitor sequence at once

demonstrates Boo's interpellation of Sulley—she has called him toward another identity—and it

is a figuration of Docter's point-of-view reversal thematization.

Figure 8 Sulley's scare demonstration.

    Boo's potency is in part derived from the excessive othering of children in the film,

which is an exaggerated form of how children are commonly othered in a range of societies. For

many adults, children are not simply vulnerable and dependent upon caretakers. They can also

appear threatening in their unpredictability, incomplete socialization, and embodiment of

becoming. In many cases, they are not yet subject to law and only become subject to norms

gradually. This exceptional status and treatment makes adults vulnerable to the desires and fears

of children and contributes to the valuing of innocence associated with childhood. This is one

reason why the concept of the child tends to be co-opted by power, where the child represents the

future of a given socio-political order (Edelman). In other words, the child represents the

perpetuation of specific forms of adulthood, and adults repeatedly leverage this potentiality

against political rivals while simultaneously filling the concept of child with their preferred

ideological content. Debates about children as proxy arguments for possible futures structures

the institutions and discourses responsible for education and socialization. But, as Lyotard

mentions, during the process of socialization, it is inevitable that an alien remainder surfaces in a

child. The unsocialized queerness of childhood is exaggerated in *Monsters, Inc.* through its

separate monster and human worlds and the comparison of children to the human-defying

agency of the environment.[9] This condition sets up children as alien entities that the monsters

actually know very little about, although their society depends upon the everyday exploitation of

children.

Boo's characterization as alien is compounded by her inability to talk. The inability for

the child and the monsters to communicate maintains their mutual fear and the film's irony in

that the audience understands the little girl more than the monsters do, and understands the

monsters more than the little girl does. In an interview for *Creative Screenwriting*, writer

Andrew Stanton tells how he and director Pete Doctor were set on Boo being too young to speak.

They thought this would enable characters to project more onto the child, as people do with pets

(Argent 23). In this case, then, a human child has human characteristics projected onto her by

anthropomorphic monsters. The language barrier assists in depicting the process of projection as Sulley and Mike's fears dissolve along with the myth of child toxicity. Boo's girlhood contributes to a similar divide between her and the masculine monsters Sulley and Mike. The divide derives from their separate worlds and from different levels of socialization and gendering. This enables an audience to read Boo's immediate affection and bond with Sulley as an affinity that overcomes difference and for Mike and Sulley to be read as stand-ins for adult parents.

Significantly, Boo uses a few words, including referring to Sulley as "kitty," which operates as an alien interpellation of Sulley. Again, this new call, vaguely alluding to a child's initial reference to mom, dad, or another family member, effectively offers Sulley a new identity that he clearly accepts in the film. This new identity is a significant conversion from the corporate-monster identity developed through fear and the daily business or performance of scaring. It is this interpellation and reconfiguration of identity that is visually represented through the monitor sequence, which also demonstrates the sublime nature of Docter's thematization. "Our own fears are afraid of us!" alludes to the characters' overcoming their shared fear and unknowability.

On the other hand, this turn to the sublimity of the individual person as subject and object, while shedding the transcendental overtures of earlier sublime formulations, lends itself to absurd and pernicious ideological constellations. As Slavoj Žižek argues through his Hegelian-Lacanian theory of the subject, the space of the sublime unknown serves capitalist ideology particularly well. Again, rather than expressing a Kantian transcendental notion of the sublime, Žižek formulates sublime experience as indicating the absolute negativity of subjects and objects. For Žižek, the distinction is one between Hegelian and Kantian understandings of

representation: whereas Kant claims that the Thing-in-itself exists beyond the field of

representation, Hegel claims that there is nothing beyond the field of representation. Sublime

experience under these terms loses its transcendent capacity. In this formulation, the subject is

not threatened by an external, overwhelmingly powerful environmental phenomenon, which then

prompts the subject to discover an inner power, as in Kant's dynamical sublime. Instead, the

subject experiences her environment as unknowable beyond a series of representations and

materials, and the subject finds herself likewise unknowable (*Sublime Object* 232). The object, as

unknowable beyond representation, gains meaning and force through its lack, that is, through the

parts of it that are not symbolized through language, which is comparable to Boo's preverbal

character. The sublimity of an object comes from the impossibility of symbolizing its Real,

preverbal content.

One of Žižek's famous examples of how an object's sublimity functions ideologically is

that of Coca-Cola, which as a desirable object betrays its own meaninglessness and points the

subject to the Real of desire with advertising slogans such as "Coke is it!" or "It's the real thing,

Coke." This absence of useful qualities—the product's caffeine, sugar, or other contents are not

its selling points—actually makes its advertising more effective, not less (*Sublime Object* 105-

106). Žižek's analysis of ideological objects attests to their psychical potency more than to their

historical and cultural specificity. He is interested in their sublime or excessive quality foremost

because it is this form that causes repetition in various historically specific moments. Thus, Žižek

is prone to follow an analysis of Coke with a corollary analysis of anti-Semitism under the Nazi

regime. In this latter instance, the more abstract the figure of the Jew becomes, like the abstract

advertising slogans of Coke, the more effectively it serves the Nazi's pseudo-scientific, racist

ideology (*Sublime Object* 106-7). In this vein, children in *Monsters, Inc.*, and Boo specifically,

represent an amorphous, unknown threat that is as harmless as Coke is ordinary. But it is this unknown, amorphous, sublime quality that also enables ideological effectiveness.

Boo's otherness as presented through her incomplete socialization and through her humanness in a monster world gives her character a sublimity—an excessive alien quality with which the monsters must reckon, especially when they come into contact with Boo. The crisis of Boo's presence disturbs the entire Symbolic order of the monster world and its myth of child toxicity. A large part of the film's humor revolves around the joke that the audience (and presumably some of the monsters) knows that children are not toxic. It is also a relatively familiar trope to assign the unknown and unfamiliar thing sublime weight in a film as it is in a given ideological system.[10] That said, *Monsters, Inc.* as a narrative about a mythical threat used to organize society demonstrates how physical contact with the threatening object can disrupt its sublime efficacy. A similar point is made in Žižek's Coke analyses when he suggests that all one has to do is drink Coke when it is warm or flat to experience the full absurdity of its sublime advertising. Nevertheless, this sensorial disappointment has not stopped many people from drinking Coke. Žižek acknowledges that many consumers practice a cynical, fetishistic ideology that enables them to admit the absurdity of Coke's sublime advertising and prefer to drink it all the same (*First as Tragedy* 3).

Boo, as the uncontainable, animated, toxic, child character, defies the technological infrastructure of the monster world and its cultural practices, which is more dramatic than Žižek's Coke example. Perhaps children in the film are toxic, but not in the way the monsters thought. The toxicity of children alludes to the unknowability of subjects and objects, which can support or disrupt a given system. This unknowability figures as a more relevant sublime experience than the technological sublime of the industrial era and its legacy of beautification

that persists in the digital era. *Monsters, Inc.*'s contribution to theorizing sublime relations emerges through its depiction of contact outside the parameters of a given ideological script: that is, Sulley's contact with a child who does not scream, but laughs and calls him "kitty." This demonstrates how objects and subjects are never finalized by ideology, and their sublime emptiness grants the capacity for new characterizations and identities. But *Monsters, Inc.* also demonstrates how a single subversive event must contend with ongoing cultural practices operating in conjunction with technological infrastructure. Hence, Monsters Incorporated makes the transition to exploiting children through laughter, while the promise of further social transformation resides in the secret, ongoing friendship between Sulley and Boo.

By turning to the sublime unknowability of its characters, the film expresses dissatisfaction with beautification and an antiquated technological sublime. This expression is at odds with computer animation's aesthetic of continuity which presents a polished, industrially manufactured example of beauty incorporating the sublime. However, *Monsters, Inc.* is an example of coping with fear not through reflecting on our reason or transcendental ego, but through anthropomorphization, through making our fears in our own image. The postmodern sublime, here represented imperfectly by Lyotard and Žižek, has its corollary in character animation that dramatizes the uncontainability and unknowability of personalities and animated bodies. Such characters effectively express aesthetic openness, and even though this openness seems inevitably filled in by familiar human qualities, it remains an unstable variable that troubles those monstrous structures that are "built to last."

The Exceptional Dialectic of the Fantastic and the Mundane (*The Incredibles*)

While many of Pixar's features portray alternative family formations, such as Sulley and Mike and Boo in *Monsters, Inc.*, *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird, 2004) explores a traditional definition of family in American, patriarchal culture. The film's narrative follows a family of super-humans (Supers) who have been forced to retire from their superhero vocation due to public discontent. After several lawsuits, the state passes legislation outlawing superpowers and demands that Supers blend in with ordinary society. Out of all of Pixar's films, this is the most explicit depiction of juridical laws changing within an animated world, and it raises the question of how the stylized animation used in *The Incredibles* contributes to this depiction. While the film portrays social and cultural transitions, its narrative, themes, and aesthetics are actually well-suited for thinking about the maintenance of social order in neo-liberal societies. The computer animation aesthetics of the film analogously serve its themes of the fantastic and the mundane, which exemplify the logic of exceptionality at work in maintaining social order. The film's juxtaposition of melodramatic family life with the danger and violence of superhero life is primarily a male fantasy that perpetuates competitive culture and the desire for individual achievement. Finally, these dialectical aesthetics and themes address the biopolitical governmentality involved in a technologically enhanced individualist culture and they demonstrate how the superhero genre can be read as a desire to escape it.

The Incredibles presents a liberal society in transition. The lawsuits against the Supers result from the public's perception that the Supers' freedom to exercise their powers infringed upon the personal freedom of ordinary humans. After the Superhero Relocation Program, ordinary humans no longer have to worry about being saved against their will or becoming collateral damage in a rescue operation. Following the legislation, the Supers do not live double

lives as civilians with alter-egos, but are forced into single lives without the glamour, celebrity, and danger of superhero life. Rather than dramatizing the complications that Supers pose for the legal system and political economy, the film dramatizes this lost, suppressed identity by juxtaposing it with depictions of everyday, middle-class, American life. Concealing their powers in order to blend in with society, the protagonist family of Supers suffers from a series of frustrations including the repression of their desire to achieve recognition through their talents and crime-fighting heroics. The most negative affects, however, are more pronounced in Mr. Incredible and his son Dash. The resolution to this condition emerges through the family's encounter with the violent and dangerous threats unleashed by the villain Syndrome, whose envious feelings toward Mr. Incredible turns into malice toward all Supers.

This narrative mostly follows Mr. Incredible (a.k.a. Bob Parr) who, to satisfy his longing for heroics, secretly begins to carry out missions for an unknown weapons developer. The weapons developer turns out to be Syndrome (a.k.a. Buddy Pine), a talented inventor who as a child sought to be Mr. Incredible's sidekick. Mr. Incredible rejected the boy's assistance, which led Pine to become the villain Syndrome. Elastigirl (a.k.a. Helen Parr), Mr. Incredible's Super spouse, discovers her husband's secret after he is captured by Syndrome, and she and two of her Super children, Dash and Violet, must rescue Mr. Incredible and stop Syndrome, whose plan is to destroy all the Supers.

The family names Parr and Pine correlate with the characters' situations: the Parrs struggle to fit in as equals in society and Pine longs to be a Super. The film repeatedly emphasizes the personal and psychological effects of social situations, and, as writer and director Brad Bird explains, *The Incredibles* uses the superhero genre to explore the tensions of family life:

At its heart, I saw *The Incredibles* as a story about a family learning to balance their

individual lives with their love for one another…It's also a comedy about superheroes

discovering their more ordinary human side. As I wrote, I wanted to create a world filled

with pop culture references—with spy movie gadgets and comic book super powers and

outrageous evil villains using ingenious devices—but at the same time, to create a story

within that world that is very much about family. I really poured everything in my heart

into the story. All these personal things—about being a husband, being a father, the idea

of getting older, the importance of family, what work means and what it feels like to

think you're losing the things that you love—all of these are tucked into this one big

story. ("*The Incredibles* - Production Notes")

I appreciate Bird's description not for its autobiographical insight, but for its sociological and

cultural insight. It explains how the film can be read as an attempt to address a series of tensions

typically formulated as the work-life balance, or, in the case of superheroes, public welfare

versus the well-being of loved ones. The other modern concept dramatized here is self-

realization, or the imperative to discover happiness and satisfy one's personal desires. In the

world of the film, these are liberal problems embodied most directly by Mr. Incredible and Dash.

As the two white male leads, they are character types associated with high levels of social

privilege.

Before examining the characters however, there is more to say about the cultural

implications of the overall themes of the film, which have been succinctly described in aesthetic

terms by Brad Bird as "the fantastic and the mundane" (Bird and Walker). This refers to the

juxtaposition of superhero life with that of ordinary humans but it also expresses a more

fundamental dialectic. At a very general level, fantastic events, people, and places exist as

interruptions or exceptions to mundane, everyday life. As an exception to normalcy, the fantastic

defines norms through a process of presupposition. To identify and designate an event, or person

for that matter, as exceptional, it must clearly exceed the parameters of general norms. Thus,

achieving the designation of "exceptional" weds presupposed norms to a historical reality.[1] As

readers of Agamben's famous articulation of the state of exception have noticed, exceptionality's

presupposition of general norms bears some affiliation with aesthetic judgment. The exception,

as a phenomenon that suspends norms or laws but offers an opportunity to establish norms or

laws as well, can facilitate considering both as "pure means." In other words, the changeability

of norms and laws defuses/diffuses their immediate instrumentality and necessity, and enables

reconsidering them without using means-to-ends reasoning (Benjamin, "Undoing Legal

Violence").[2]

The incredible bodies and bodily attributes of the Supers can resist determinative

judgment or at least schematization. If a person really has an unbelievable bodily capacity then

deciding how to categorize it and what it is for can be very difficult. The youngest Super, Jack-

Jack, epitomizes this in that his morphing powers, which are disclosed late in the film, have an

indeterminate, almost random appearance. Of course, the categorization of the uncategorized is

precisely what the superhero genre and the notion of superpowers provide. They give purpose to

exceptionality, which is, after all, a logical term, not an aesthetic one. Super strength, for

example, is not confined to a sensory domain, but is an ability conducive to instrumentalization.

The purpose given to these exceptional features is not aesthetic at all; they are used to re-

establish social order. Superheroes deemed "incredible" can be understood as establishing norms

in two directions: through presupposing norms by way of antinormative, exceptional behavior

and ability, but also through the instrumentalization of their exceptional talents.

Superheroes, in this reading, provide stability to social order by returning a clear hierarchy. The superhero genre presumably relieves a serious social burden given that modern democratic society suffers from an obfuscated hierarchical structure and a lack of social mobility. In short, it can be frustrating living with ideological discourses that emphasize equal opportunity and meritocracy, while living in a society with blatant static hierarchies. Further, the ideals of freedom and equality largely persist in discourses that emphasize entrepreneurial and technological savvy, which tend to facilitate self-blame over structural criticism. When searching for an explanation for personal failure, a person who has internalized these messages is likely to look inward at their own strengths and weakness. The superhero genre is able to mitigate this self-criticism through an obvious escapism but also by offering a clearer, external delineation of ordinariness and normalcy. To put it bluntly, the inability to climb the social ladder and achieve distinction appears much more reasonable in a world with superheroes with super powers.

Granted, many modern superhero stories play with the social order formula by portraying mundane concerns interrupting the fantastic elements of superhero life—e.g. the hero must choose between serving the public welfare or honoring personal relationships. These disruptions of the superhero vocation prevent the hero's exceptionality from becoming too routinized and normalized. The normal returns in these instances as an exception that presupposes the exceptionality of the superhero. The poles of this dialectic narrow in *The Incredibles*. In many ways the fantastic is the mundane and vice versa. For example, despite the obvious conservatism of their family structure, the Supers find their home and domestic space as a respite from social norms and laws and it is where they are able to use their powers. And, more importantly for the project at hand, the animation aesthetics function analogously to the exceptionality of the superheroes on multiple levels. The animation offers a fantastic aesthetic corollary to the

exceptional abilities of the Supers, and the animation is an example of building the mundane with fantastic technological tools.

The film's computer animation enhances this fantastic-mundane dialectic through a distinct fantasy-realism balance. Each term in the fantasy-realism binary refers to and differs from each other: visual fantastic elements emerge in contrast to realistic elements and vice versa. In *The Incredibles* fantastic imagery and movement correspond to the exceptional abilities of the Supers. Mr. Incredible's caricatured figure features an enormous upper body to signify his super strength. But the limits of the cartoonish exaggeration are equally important to the diegesis and tone of the film. Within the history of representational animated films, fantastic elements that convey a sense of emancipation or utopia are accompanied by realistic elements that give the story weight and stakes. Fairy tales, for instance, have found animated film to be a suitable home for their more fantastic elements.[3]

The superhero genre has been a fruitful space for innovations in presenting fantastic and realistic elements through animated film, as was demonstrated by the Fleischer brothers' use of rotoscoping and the Stereoptical process in their Superman cartoons of the 1940s. In these shorts, an enhanced realism elevates the stakes of superpowers, which informs Superman's dual identity and the overall tone and aesthetic palette of the world. Supporting Superman's capacity to blend fantastic abilities into a normal-looking human figure, the animated world blends fantasy elements—e.g. monster robots—with anatomically precise rotoscoped characters. The world becomes more like a comic-book than a Disney cartoon. In addition to aesthetics, the recalibrated balance in the Superman cartoons is indicative of a series of decisions made in respect to available technology, trends in other media, and market strategy.[4] In *The Incredibles*, the powers and caricatured bodies of the Supers exist in tension with a recognizable 1960s, American

setting. In this context, the fantastic elements of the Supers disrupt the standardization, rationalization, and bureaucratization of mid-twentieth century life in the US. The caricatured humans and super humans in *The Incredibles* also distinguish the film's realism from the photorealism of other computer animated films.

However, the distinct twist that *The Incredibles* employs with its themes of the fantastic and the mundane is that quotidian moments in the lives of the Supers disrupt their own fantasies and fantastic abilities. The convention of fantasy disrupting the boring and oppressive parts of reality is in turn disrupted by the inexorable return of reality. This dialectic can easily be read in terms of the historical divide between animated and live action film, in which animation is associated with illusionistic effects in contrast to live action realism, but then computer animation's capacity for photorealism serves as a means for a new level of realistic effects to enter animated film. Further, what was once the exceptional domain of animation—cartoon physics, plasmatic bodies—is now more readily available to live action by way of digital production. The fantastic-mundane and the realism-fantasy dialectics illuminate how the distinctions made between modes are historically contingent. The difference that makes a difference when distinguishing (judging) between animated and live action film can change. At a historically appropriate moment, when computer animation is defining itself, the mundane theme of *The Incredibles* works to reverse the fantasy of the animated cartoon.

This more mundane animation helps to make the biopolitical point that bodies, and their everyday life processes, are technological targets and subject to the tools of governance. The maintenance of social order through quotidian biological processes is a bottom-up approach to governmentality, to use Foucault's term, and in the animated world of *The Incredibles*, the rules and laws that hinge on the attributes of bodies are also personal, family matters. Animated films

are conducive to biopolitical readings through their capacity to influence which movements and bodies are recognized as living and indicative of personhood.[5] In *The Incredibles* the computer animation reinforces the significance of the moving, living body within the animated world; it is focused on generating embodied characters. This focus necessitates that the characters' bodies are subject to many of the rules we assign to bodies. For instance, Brad Bird initially planned on killing off one of the film's developed characters—a pilot and friend of Elastigirl named Snug. Bird cut this element out to save screen time and labor, but he wanted it because it bolstered the theme of the mundane and the fantastic. He thought it would give an adult, serious tone to an animated, family film that presumably would avoid depicting death altogether (Bird and Walker). In other words, the death sequence would extend the mundane to refer to the mortality and vulnerability of everyday life and everyday bodies. This is also why Mr. Incredible is shown to experience pain, fear, and to bleed.

In addition to narratively treating the characters as having mortal, human bodies, the characters are digitally constructed through software that simulates basic skeletal frames and working muscles that are then covered with digital skin. In the film's production notes, Bird describes it: "We used a fantastic new technology called 'goo,' which allows the skin to react to the muscles sliding and sticking underneath in a very true fashion."[6] Bird's use of the word "fantastic" is ironic since the fantastic element is the new animation technology used to produce images that are materially and dimensionally realistic—closer to the mundane.

The reflexive relation of Pixar's technics to its narratives in this case presents another twist. In the narrative, the fantastic elements of the Supers are suppressed by law, but when the Supers use their powers, they are interrupted by mundane cultural and bodily events, e.g. Mr. Incredible throwing out his back. In the production of the film, technological innovations are

used to generate and compose mundane reality with its bones, muscles, and blood. In the production process, the materiality of the body, with its limitations, seems less like an interruption and more like a target. And the innovations in computer animation, as Bird's comment indicates, become the fantastic components targeting the mundane. In other words, when fantastic technology targets mundane human bodies, the body is not a helpful, therapeutic break in an otherwise technological condition, but is a mere model and something that can be technically reproduced and manipulated. Underneath the superpowers of the Supers and the realistic aesthetics of their world lurks a techno-utopian ambition that resonates with Pixar's cultural position. Building a mundane world is also a fantastic technological achievement.

It is remarkable that within this biopolitical gesture, in which the animators' technological work of building digital bodies facing quotidian problems might serve as an analogy for governance through the management of biological processes, the role of economic competition is depicted as an inferior form of competition. In the film, individuals compete with each other physically, violently, and achieve distinction through combat or athleticism. Entrepreneurship and striving for economic security are in the film, but they are not fully satisfying substitutes for the interpersonal violence and danger that the Supers engage in when fighting crime and Super villains. In this fashion, the film obliquely addresses the general neo-liberal context dominant at the time of its production, in which economic logics are applied to all kinds of personal and domestic affairs. The Supers are not banned because their powers amounted to an economic advantage that disturbed the market, even though they are banned for interfering with the personal freedom of ordinary citizens.

On the other hand, there are aspects of the mundane world of *The Incredibles* that are familiar allusions to modern industry and economic activity. This includes a critical depiction of

mid-twentieth century industrial bureaucracy and hierarchy that contrasts with the post-industrial, networked, Californian context within which Pixar studios developed. The film also depicts an individualist culture demanding that government primarily concern itself with securing individual interests and safety. The world of the film lacks systemic, apocalyptic threats, and the violence that does threaten society is wielded by individuals. As tends to be the case in many superhero narratives, collective power is hardly present. Instead, individuals of great ability fight and compete against each other.

This depiction accords with Slavoj Žižek's observations in his book *Violence*, which describes how in economically prosperous and secure regions of the world, subjective violence is more jarring than objective violence. Subjective violence includes the subject-versus-subject form of conflict typically found in Hollywood films and on local news. Objective violence is often more difficult to depict and includes "symbolic" violence, as in that which occurs through language, and "systemic" violence, which exists as background conditions or the "normal" state of affairs. Systemic violence and its capitalist social order are maintained by constant activity. But, and this is the overarching lesson of Žižek's book, our attention to local, subjective violence blinds us from seeing the systemic violence of our social order and how quotidian, personal activities sustain it.

A similar dilemma preoccupies Bird's fantastic-mundane thematization of *The Incredibles*. Building the mundane in the film involves more than the characters' bodies. It also includes building a series of familiar domestic and public spaces, and it includes developing the personal motivations of the characters. It is common for a Hollywood action film to have melodramatic elements at its core, but *The Incredibles* parodies this genre as it depicts the domestic life of the Supers and demonstrates how psychologically vulnerable they all are. It also

builds on the melodramatic role of a stylized mise en scène. In melodrama, the emotionally afflicted characters struggle to address the social and systemic issues contributing to their misfortunes. The people and objects nearest to them become substitutes for these alienating forces. Further, this psychologized, melodramatic mode has many of its roots in the popularity of Freudian psychoanalysis in the US during the middle of the twentieth century (Elsaesser "Tales of Sound and Fury" 58-59). Thus, *The Incredibles*' setting alludes to this melodramatic mode almost as much as the superhero genre. This mix of genres contributes to the film's focus on subjective violence and personal desire, and it facilitates the narrowing of the fantastic and mundane dialectical poles.

In the real world, in which the dialectics described above are less determinative, there are plenty of counter examples in which people demonstrate sensitivity toward and engagement with systemic, social issues, and are not blinded by intimate relationships and contexts but think of these as always related to broader contexts. But in *The Incredibles*, the focus on superheroes and family and on the maintenance of social order through bodies living and pursuing personal interests caricatures the more narcissistic side of modern liberal culture. The film invokes the premise that the modern aspiration for individual autonomy, security, and prosperity leads to conformity and nihilism, or at the very least, boredom. *The Incredibles* is not a formal intervention into a debate about politics in today's globalized, capitalist societies, but it does address the stagnation of consensual politics and the triviality of an individualist state of mind in which the good life is reduced to "narcissistic satisfactions" (Rancière, *Chronicles* vii-x). Without grand ideological causes that demand individual sacrifice and collective action, or without substantial debates about the good life, society slips into a state of political stagnation. This is a politics reduced to management, administration, and pragmatic problem solving, and a

culture ill-equipped to critique this politics because it suffers from fragmentation by way of an obsession with self-gratifying pursuits and an individualist, entrepreneurial market economy.

The film addresses this context by distinctions between conformist/stagnate space and aesthetic/political space; in the film the latter is typically the space of home or fantasy and the former is the space of bureaucracy and mundane life. As with Bird's synopsis, which opens this chapter, the role of family is critical in this context as it is often the site where norms are contested and reproduced. Perhaps even in our neo-liberal context where the market is the primary motivator for daily activity and individual life and autonomy increasingly looks like a technologically mediated form of governmentality wielded by states and corporations, familial and communal space can appear for many people as bastions for political significance and meaning. Nevertheless, the film seems to echo Žižek's observations in that it is difficult not to find mundane, personal and familial activities complicit with a systemic culture of competition and violence.

Familial Space

Family has long served as a model for society and government, in part because power differentials exist in families and have been thought of as occurring naturally. To be sure, the use of families as theoretical models has tended to gloss over the major differences and disagreements that persist within families, which misses their major contribution as models of study, according to political theorist Kennan Ferguson (23). Ferguson considers how families function with and through incommensurability, or that "the fact of human differences, of the reality that two people never fully understand one another, is closely tied up with the differences in their motivations, valuations, and histories" (Ferguson 5). Ferguson adds, "*The family is where people have the highest level of identification with one another, but also where their differences*

and distances seem most important" (emphasis in original, 27). Thinking of families as sites of heightened intensity and intimacy and sites of open conflict and contestation challenges models of successful politics as consensual and agreeable. Further, a less idealized examination of family as a political model illuminates differences between micropolitics and macropolitics. In other words, it recognizes the intensity of a parent's authoritative command as distinct from orders that come through institutions or from the state. Micropolitical contexts can be uniquely compelling given the loving and affectionate attachments involved (Ferguson 26-27).

This is familiar terrain for superhero stories that tend to rehearse the drama of the hero neglecting or relinquishing familial, intimate attachments in order to serve a larger public entity—the city, the nation, or humanity. Adhering to convention, *The Incredibles* ends with the Supers being able to uphold both family and public duty, but the fantastic-mundane theme and the caricatured bodies and distinct superpowers give figural representation to family dynamics and their intersection with social norms. This animation reinforces the role of aesthetic experience in politics by presenting certain spaces as open to new experiences and conducive to challenging rules. But as a model of politics open to incommensurability, this Super family, with its caricatured figures, demonstrates the limiting effects of socially inscribed power differentials. In accord with Ferguson's insight, the family and the domestic scenes in the film serve as sites for these differences to surface and become open to debate.

For the family of Supers, their different powers are exaggerations of character type: Elastigirl has nearly infinite stretching capabilities and becomes a mother stretched to care for four other people; her husband, Mr. Incredible, is athletic, strong, disproportionately muscular, and literally struggles to squeeze his body and his ego into the settings of home and work; their daughter Violet, a shy teenage girl, can generate force fields and turn invisible; their son Dash

can run at amazing speeds and is a rambunctious young boy; their infant Jack-Jack meanwhile

shows infinite possibilities and in a sequence near the film's end discloses the ability to morph

into a host of forms. This mix of powers generates hyperbolic family dynamics epitomized by

the physical comedy of the film's well-known dinner table scene.

Figure 9 The Supers' family dinner.

The dinner table scene gives physical and material expression to the Supers' inability to

fit into normal space and spatial norms. The suburban house in which they live features a typical

dining room for an American, middle-class home. But the family's dinner quickly gets out of

hand when Elastigirl explains to Mr. Incredible how Dash was sent to the principal's office at

school for placing a tack on his teacher's chair. Dash avoids disciplinary action because he

moved so fast that the teacher's video camera could not capture him placing the tack (the

reflexive joke here is that Dash's blurring speed is better represented by animation than live-

action recording). This dinner-table anecdote impresses Mr. Incredible, whose reaction is met

with disapproval by Elastigirl. Distracted by the story, Mr. Incredible cuts through a plate and the

dinner table. Then Dash and Violet get in a fight—Dash runs around the table until he runs into

Violet's force field, Elastigirl's arms get wrapped around the table as she tries to separate them;

finally, Mr. Incredible picks up the table altogether. Then, their friend and fellow Super, Frozone, rings the doorbell and brings the chaos to close.

As the still from the film, above, shows, the family looking at the door where Frozone is about to enter projects their fear of being discovered directly onto the audience in the form of a reciprocated gaze. Audiences can identify with the society outside the home capable of judging the Super family or they can identify with the Supers themselves who caricaturize the differences at play within a family. The home serves as a safe space for the distinct bodies and personalities of the Supers to express themselves. The interpersonal conflicts taking place within the home exist within a productive political domain—the children are not afraid of fighting with each other and using their powers, the parents' disagreement demonstrates a basic freedom to disagree. The conflict with the society outside their home is more threatening and demands greater conformity; hence, their relief when they discover that it is only Frozone at the door.

According to the DVD commentary by Brad Bird and producer John Walker, this dinner table scene was challenging to animate because the action and movement is depicted by several shots from varying points of view, requiring precise spatial-temporal calculations. Each object on the table for instance—the food, plates, glasses, etc.—had to be adjusted accordingly to maintain continuity throughout each point-of-view shift. Bird describes this process in terms of fighting the tendency for computer animation to look small, plastic, and clean. In the dinner table scene, this challenge of adapting computer animation to perceptual norms correlates with the challenge of the Supers adapting to everyday, civilian life. It is the tension of adjusting to norms that is analogous, and the analogy follows throughout the film as the Supers use more and more of their powers and computer animation shows off more and more of its capacity to portray the dynamism and force of those powers. In other words, there are spaces in the animated world in

which the characters explore their own rules and limits, and these aesthetic spaces can allegorically refer to the animation production process.

Again, Dash's blazing speed is exemplary. According to Bird, one of the reasons he wanted to make the film was to see what it would look like for a character with superhuman speed to "go all out." Here, Bird refers to the sequence of Dash racing through the jungle of Syndrome's island and then running on top of the water surrounding the island. Dash's exploration of his powers analogously refers to animators exploring the capacity of the medium, and Syndrome's island serves as a larger space for discovery and self-expression than the Supers' home, which the dinner scene shows as limited by the society just outside.[7] Dash's speed, which the film suggests cannot be recorded on camera but is better presented through animation, exceeds the bodily-social norms of his school, but not the less restricted space of Syndrome's island or the safe space of home. Domestic space and fantasy space are the properly aesthetic and animated spaces of the film where rules can be discovered and contested. These aesthetic spaces contrast with the public spaces which have become more restrictive for the Supers and are less animated in the sense that the fantastic actions of the Supers no longer occur there. Further, these aesthetic spaces contribute to a patriarchal gesture in that Dash and Mr. Incredible experience the loss of public space more acutely than Violet and Elastigirl. Dash's speed and Mr. Incredible's bulk and strength are not easily concealed, whereas Violet's invisibility and Elastigirl's flexibility enable them to conform to the rules of public space more easily. If freedom in a liberal society is thought about through spatial metaphors, then the film effectively shows certain bodies demanding more space, and therefore more freedom, than others.

This treatment of space and difference evolves over the course of the film, but it is poignantly expressed in a domestic sequence featuring the character Frozone (voiced by Samuel L. Jackson and one of the few black Pixar characters), whose cool personality is complemented by his powers to generate ice. As a giant robot unleashed by Syndrome begins wreaking havoc on the city of Metroville, Frozone frantically searches his high-rise residence for his "super-suit."[8] In the scene, Frozone's wife remains off screen, and the couple's dialogue consists of them yelling at each other from separate rooms:

F: Honey…

W: What…

F: Where's my super suit.

W: What…

F: Where is my super suit!

W: I, uh, put it away.

F: Where?

W: Why do you need to know?

F: I need it.

W: Uh-uh, don't you think about running out doing no derring-do. We've been planning this dinner for two months.

F: The public is in danger.

W: My evening is in danger.

F: You tell me where my suit is woman! We are talking about the greater good.

W: Greater good? I am your wife. I am the greatest *good* you are ever going to get.

While humorously playing with the superhero convention of family sacrificed for the sake of the public, the amusement of the scene emerges from the rendition of the depersonalized, shouting exchange that cohabitants of a large dwelling often engage in. But the absence of the wife's body diminishes the unique force of their domestic, intimate attachment. The implication is that the computer-animated body would be real enough or believable in such way as to be capable of interrupting social, civic obligations with the obligations of fidelity and love represented by the wife's body. The scene explicitly contrasts the gravity of public duty with the holds of private commitment, but the mundane is coded familial, female, and invisible, while the fantastic is coded masculine, heroic, and public. The scene implicitly acknowledges the potency of the visible body as a political marker.

This treatment restricts women from public space and macropolitical concerns, and it reinforces the film's narrative in which the female Supers have less trouble conforming to social norms. Unlike her brother Dash, Violet does not want to achieve public distinction, but desires to fit in with her peers. Mr. Incredible's integration into civilian life undermines his masculine identity. Elastigirl, on the other hand, foreshadows her conversion to life as a homemaker from the beginning of the film.[9] It is also important to note that the black character, Frozone, as much as he misses superhero work, adjusts more easily to civilian life than his friend Mr. Incredible. These distinctions contribute to depicting the loss of freedom and status to which Mr. Incredible and Dash are sensitive, and presumably, audiences are too, as bound up with privilege. The racial, sexual, and gender norms of the film are obviously not so distant from contexts in American life. The rebelliousness of Mr. Incredible and Dash smacks of privilege to which the other characters do not have access. Is it not equally unfair that Frozone and Elastigirl are deprived of using their powers for recognition and serving the public welfare? The aesthetic

freedom of animated film, the capacity to explore and contest the rules of the world, is not equally accessible to all of the Supers even though their very bodies are marked by it.

The characterization of the Supers blatantly discriminates along racial, gender, and sexual lines, and the film attempts to evoke sympathy for the privileged characters by focusing on the freedom that they have lost, namely the use of their talents to achieve distinction and pursue their superhero vocation. The father and son's loss of individual freedom can be read as a disruption of the democratic cultural norm of competition. In a democratic society that does not stabilize itself through traditional or religious hierarchies, citizens normally expect to compete with each other as equals. To demonstrate that one is equal to others or to achieve distinction amongst one's peers requires a person to exercise autonomy and self-determination, and be able to use her talents. Thinking about democratic culture as highly competitive illuminates democracy's relationship with capitalism. In philosopher Stephen Gardner's words, "the money-driven economy affords a social mechanism by which the passions unleashed by equality, negative passions usually destructive of society such as envy or resentment, can be turned into sources of prosperity" (96). Gardner's point is that this competitive climate has contributed to the rise of debt as people vie for distinction and security through the means of credit. The animated world of *The Incredibles* is light on depictions of market behavior, but it is heavy on its depictions of the insecurities and competitiveness that proliferate in a society of supposed equals.

The film's focus on family interactions shows how this competitive context has formal and informal rules that each family member negotiates differently. For instance, after his trouble at school, Dash has an exchange in the car with his mother Elastigirl as she drives home. In a recognizably domestic space, the dialogue addresses Dash's lack of discipline and his inability to

find what his mother calls a "constructive outlet." Dash wants to try out for sports, but his

mother will not allow him:

> E: You are an incredibly competitive boy, and a bit of a show off. The last thing you need
>
> is temptation.
>
> D: You always say 'do your best,' but you don't really mean it. Why can't I do the best
>
> that I can really do.
>
> E: Right now, honey, the world just wants us to fit in and to fit in we just got to be like
>
> everybody else.
>
> D: But dad always said our powers are nothing to be ashamed of, our powers made us
>
> special.
>
> E: Everyone's special Dash.
>
> D: Which is another way of saying no one is.

This scene adumbrates very similar language used by Syndrome when he describes his plan to

eliminate the Supers, and enforce a bland, equitable society in which no one is distinct or special.

But the logic is ambiguous. The phrase "everyone is special" could mean that everyone is

unique, distinct, or intrinsically valuable. Dash's interpretation equates "special" with distinction

or recognition achieved through individual ability. Dash's father, Mr. Incredible, is the source of

this interpretation, and this interpretation opposes that of Elastigirl, Violet, and even Frozone,

who are more interested in fitting in than achieving distinction. Nonetheless, Dash and Mr.

Incredible express the nuance that fitting in does not amount to belonging in a society that values

individual freedom and self-determination. To experience belonging in a competitive culture, a

person must be free to compete.

The Megalothymic Mode[10]

The divides that show up between the characters and within their domestic spaces are indicative of larger social structures, which can be observed in a couple of non-Super characters who manage to exercise a privileged relation to the social order. These non-Supers embody the "existential inferiority complex" that follows from a competitive democratic culture (Gardner 96). Both Edna Mode and Gilbert Huph are ordinary humans with small bodies and large egos, and each is competitive and aggressive in their own way. These characters demonstrate that the desire to achieve distinction is not a quality intrinsic to the Supers or peculiar to Mr. Incredible and Dash. They demonstrate the pervasiveness of a competitive democratic culture, and their caricatured bodies indicate the primacy of the comparative logic of body-image. But unlike the Supers, they do not have super-human powers capable of winning them distinction, which confines them to more mundane and familiar modes of competition.

Edna Mode is a petite woman who is half-Japanese, half-German, a fashion designer, and, according to Brad Bird, the only non-Super character capable of making the Supers uneasy (Bird and Walker). Despite her tiny stature, Edna is dominating, self-assured, and competitive (Figure 10). When Elastigirl finds Mr. Incredible's old super suit repaired, she visits Edna, the only person capable of such tailoring. From Edna, Elastigirl learns that Mr. Incredible has lied about his work and his whereabouts, but also that Edna has made new suits for the entire family. Suspecting an affair, unsure of what to do, and personally devastated, Elastigirl weeps in front of Edna, who, voiced by Bird himself, responds with German-accented, Californian flair:

> What are you talking about? You are Elastigirl! My God, pull yourself together. What will you do? Is this a question? You will show him you remember that he is Mr. Incredible and you will remind him who you are. Ah, you know where he is. Go!

Confront the problem. Fight! Win! And call me when you get back darling, I enjoy our visits.

Figure 10 Edna Mode.

This short speech redirects Elastigirl's energies and prompts her to go on a mission to confront Mr. Incredible and rescue him from himself or whatever danger holds him. Her two oldest children, Violet and Dash, sneak onto Elastigirl's jet and force their mother to take them along on her mission. This sequence sets up the film's resolution in which the parents are reunited, the children learn more about who their parents really are and they learn how to use their own powers.

Edna plays an important role in this process in that she presents a social, external location for the identity that the Supers have struggled to suppress. Her character shows how the desire to excel, to "fight" and "win," is cultural, even though it is also central to the egos of the Supers. Edna Mode is an informal advisor, counselor, and ideologue, reminding the Supers of who they are supposed to be and what they are supposed to do. Edna's personality compensates for her small, benign appearance. It is her personal means for establishing distinction and for competing in a democratic order in which visibility and bodily appearance matter. Edna lives vicariously

through the Supers and the Supers' imperative to be super is reinforced by Edna.[11] The exchange between her and Elastigirl presents an ideological loop.

Another example of competitive, individualist culture emerges through Gilbert Huph, Mr. Incredible's supervisor. A caricature of a small man and foil to Mr. Incredible, Huph, manages an insurance company and repeatedly berates Mr. Incredible for being too lenient to claimants. The insurance business offers a competitive field where a man of Huph's character and stature can thrive. Huph demonstrates how Edna Mode's exhortation to "Fight! Win!" can apply to ruthless capitalism. The tiny manager endorses violent practices—such as denying claims—to keep his company competitive and profitable. Mr. Incredible finds this form of competition antithetical to his superhero vocation and eventually assaults his boss out of frustration. The workplace for Mr. Incredible is literally and metaphorically claustrophobic. His bulky body hardly fits in his cubicle, and his position in the agency is so low that he has no credible autonomy.

The irony of the insurance company sequence is that it deals directly with modernity's response to danger and risk. This is doubly frustrating for Mr. Incredible who has no patience for the machinations of insurance when formerly it was his job to singlehandedly help people during times of crisis, misfortune, and victimization. In addition, the bureaucracy of the company creates an alienating distance from the violence and chaos that afflicts the lives of the people that the company is supposed to help. The commodification of protection and the quantification of risk depersonalizes and monetizes what was once a personal, visceral, and magnanimous duty performed by Supers. The film juxtaposes the intimate danger and violence of superhero life, with the bureaucracy, security, boredom and alienation of modern life.

The danger that Mr. Incredible seeks is not necessarily in conflict with the administered, market-oriented logics of the insurance company, although in the animated world, it is presented as such. In *The Incredibles*, the law against the use of superpowers that demands that Supers blend in prevents them from seeking out danger. Their superpowers make them less vulnerable than other humans and an average, middle class life does not expose them to the kind of danger to which they are accustomed. This contributes to Mr. Incredible's boredom and depression, Dash's frustration, Violet's confusion, and Elastigirl's weariness (mostly from helping her spouse and kids with their problems). The normal license to compete and take risks in the marketplace seems a feeble comparison to fighting crime and rescuing people from catastrophes. *The Incredibles* serves as a hyperbolic representation of how meaninglessness and boredom follow from modernized security and prosperity when the marketplace does not satisfy these individualist desires. This characterization evokes Nietzsche's "last men" who emerge amidst the prosperity and security of modernity. Nietzsche rails against the life of the last men whose devotion to comfort has displaced the passion and tragedy of a Dionysian worldview, and he offers the figure of the *Übermensch* in opposition to the last man.[12]

A crude Nietzschean reading of the film could amount to an argument for a society open to the conflicts and inequalities that would arise from granting the same freedoms to all humans—super or ordinary. This reading would sympathize with Mr. Incredible's resistance to insurance since Nietzsche endorsed "liv[ing] dangerously" in order to counter the bourgeois pursuit of contentment or progress, a holdover from the Christian pursuit of redemption and presupposition of universal guilt. Nietzsche's call to live dangerously also appeals to the individual to face the indeterminate cosmos and commit to authoring a part of his or her own life. But the film, in accord with its 1960s, spy-thriller mise en scène, maintains a cooperative

connection between danger and a bourgeois existence. Exemplary here are the James Bond-like sequences on Syndrome's beautifully exotic and technologically sophisticated island, complete with an attractive female assistant who seems to exist to serve powerful men. It is in this space that Mr. Incredible learns the market value of his abilities as he is paid to fight Syndrome's robots under the guise that they are prototype weapons that have gone out-of-control. While these sequences do not dominate the entire film, they mark the incorporation of danger and personal risk into the bourgeois system that Nietzsche bemoaned.

As Marcus Bullock describes in an essay on what he calls the "danger market," there are many forms of danger that are readily incorporated into modern democratic, capitalist life. Foremost, the market provides forms of universal risk through competition: "we can rise and fall with equal freedom according to the law of competition. In its invitation to all comers to try their luck or their skill according to that law, the bourgeoisie can claim to be the universal class" (Bullock 70). The market carries a democratic promise of competition for all, and the law of competition supplies a continuous, low-level, universal danger that primes people for crises and crisis ideology while uniting them through the universalization of market risk. But the incorporation of danger also includes the commodification of thrill-seeking, and, in turn, its contribution to subject formation (Bullock 78). Akin to the relationship between disobedience and autonomy, and the sublime, an encounter with danger can generate a heightened awareness of one's self. In some cases, the feeling of endangerment prompts a person to become dangerous. Such is the case for the Supers in *The Incredibles*, when they are threatened by Syndrome and must defend themselves and their family and friends. But this is precisely where the film's action departs from the market's inclusion of danger; it is where the Supers regain their dangerous identities and their status as super-humans. Through these fantastic sequences of violence and

action, the Supers depart from their mundane, middle-class working life and therein from market society, its universal risks, and "narcissistic satisfactions." Within this "return of the Supers" narrative, however, we can see that this is precisely the form of danger and Nietzschean living to which Gilbert Huph and Edna Mode do not have access. They are resigned to compete in the marketplace or vicariously through the Supers.

Syndrome and Elastigirl

When Scott Bukatman claims that "maturity is held in abeyance by the superhero comic" (*Matters* 199), he is referring to the genre's primarily adolescent-boy audience and the superhero trope of the origin story, which is in turn related to the genre's commentary on a lack of tradition passed on between generations. There are rather explicit parallels between the superhero discovering his powers and the bodily and body-conscious development of a boy. Further, the origin story reverses the *bildungsroman* narrative in which the protagonist must learn to overcome or shed the weight of the past (Bukatman, *Matters* 198-9). The implication is that there has been a rupture with the past that superhero origin stories address. While Bukatman is right in his observation that superheroes "tap strongly into older traditions of animistic power and possibility," he does not examine how "playing" with superheroes through comics and films also alludes to a calcified aspect of our social lives (*Matters* 188). Bukatman describes his position: "I'm convinced that the overt concern with issues of law and order is something of a red herring in the superhero cosmos—these flamboyant figures are more easily aligned with a pleasurable chaos than with restrictive order" (*Matters* 188-9). I am less convinced that the genre should be approached this way, and I think *The Incredibles* expresses a similar sentiment. Inseparable from the light amusements of these fantastic depictions lurks a comment about the restrictiveness of a pleasurably chaotic order. Even if the superheroes supposed to reconnect us

with "older traditions" turn out to be pleasurably chaotic, the surface gesture of the genre remains significant. It indicates that the individualist and aesthetic qualities of modern identity and culture, which are at once liberating and chaotic, are also burdensome and precarious.

The return-of-the-Supers narrative, like an origin story, reconnects past and present, but in doing so, it also offers a critique of a competitive, liberal democratic culture. Critics of this competitive culture frequently highlight how it contrasts with older social orders, as Gardner does: "Democracy strives to replace what once appeared as a 'natural' and 'divinely legislated' order with a 'cultural' or 'aesthetic' one in which individuals are free to invent themselves, a virtual reality predicated on individual will or imagination" (95). This kind of self-invention is embodied by the villain Syndrome, who believes he can become a Super, without having superpowers, through his technological inventions. Syndrome's villainy is based on the same cultural logic of narcissism and competition that drives the other white, male characters, but Syndrome expresses his identity through his techno-entrepreneurism.

Before becoming the aptly named Syndrome, Buddy Pine was a boy who believed that he was as capable as any Super, but when Mr. Incredible rejects his assistance, Pine's inability to join the ranks of the Supers and enjoy their glory becomes a desire to destroy them. Pine's envy is about the desire of the Other, or in Žižek's phrasing, "The subject does not envy the Other's possession of the prized object as such, but rather the way the Other is able to *enjoy* this object, which is why it is not enough for him simply to steal and thus gain possession of the object" (emphasis in original, *Violence* 90).[13] It is this kind of envy that drives Pine to become Syndrome, and it is grounded in a sense of equal entitlement to the enjoyment of recognition. The subject who presumes she is equal to or better than the Other is disappointed when her accomplishments and capabilities and enjoyment appear as somehow less than the Other's. Envy,

then, can be understood as a subject's self-criticism redirected toward the Other. The Other operates as a reminder of one's failure—a kind of inverted narcissism. Envy, in this formulation at least, indicates a belief in an illusory, level playing field in which the construction of one's identity overly relies on comparative logic. The examination of the injustices and inequities of the system do not come into focus through this logic. After all, a critique or reformation of the system would likely not help the envious subject attain the enjoyment that they seek.

For Syndrome, satisfying his envy takes priority over his grandiose scheme for power. This is rendered obvious through jokes about villains having the bad habit of "monologing" and revealing their evil plots to the heroes. In the film, villain-monologues are not included solely to inform audiences and generate suspense. A villain driven by envy takes far more pleasure in depriving his nemesis of heroic glory than in acquiring the material rewards of his victory. After he captures Mr. Incredible, Syndrome discloses in a brief monologue that once he has destroyed all of the Supers, and he grows tired of being the world's only superhero, he will retire and sell all of his technologies to the masses. This will ensure that everyone can be super, which, Syndrome reminds the audience, means that no one will be super. This plan threatens to exacerbate the nihilism and narcissistic competition of society through the democratization of advanced personal technology. But Syndrome will not consider implementing this plan until his enjoyment is satisfied under a more hierarchical system with him at the top. It is difficult not to read this as a critique of techno-utopian positions that argue that personal computing and networked technologies will enable individuals to pursue their own independent interests while simultaneously creating a self-organizing, democratic system.

Syndrome's plan is also a loose reversal of the conclusion to Alan Moore's comic-book series *Watchmen*.[14] In the superhero comic's alternate-Cold War setting, the character

Ozymandias creates a fictional, alien threat to resolve the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. He effectively engineers a giant monster that explodes in New York City killing half of the city's population. To protect his plan, Ozymandias initiates an effort to hunt down retired superheroes, but his devastating plan is ultimately meant to re-organize society through the creation of a new myth—an alien threat. Political theorists from Plato to Machiavelli have claimed myths to be fundamental to social order and law, and the comic suggests that a foundational myth is precisely what postmodern society lacks (Paik 23-25). Syndrome's myth-making effort fails, of course. His plan is to unleash a giant, destructive robot into the city of Metroville to terrorize the defenseless public, then, defeat the robot singlehandedly, establishing him as the lone remaining superhero. As one might expect, the giant, artificially intelligent robot turns on its creator and escapes his control. The Supers, then, must defeat the robot and restore social order.

Syndrome is a character whose personal motivations cloud his reasoning. His envy is based in the comparative, competitive logic that pervades the animated world of the film, and his proposal to sell his technologies to enable everyone to be super would exacerbate this condition. The return of the Supers to defeat Syndrome's robot is the film's resolution to this competitive cultural order. Further, the portrayal of Syndrome's technological genius as somehow less intrinsic than the powers of the Supers supports the impression that the Supers are part of an older, more stable, and less abstract order. This neglects the idea of technogenesis which posits that humans have always developed technologically in a kind of creative negotiation with their environment (Hayles, *How We Think* 10). The use of implements external to the body for thinking and acting is an old human tradition in itself. But this technological tradition, caricatured by Syndrome, seems too protean and even too democratic to lead society to return to

a more stable, less aesthetic order. Unlike natural superpowers, technological powers are shareable.

Possibly betraying its own origin in a technology company with many ties to Silicon Valley's techno-utopian culture, *The Incredibles* finds the democratic promise of technology as more problematic than utopian. The democratization of access to technologies, the personalization of technology prominent in the electronic era, feeds both aesthetic identity and governmentality. It gives individuals more tools for self-invention and more opportunities to develop skills that can earn social and market recognition. At the same time, this technological skills race and competitive marketplace for self-expression generates a vast infrastructure for the maintenance of populations—as consumers and as citizenry. Perhaps this insight is afforded to animators with experience building the mundane through fantastic technological tools whether they acknowledge it or not.

The Supers as characters relieve the burden of a "cultural" or "aesthetic" order in which differences, and the incommensurability they produce, require people to make difficult judgments about how to organize society and encourage people to make constant comparisons between self and other. The Supers' differences are more pronounced, "natural," and their obvious superiority relieves to an extent the agonistic culture that generates envious personalities like that of Syndrome. The hope within abandoning an aesthetic order plagued by individualist self-invention is that doing so will diminish the feeling that individual freedoms inevitably contribute to governance and the maintenance of systemic structures.

It is through the caricatured animation of the Supers with their incredible bodies and powers that the restrictiveness of a liberal order comes into greater relief. Dash is an obvious example of this once again. His desire to act out and be his best, while deeply personal for him

and his sense of identity, is in a substantive way not about him but about reproducing a cultural

norm of competition and comparative distinction. Nonetheless, Dash's excessive speed could

actually disrupt this norm more than reinforce it. He would no longer be a boy with whom others

would compete and to whom others would compare themselves, but perhaps become a godlike

superhero to which other boys may be glad just to have some affiliation. In a strange instance of

what Žižek might call "over-orthodoxy" the Supers' caricatured bodies and fantastic

superpowers challenge the norms of the social and physical environment by following the

cultural norms about competition and comparative distinction (*Plague of Fantasies* 99).[15] They

implement one set of norms so thoroughly that they destroy other norms. If society would simply

let them play its game by following the same rules as everyone else, they would break the game.

   The character Elastigirl takes this point in a more progressive direction. Even though the

roles of the women characters, Violet and Elastigirl, expand significantly over the course of the

film, Elastigirl maintains a rather stereotypical woman's role. In short, Mr. Incredible risks

losing his family over individual pursuits while Elastigirl risks life and limb to maintain family

relationships. These are typical, gendered notions of individual freedom—the man fears the

burden of relationships and the women fears isolation from losing relationships. That said, the

Elastigirl character's redeeming elements involve her departure from the melodramatic space of

the film, in which her character suffers from paranoia, confusion, and doubt in her own

judgment.[16] When Elastigirl uses her powers to rescue Mr. Incredible, her character challenges a

variety of norms and conventions, both physical and social. As Elastigirl's body takes on

alternative shapes—e.g. a parachute or boat—her character shifts from that of a woman subject

to melodramatic norms to a more cartoonish action hero. This does not mean her body is no

longer sexed or constructed as a woman's, even in her limited capacity as a character. If

anything, animated cartoons demonstrate how identity construction perseveres during metamorphoses and deliberate performances. A woman can turn into another animal altogether and still retain her character's identity. As long as the narrative and the other characters help point out who has turned into what, audiences rarely lose track of identity through metamorphosis.

This construction of fictional character identity demonstrates how identity is much more than the visual presentation of a body, which resonates with Judith Butler's comments on the discursive process of materialization. For Butler, a body does not materialize through deliberate performative action but through a discursive process that involves norms. Understanding the matter (in both senses) of bodies occurs through the reiterative and referential activity of discourse (i.e. citationality). In short, bodily attributes (such as sex) require repeated references to earlier instantiations to build on authority and give meaning to the norm's current usage. It is not that bodies don't exist without discourse and culture, but they are less thinkable and communicable without discourse. The reiteration involved in the materialization of bodies, however, is a contingent and vulnerable process, which enables the possibility of new formations. Even though materialization may be in the service of heterosexual norms, rendering some bodies as outside and excluded from cultural intelligibility and from qualifying as life, this materialization provides the potential for change (Butler xi-xxx).

Elastigirl's body materializes differently from a human, woman's body as she deploys her powers; these sequences rely on a different series of visual references. That is, in addition to her body becoming a parachute and then a boat, her body takes on the characteristics of other elastic materials. This is part of the suspense of her action sequences—we don't know how far she can stretch and if the diegesis will permit her injury. Given the fantastic-mundane theme, it

seems possible for the character to over-extend or damage her body. In this way, the character

Elastigirl highlights the indeterminacy of the rules governing the movements of her body, which

in turn challenges the rules governing the discursive concept of "a woman's body." By visually

evoking materials and images that seem other to a woman's body while maintaining her identity

as a woman with a body, the character Elastigirl exaggerates aesthetic experience, which disrupts

the normal process of materialization.[17] Basically, instead of a normal materialization, Elastigirl

presents an aesthetic materialization that confuses the rules about the concepts and references

that we should use to understand her body.

The example of Elastigirl helps illuminate how the logic of exceptionality raised by the

fantastic-mundane dialectic is served analogously by the film's animation aesthetics. The

designations of fantastic and mundane, or normal and abnormal for that matter, always include a

level of aesthetic indeterminacy. Perhaps Butler's point is precisely that materialization, because

it is discursive, always contains aesthetic indeterminacy. Again, such indeterminacy is explicitly

presented through the youngest Super, Jack-Jack, who as an infant has not yet disclosed his

superpowers. During the final moments of the film, Jack-Jack demonstrates that he can morph

into a host of shapes and bodies. The natality[18] embodied by this character captures the

unpredictability and disruption figured by superheroes who not only challenge social rules and

conventions, but demonstrate the aesthetic experience of discovering what a body can do within

a world. The Supers in *The Incredibles* at once disrupt the narcissistic, competitive, and aesthetic

culture by reintroducing a more hierarchical social structure, but the Supers themselves also

demonstrate aesthetic experience and self-invention as they discover how to use their powers and

challenge conceptions about what a body is and can do. While superpowers in the superhero

genre are rationalized as instruments for doing superhero work, the dialectic themes and

aesthetics of *The Incredibles* reveal the instability of this rationalization. The young superhero does not necessarily assign a purpose to his abilities, nor does the elder superhero restrict herself to bodily norms. This contradictory formulation presented by the film helps deconstruct the competitive, individualistic culture to which critics on both the Right and Left are sensitive (in this case Gardner and Žižek respectively). The point is that the Supers' bodies and the film's fantasy spaces serve both the reproduction of norms and the disruption of these very same norms.

The deconstructive analytic used by Butler and Agamben is an appropriate tool for analyzing *The Incredibles* given the mundane-fantastic theme articulated by Brad Bird and by the film itself. The Supers emerge as characters who are both mundane and fantastic, and their exceptionality illuminates the contradictions that constitute the competitive, individualistic culture that the film depicts. The appearance of an exceptional individual, such as a superhero with super powers, presupposes a reality full of individuals who do not exceed the norms of that reality; they are not exceptional. The exceptional individual, then, provides a referential anchor for a social order that clarifies the distinction between normal and exceptional. The exceptional individual reconfirms the norms governing the non-exceptional. The character Dash cannot complain about the category designated by the term "special" losing its applicability without referring to a time when it was applicable to people like him. Elastigirl and Frozone, however, do not complain because their history has a different set of references (a fictional history that intersects with our real history), and this enables their superhero activities to challenge social norms.

This point counters Bukatman's claim by showing how the popular fascination with superheroes can be read as a popular desire to see exceptionality in order to stabilize and define the non-exceptional. Thus, critics are bound to find questions about the definition of the human

addressed by the superhero genre and this is not too obvious to be significant. Within this genre, every instance of the superhuman at once reinforces the definition of human, but also contains the possibility of challenging it (e.g. Elastigirl, Violet, and Frozone). This is an aesthetic activity, and serious criticism of the genre can help interrogate what its aesthetic spaces are reproducing and inventing. For instance, *The Incredibles* may counter the techno-utopian ideal embedded in fantastic-mundane technology, but however amusing the family of Supers appears, and however emancipatory their aesthetic spaces seem, their obvious powers are not ours; we are left to the fate of Syndrome, Gilbert Huph, and Edna Mode—relying on technology, the market, or vicariousness to satisfy our individualist desires.

In Defense of Politics, Sensation, and the New (*Ratatouille*)

The world of *Ratatouille* explores how sensorial events, such as fine dining and physical comedy, contribute to radical changes to communities and individuals. The film presents representations of sensation and explores how sensation disrupts representation.[1] That is, how the everyday aesthetic experience of sensation can disrupt and reconfigure the systems of meaning that a person employs to understand the world around them. Like other Pixar productions, *Ratatouille* participates in the cultural transition to digital media and rapidly advancing intelligent technologies by presenting allegorical narratives, but *Ratatouille* is distinct in its focus on sensation and mediation. Further, its explicit concern with introducing and defending "the new" can be read as a political allegory for including formerly excluded elements within democracy.[2] The category of "the new" also pertains to Pixar's historical position at the forefront of an expanding animation industry. These allegorical readings are supported by the film's three themes—"anyone can cook," "the new needs friends," and "change is nature." Through these themes, the film expresses how sensation, creativity, and vulnerability are central to transitions to new media and new democratic formations.

This thesis relies on an understanding of sensation as a form of aesthetic experience and aesthetic experience as having a political dimension. However, this treatment of sensation differs from the *anima minima* described by Lyotard, in which aesthetic sensation at its most basic level is an unrepresentable infinite that amounts to an ethical connection with the Other.[3] Instead of such a sublime effect, sensation in *Ratatouille* approaches what Jacques Rancière refers to as dissensus. That is, it disrupts a given social and perceptual order determining what bodies are

allowed where and what they are allowed to do. Rancière refers to this as the aesthetic dimension

of politics and it illuminates how *Ratatouille* can function as an allegory about democracy.

Democracy, for Rancière, is not simply a state ruled by the many or by a sovereign

collective of representatives, but more precisely involves the activity of disrupting what he calls

the police order and altering a given distribution of the sensible through instances of dissensus.

The police order refers to the forces sustaining the hierarchical organization of society. The

partitioning or distribution of the sensible refers to "the implicit law governing the sensible order

that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the

modes of perception within which these are inscribed;" it determines who or what is perceptible

(Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics* 85). Dissensual events interrupt a given distribution of the

sensible and enable a reconfiguration of perception, or what is perceptible, and thereby the

coordinates of any political debate. In democracy, dissensus neutralizes the logic of the *arkhè*,

i.e. when "the exercise of power is anticipated in the capacity to exercise it, and this capacity in

turn is verified by its exercise" (Rancière, "Aesthetic Dimension" 9); in other words, because

you can, you will, and because you did, you can. This logic legitimates hierarchy and the activity

of the police order. Paradoxically, democracy calls for the dismissal of dissymmetrical positions

and disrupts this logic.

Rancière writes, "Democracy is this astounding principle: those who rule do so on the

grounds that there is no reason why some persons should rule over others except for the fact that

there is no reason." This structure facilitates political community. There are many ethical

structures within this community where one party dominates another, but because the democratic

principle exceeds all of the other principles governing social organization, a political community

develops.[4] This is what Rancière refers to as the democratic supplement. The demos supplements

dissymmetrical structures. In regard to the demos, Rancière writes, "I have called it the part of those without part, which does not mean the underdogs but means anyone. The power of the demos is the power of whoever" ("Aesthetic Dimension" 10). The "anyone" of the demos designates a heterological element but one that is endlessly substitutable. In Rancière's formulation, the ethical order, the police, which operates by *arkhè* –logic, is supplemented by the demos and the notion that anyone can rule. Democracy "can be said to exist only when those who have no title to power, the *dēmos*, intervene as the dividing force that disrupts the *ochlos*," i.e. the community obsessed with pursuing its unification (Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics* 83-4).

As will be shown, the proposition that "anyone can" is central to *Ratatouille* and contributes to the sensorial disruption and reorganization experienced by the characters. The emphasis on sensorial effects, transmission over representation, is not new to cinema, but in this case, the animated feature builds on animation's tradition of addressing aesthetic experience explicitly. In order for fantastic animation to disrupt realism, there must be a given amount of realism in the animation beforehand, effected through representations, images that are recognizable and bear a noticeable resemblance to something else. This ensures that animation maintains the ability to interrogate and disrupt the conventions of realism in moving image media (Telotte 134-5). Animation in such cases remains representational, but the humor and pleasure can derive from the breaks with representation and resemblance—when the animation breaks rules and conventions. In light of this, *Ratatouille* holds a prominent place in Pixar's *oeuvre* since it is about a new technical and bodily aesthetic that radically reconfigures the way individuals and communities function, and within that narrative, sensation provides the critical moments of disruption that lead to reconfiguration. This narrative continues Pixar's tradition of

reflexivity in that it too can be read as an allegory for the sensorial and social effects of new digital technologies and computer animation in particular.

Ratatouille presents a world not dissimilar from our own that is radically changed by forms of the new. The first form is the rat protagonist Remy, who can comprehend human language and has highly developed senses, which enables him to pursue his passion of becoming a chef. Then there is the unusual partnership that Remy forms with the human Linguini, a struggling garbage boy working at the former five-star restaurant, Gusteau's, in Paris. After Linguini and Remy learn that they can communicate, that Remy is a talented cook, and that Linguini's job is in jeopardy, they develop an arrangement in which Remy controls Linguini's movement by pulling on his red, curly hair. Through this Remy-Linguini apparatus, the two become a great chef and temporarily restore Gusteau's to its former glory. The food cooked by the pair serves as a third form of the new that amazes patrons and leads to changing the life and philosophy of notorious food critic Anton Ego.

Anyone Can Cook and the Politics of Sensation

The democratic thematization in *Ratatouille* is developed through the cookbook written by Chef Aguste Gusteau ("gusto"), titled *Anyone Can Cook*. Sensation is critical to the anyone-can-cook ideology propagated by Gusteau; it provides it with a sense of fairness and democracy since everyone can participate. The idea that anyone can cook generates the possibility for Remy the rat's adventure and the social changes it initiates. The claim that cooking is not reserved for a certain class or artistic elite is controversial amongst the food critics in the world of the film, but it garners hope in Remy who learns to read and to cook through Gusteau's cookbook. Chef Gusteau, who apparently died after receiving a bad review from food critic Anton Ego, becomes an apparition of Remy's imagination and guides Remy when he is separated from his family and

clan. Thus, Gusteau's philosophy literally brings Remy into the kitchen, and it is the Gusteau philosophy that keeps him there.

Beyond the development of Remy's character, the anyone-can-cook ideology informs the drama of the film's kitchen sequences. When Remy makes a delicious soup that is attributed to the garbage boy Linguini, head chef Skinner fires Linguini for cooking without permission. But since the customers love the soup, Colette—Linguini's love interest—reminds Skinner and the other kitchen staff of Gusteau's maxim "anyone can cook." The reminder elicits believing smiles from the staff and forces the villainous Skinner to allow Linguini to stay. Linguini then pursues a partnership with Remy, the real cook. In a later scene, Colette relates to Linguini the diverse backgrounds represented by the different cooks at Gusteau's restaurant. Apparently, the Gusteau philosophy had a significant influence in bringing a diverse range of people and backgrounds into the same kitchen, which includes Colette, the only female cook (and one of the few female characters in Pixar). These scenes demonstrate how Gusteau's anyone-can-cook philosophy serves as the ideology holding the kitchen together. This ideology is something felt and cherished by the cooks and it is tied to sensation—Remy's soup saves Linguini's job through its deliciousness.

In proper ideological form, "anyone can cook" is a reduction that holds together inconsistencies. The food critics despise it because they interpret it literally and do not believe that just anyone can cook. Explicitly, Gusteau's cookbook and anyone-can-cook ideology set up the action of the film through a basic syllogism that challenges the elitism of the critics: if anyone can cook, then a rat can be a chef. Or, taking the film as a political allegory, if we live in a free democratic society, then anyone can be…anything. Part of the film's tension comes from discerning how precisely to interpret the reductive mantra "anyone can cook," which becomes

differentiated by Anton Ego from the more egalitarian *we all can cook*. Ego reinterprets the

message in his final review to mean that a great cook can come from anywhere, which

encourages equal treatment despite known differences and inequalities because there is no means

of determining who is and is not a fine cook beforehand. The unknown future, potentiality,

serves as the equalizer, because it creates a context of ceaseless substitutability, which is

precisely how Rancière describes the logic of the demos. In the case of *Ratatouille* however,

there is one definitive measure of status in addition to this form of equality through

substitutability: the sensation of taste.

Part of the theoretical appeal of thinking about sensation, including taste, is that it seems

to consist of unrepresentable intensities that affect the body and require invention/creation to

express or communicate. Sensation thus escapes predetermining structures (social, linguistic,

political), and therein, sensation creates space for a person to reconfigure their associational life

(Panagia, *Political Life* 2-3). The immediacy of sensorial experience is crucial in this formulation

because it does not allow for any cognitive work of comparison or analogy, no predetermined

structure of sense or reason is used to evaluate or determine the use of the sensorial experience.

For political theorist Davide Panagia, this quality makes sensation a kind of aesthetic experience

and he traces the immediacy of sensation back to Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgment and

discussion of the agreeableness of sensory pleasure. Akin to judgments of beauty, sensory

pleasure is not governed by prefigured concepts and effects subjects immediately, arresting

attention and disrupting interest.[5] Panagia explains how this disruption of interest is a kind of

disarticulation that contributes to a feeling of freedom:

Rather than the disinterested subject being a version of the impartial observer, what Kant offers his readers is a subject whose interest at the moment of sensory experience is disarticulated, as are his or her conditions of subjectivity.

The feeling of freedom that arises from aesthetic experience occurs because there is no governing principle in the beautiful that commands a submission to its mode of attention. (*Political Life* 26)

The result then, is a radically democratic project, as Panagia describes in terms apropos to *Ratatouille*:

For Kant, anyone can experience beauty precisely because no one can determine its conditions of existence. This is the egalitarian promise of Kantian aesthetics: both the cook and the critic are afforded the occasion for aesthetic experience and neither the cook nor the critic has the privilege of safeguarding the conditions for that experience. Taste is available, for Kant, regardless of privilege. (*Political Life* 31)[6]

Proposing that anyone can cook and that anyone can experience beauty puts the cook and the critic on equal grounds. It is not the case that one provides the rules for the other, or that there are any rules governing aesthetic judgments, and it is the immediacy and disruption of sensation that makes this evident.

In *Ratatouille*, the critic who tastes the first soup that Remy illicitly made at Gusteau's writes in her review that "the soup was a revelation." Her review indicates that tasting the soup changed her life, at least her work life, and she writes that Gusteau's restaurant regained the attention of French food critics. The sensation serves as an event that ripples outward through the critic and her work, as well as through the cooks, for whom taste is a test of merit. But the most important taste event in *Ratatouille* occurs when the food critic Anton Ego comes to Gusteau's to

evaluate the cooking of Chef Linguini (the Remy-Linguini apparatus). Boldly, Remy decides to make ratatouille for Ego, even though ratatouille is referred to as a "peasant's dish" by fellow chef, Colette. When Anton Ego eats the dish he has a flashback. The flashback depicts a nostalgic, country scene where the child Anton is comforted by a bowl of his mother's ratatouille. Thus, the "peasant's dish" reminds Anton Ego of his humble beginnings before he was a famous, wealthy food critic, and they reconnect him to the feelings of comfort generated by food prepared by his mother.[7] This Proustian moment motivates Anton Ego to insist on meeting the chef who prepared his meal. After the customers are gone, Linguini and Colette reveal Remy the rat, the Remy-Linguini apparatus, and how Remy prepared the ratatouille for Ego. In this sequence the character Anton Ego experiences multiple moments of disfiguration and reconfiguration of his sensorial being. After he is disrupted by the ratatouille's flavor, Ego wants to meet and thank the chef. His character shifts from authoritarian judge to the grateful and inquisitive receiver of a gift. A second moment of disfiguration occurs when Ego meets Remy the rat, which radically alters Ego's theory of fine cooking, and obviously, the hierarchical stratification between animals and humans and kitchens.

In short, *Ratatouille* demonstrates how sensation, as a catalyst working in conjunction with a democratic ideology, initiates processes of change; it makes way for the new. After the sensorial experience disrupts a given historico-cultural organization of the senses, a new organization (which can include memories of the past), with revised narratives must be formed. The fictional world of the film allows for similar but radical and fantastic changes to develop with little resistance. As a narrative feature marketed to children and adults, many expected complexities are omitted. For instance, the villain Skinner is depicted working alone in his pursuit of profit through mass produced, globally distributed frozen foods. The culture

supporting Skinner's behavior is left out, although many viewers might recognize it as a cartoon of their own global capitalist culture. The Skinner character is doubly problematic given that he is a villain with potentially racist coding—he is a small, brownish man with a large nose—and this further distracts from the critical work of analyzing the systemic conditions of Skinner's greed. Without the presence of these systemic conditions, the democratic ideology of anyone can cook never becomes co-opted by capitalist formulations—anyone can become wealthy, develop a successful business, or enjoy being a powerful consumer. As an animated film, *Ratatouille* is limited by its Hollywood, global capitalist context. Thus, the film faces the challenge of presenting a narrative about newness while being sure to follow certain entertainment rules and cinematic conventions.

The aesthetic aspects of the film's animation, however, explore sensations beyond taste that challenge conventional organizations of bodies and sensation. It is true that the realistic but stylized depictions of food aim to look appealing, fresh, and tasty. These depictions aim to resemble firsthand perceptions of food and photographic images of food, but they also involve exaggerations of shape and size, and highly stylized lighting simulations.[8] Beyond the look of food, the novelty of the animation relies on the transmission and translation of touch, coordination, and the sensorial experiences of cooking and eating. Here I am referring to the Remy-Linguini apparatus as a gimmick that entertains audiences, but also serves as a possible metaphor for mediated creativity and identity. Remy's aptitude for cooking is transmitted through Linguini. Linguini's body transmits the feel of working in the kitchen to Remy. But Remy's keen senses and cooking instincts are translated into human movements through Linguini, which can be compared to the processes of digitization and programming that occur through a human-computer interface (HCI). In fact, Pixar's proprietary software used for the

"rigging" process in computer animation is called Marionette, alluding to the similarities

between puppetry and manipulating digital figures (Finch 88).

The Remy-Linguini apparatus can be understood as a meditation on mediated

existence—whether creating moving images through computer programs or experiencing the

world through recorded images. Both characters' retraining through sensation correlates with

understanding technical media as extensions of the human body and its senses. Their retraining

resonates with the reorientation of the body during the computer age as the eye becomes a little

less dominant with the rise of interactive media and gaming that rely heavily upon the hands and

coordination between screen-viewing and sensorimotor knowledge. This does not mean that the

animation is no longer cinematic. As film theorists have noted, cinematic expression has

functioned through its presentation of shared structures of embodied existence (Elsaesser and

Hagener 117). The common experiences of embodied action and perspective shared by

spectators provides sensorimotor and conceptual knowledge that lends itself to comprehending

the moving images on screen. The onscreen presentation of the Remy-Linguini apparatus, as a

coordinated set of caricatured bodies, at once relies upon embodied experience familiar to

audiences but also challenges bodily norms.

Figure 11 The Remy-Linguini apparatus.

The history of modernization has consisted of technological developments that alter the human interface with the world, and *Ratatouille* presents a localized narrative of such an epistemological adjustment. Consider the substantial series of scenes devoted to depicting how Remy and Linguini learn the kinesthetics of their apparatus, and how to cook through it. With Remy directing on his head, Linguini cooks in his apartment while wearing a blindfold. The physical comedy is here in full force, as the pair tumbles into the refrigerator, as food is tossed out the window, and as Remy is doused with wine and tomatoes. It takes some getting used to, but the pair is unbelievably adept at adapting to their re-organ-ization. Linguini remarks that his body responds "involuntarily" to Remy's tugs, and with practice, Remy learns precisely how to mobilize that body with precise coordination. As figure 11 shows, the main characters in *Ratatouille* experience a mirror stage comparable to those in *Toy Story* and *Monsters, Inc.* Here the characters view their new integrated bodies and identity; they are synced.

The film indulges in Remy's point of view from atop Linguini; it is clear that part of the cinematic pleasure of the film involves participating in reimagining the world through the Remy-Linguini apparatus. As Tom Gunning notes, cinematic movement conveys a sense of presence and reality apart from indexicality, and this prompts a level of spectator participation:

> We experience motion on the screen in a different way than we look at still images, and this difference explains our participation in the film image, a sense of perceptual richness or *immediate* involvement in the image. (emphasis mine, "Moving Away" 42).

This quality becomes exaggerated in many animation sequences, including those depicting the Remy-Linguini apparatus. Linguini's body moves with an alien speed and coordination entirely new to him, and in addition to Remy's new view, the rat gains a new kind of agency as well.

Although he is not able to touch the food, Remy is free to see, smell, and create through

Linguini. The "immediacy" of watching movement experienced by an audience is paired with

the immediate sensorial experiences of the characters.

To further extend the mediation metaphor, the Remy-Linguini apparatus can be

considered a figuration of the tension between immediacy and hypermediacy that persists

through media history (Bolter and Grusin). Immediacy, that is, instant/transparent access to

phenomena, is typically invoked by representational images that are so precise and instantly

comprehensible that the medium is overlooked. Immediacy has a slightly different function in

Panagia's treatment of sensation as it contributes to total disruption in which former interests

cease and new interests begin. In this formulation, sensation functions less as a moment without

mediation and more as a moment when the mode of mediation changes. This reconfiguration is

akin to a moment of dissensus in which there are opportunities to perceive and acknowledge new

persons and possibilities. Meanwhile, hypermediacy, that is, engagement with a medium that

announces itself through its multiple signs and functions, initially applies to the complex and

dynamic contact between Remy and Linguini. But once they master their apparatus and it

becomes second nature, the kitchen, with its multiplicity of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes

becomes the hypermediated environment par excellence.

This development can be compared to the transition within cinema during the advent of

digital production technologies. After all, *Ratatouille* was released in 2007, the year D.N.

Rodowick published *The Virtual Life of Film*. In Rodowick's text, which details the medium-

specific distinctions between the filmic moving image and the digital moving image, there is a

definite tension between film's seemingly immediate purchase on the past and the future

orientation of digital methods. Rodowick argues that through the continuous isomorphic

recording offered by motion photography, film presents duration in a mode that digital cinema cannot (*Virtual Life* 104). While digital photography can certainly perform those duration-sensitive tasks once performed by analog photography (e.g. a race decided in a "photo-finish"), it is also true that the transition to digital methods and tools generates sensations that can be disorienting. The Remy-Linguini apparatus serves as a profound metaphor because of its emphasis on sensation and its emphasis on the process of becoming. Cinema, in this metaphorical and animated treatment, persists but not without becoming different from what it once was. Implicit in the openness of aesthetic experience to the new is the notion of becoming. In this way, cinema and other media are animated by the aesthetic experiences that they afford.

In *Ratatouille*, the hybridized subjectivity generated by the Remy-Linguini apparatus is enabled and organized by sensation. The two characters function through the coordination of movement and touch, which results in a cinematic mode that attempts to alter the hierarchical order of the optic, the kinetic, and the haptic. Further, within the plot of the film, the Remy-Linguini apparatus is secured by the sensations of the critics and customers who circulate positive reviews and continue to order dishes prepared by chef Linguini. Each taste event contributes to validating the characters' partnership. The hybridized subjectivity of the Remy-Linguini apparatus emerges through the ideology of Gusteau's cookbook, which hinges on the sensations of customers and critics. These sensations, which are democratic and unregulated by determining structures, are translated into material and cultural capital through the restaurant's success. These material conditions created by the Remy-Linguini apparatus then work to maintain the apparatus. In this context, sensation begins processes of solidification and organization once it disrupts and destabilizes the preceding organization. While the taste of the food prepared by Remy alters the worlds of customers and food critics, it also begins the process

of solidifying and perpetuating the conditions that brought it about. For the sake of reproduction and thereby profit, Linguini keeps his job and partners with Remy. Along these lines, a negative sensation, food that tastes bad, would initiate a different organization; one that avoided repetition.

The Remy-Linguini apparatus suggests considering the coordination of bodies and how the movement and touch between bodies contributes to the production and distribution of aesthetic experiences, which in a Parisian restaurant are also commercial experiences. Considering the Remy-Linguini apparatus in the context of Paris and a realistic restaurant raises the stakes for what Remy and Linguini become. Their becoming challenges the order and organizations of that reality. The Remy-Linguini apparatus challenges the distribution of the sensible in the world of the film and presents to viewers not only an example of dissensus but also a cinematic sensorial experience. Reading the Remy-Linguini apparatus metaphorically illuminates how this unconventional relationship resonates with the human-computer and human-cinema relationships that typify modern life.

The film posits taste as an idealized, impartial judgment of merit that forms the basis of the values at Gusteau's restaurant and in the French culinary community in the film. This basis, at its core, is sensorial and irrational, which is precisely how a rat ends up cooking in a restaurant. Once the democratic theme is presupposed (believed in), as it is by the cooks in Gusteau's restaurant, then the restaurant as a political system is ripe for the entrance of the new. The film is an example of a universal or ideal content becoming concrete. It gains an ironic tension in that the ideal content (anyone can cook, taste defines cooking, and taste as a sensation is democratic and fair) is more realistic/believable than the concrete content (Remy the rat is a great chef).

The film plays with the democratic quality of sensation by depicting two communities that value Remy's talents differently. Remy's rat family, or clan, could not care less about his cooking ability. His heightened sense of smell and taste is only valuable to them as a means of detecting poison. Remy's cooking does not provide any of them with the pleasurable sensations that would prompt a reorganizing of their community, even though Remy repeatedly tries to teach his brother, Emile, how to appreciate different flavors and combinations of flavors. On the other hand, the human community that Remy is covertly exposed to does appreciate his cooking. In accordance with a degree of realism, the rats' bodies work differently from the humans and therefore, have different sensations which results in a different social organization.

Remy's senses and the sensations that his cooking evokes, correspond with the human community more than the rat community. Thus, before the hybrid subjectivity of the Remy-Linguini apparatus and its reorganization of sensation in the film, the character Remy is already hybridized by his anthropomorphism. His hybridity is not purely intrinsic but is cultivated by Gusteau's cookbook. In anyone-can-cook ideology, sensation serves as an impartial judge that can accommodate hybrid subjects such as Remy and the Remy-Linguini apparatus. In Rancierian terms, the hybrids in the film persist through the category of the demos. Remy and then the Remy-Linguini apparatus are heterological elements that reshape society through the categories provided by a democracy organized around aesthetic experience. Sensation is at the center of the universal content of the ideology and therefore, it is at the center of the social organization that holds it. Further, the metaphorical reading of the Remy-Linguini apparatus helps us recognize how our creative, sensorial relationships with media participate in constituting the political landscape of everyday life. In the world of the film, if a new partnership between a human and a

nonhuman presents pleasurable sensations that benefit a business and community, then it is likely to thrive.

<u>The Discovery and Defense of the New, or, "the new needs friends"</u>

Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* begins by describing the paradoxical quality of becoming through the example of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. In the story, Alice repeatedly grows or shrinks or travels from place to place. She is either changing from what she was or she is changing into what she will become. This becoming unhinges or destabilizes her identity; she literally loses her proper name (Deleuze, *Logic of Sense* 1-3). The world of *Ratatouille* is not that of Alice, but there are characters that change radically. Remy moves from being part of a clan of rats living in the attic of a small house in rural France to forming a pact with a human, to cooking in a five-star restaurant and living in Paris. Likewise, Linguini and Anton Ego change in social position, occupation, and they both change in their relation to animals as well. We have discussed sensation thus far, but the aspects of becoming and animality provide the film with the central tension between the animal world and the human world. As implied in the foregoing discussion, the immediacy of sensation has its democratic interpretations, but it does not account for the instability already present within bodily and social organizations.

First, here is a more precise definition of "becoming" that Deleuze and Felix Guattari develop in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

> Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the functions one fulfills, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes. (emphasis in original, 272)

In *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice's body, and the many organs, tissues, and particles that constitute

it, continually changes; the parts are not able to maintain stable coordinates and relations with the

world that they are moving through, expanding and shrinking in. When "becoming" is advanced

as a concept in *A Thousand Plateaus*, it fills the book's largest chapter "1730: Becoming-Intense,

Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible." The passage above highlights the processes of

extraction and the relations of movement essential to becoming. Becoming dissolves the solidity

of identity through a subject's acquisition of components, traits, or functions from some other

entity. Granted, this acquisition is not an exchange of parts or resemblance or imitation or

metaphor; it is not representational. Since all bodies consist of a multiplicity of parts, Deleuze

and Guattari consider a body an assemblage, and they understand an assemblage by what it does,

its affects, not what it represents. Further, "becomings are minoritarian," meaning that they

involve a move away from power and privilege: "in this sense women, children, but also

animals, plants and molecules, are minoritarian." Thus, becomings pass through each other; one

must first become-woman, then –child, -animal, and so on toward becoming-imperceptible

(Deleuze and Guattari 291).

To clarify these definitions, Deleuze and Guattari provide many examples from music,

literature, and film, and apropos *Ratatouille*, one of the most lucid recurring examples deals with

rats. The "Becoming" chapter begins with the example of the 1972 film *Willard* which is about

the character Willard's precariously close relationship with a pack of rats, and the chapter returns

multiple times to rat examples to illuminate the concept of becoming-animal. Leonard Lawlor

has followed this recurring rat motif through Deleuze and Guattari's *oeuvre* in an effort to

develop an argument against naïve positions of human dominance. In "Following the Rats:

Becoming-Animal in Deleuze and Guattari," Lawlor describes how becoming-minor happens

through aging. That is, as we age, small changes (in our bodies, our social lives, our environment, etc.) open up cracks for the new to enter. Becoming is not the life changing moment where one crosses a threshold or hits rock-bottom. Instead, becoming is a gradual process that moves toward an unknown. Lawlor recognizes that successful becoming results in producing written work, i.e. writing, a map, or a drawing (170-178). To arrive at this conclusion, Lawlor works through another key example that Deleuze and Guattari refer to: "The Lord Chandos Letter" by Hugo Von Hofmannsthal.

Set in the seventeenth century, Lord Chandos writes a letter shortly after he has poisoned and witnessed the death of a whole pack of rats. When he writes the letter he claims to no longer be himself, he is older, and something from the rat experience has gotten inside of him. This causes him to write differently (Lawlor 179-180). Deleuze and Guattari call this "writing like a rat":

> Hofmannsthal, or rather Lord Chandos, becomes fascinated with a 'people' of dying rats, and it is in him, through him, in the interstices of his disrupted self that the 'soul of the animal bares its teeth at monsterous fate': not pity, but *unnatural participation*. Then a strange imperative wells up in him: either stop writing, or write like a rat…If the writer is a sorcerer, it is because writing is a becoming, writing is traversed by strange becomings that are not becomings-writer, but becomings-rat. (emphasis in original, 240)

The Lord Chandos character finds himself in a predicament where his only means of proceeding with his letter is to "write like a rat." This parallels the sort of experiences that Remy, Linguini, and Anton Ego endure in *Ratatouille*. Immediately following intense, sensorial encounters with another species, these characters can only proceed by becoming-animal; for Linguini and Anton

Ego, becoming-rat. On this point, one must consider that for Remy, becoming-human is extremely unpopular and disapproved of by his family and clan.

Lawlor writes, "The formula for this becoming therefore is: the rats become a thought in man, 'a feverish thought,' while the man becomes a writer who writes like a rat" (180). Lawlor claims that this different kind of writing is the product of becoming, and it can lead to a collective that thinks differently and therefore has different relations to animals and the world: "Chandos becomes rat *so that*, writing like a rat will call forth a people"; and this writing would be "a writing that struggles to escape from the dominant forms of expression" (emphasis in original, 181). Lawlor makes explicit his critique of the human dominance of animals, but also suggests a claim similar to Panagia's thesis about common sense: "Following the animals means writing like the animals. As we have suggested, this kind of writing—to write like a rat—would challenge and question common sense" (Lawlor 183).

The narrative of *Ratatouille* follows this logic. For one, Remy and Linguini become increasingly vulnerable as they age: Remy loses his clan and must begin a new life; Linguini loses his mother and must get a job—he begins as a garbage boy. Their mutual vulnerability creates cracks through which they can enter each other's lives and form their apparatus. The new being that they create sets to making food for other people, but Linguini is now cooking like a rat and Remy is cooking like a human. Remy's senses are added to Linguini and Linguini's body is added to Remy: both characters become something else. Linguini's physical comedy, where he is hunched over, moving, darting, around the kitchen to smell and grab things is precisely when he is scavenging like a rat. It is a becoming-minor for Linguini because he gives up the dominance of his eyes, his nose, and his bodily autonomy. And as mentioned before, a parallel situation is written into Remy's character since he must resist and reject the ways of his family and clan to

become part of a human apparatus—Remy as a subject hybridized by his sensorial capabilities was already becoming-human. The food produced by this apparatus is delicious and "new." It is a "revelation" for patrons and critics, and the restaurant's following and status grow. And the movement culminates in the becoming-animal of Anton Ego.

Upon hearing the news that Gusteau's restaurant is popular again, Ego retrieves and reads his old review that condemned Gusteau's to the "tourist trade." The news creates a micrological crack in Ego and opens him up to the new. After dining at Gusteau's and learning about Remy, something of the animal and Remy-Linguini apparatus makes its way into Ego because not only does he write a review in defense of Gusteau's and "the new," but he then invests in a restaurant for Remy the rat to cook in. Ego loses his job for endorsing a restaurant closed by the health inspector, but his becoming-animal produces the written review, and his new restaurant provides jobs for both Remy and Linguini to continue to develop. Ego writes in his review that it is the critic's job to discover and defend the new; this is one of the few risks that the critic takes, but, Ego argues, "the new needs friends" or it will disappear. This conclusion echoes Lawlor's: that becoming generates artifacts that call forth other people.

Ratatouille, then, presents becoming as a process motivated by aging and sensation; it presents becoming-animal as a form of vulnerability; and it presents the food produced by Remy and Linguini's becoming as work that calls forth other people. This includes the becoming-animal of Anton Ego, who likewise, produces work in the form of his written review. It may be funny in this cinematic case, but becoming-animal is a form of self-humbling that opens up new choices and actions, which is akin to Rancière's dissensus since it changes the coordinates of politics in the context of the film. The film features both dissensual events and characters demonstrating becoming-minor. The addition that *Ratatouille* makes, in this regard, is that the

writing or map generated through becoming-animal, instead of a letter like Hofmannsthal's, is food. The food becomes a sensorial artifact that embodies the trace of its hybrid, heterological production.

But the film does not rely on a mere circular logic of sensorial events that initiate social changes, which generate more sensorial events. For sensation to radicalize the characters, they must already be vulnerable to it by becoming-minor. As in a political or religious conversion, one's doubt in a given system becomes belief in another. While sensation itself is democratically available and disruptive, how a subject responds or processes her own reconfiguration depends on a longer history of vulnerabilities and material conditions.

Hence, the villain Skinner, who partakes of Remy's ratatouille dish at the same time as Ego, is profoundly affected by its flavor but his reaction oscillates between an envious loathing and a disabling delight. Skinner, like Ego, wants to meet the chef, not to thank him, but to destroy him. The disruptive flavor of the ratatouille exacerbates Skinner's villainous character. Over the course of the film, the character Skinner becomes more villainous as he becomes more vulnerable to losing his restaurant to Linguini (the secret offspring of Gusteau). The inheritance plot that surrounds Linguini assists in the film's realism. It generates a vulnerable situation for Skinner and it gives Linguini a more secure place at Gusteau's. The implication here is that while the motto "anyone can cook" is generally believed in by the cooks, it is not law and not powerful enough to warrant Linguini's place at the head of the restaurant even if he is the best cook thanks to Remy. This realistic gesture is critical because otherwise the new, as in Remy the chef, would not need to be defended against an oppressively regimented world. The upshot then is that for an anyone-can-cook community to function in a world that resembles our own, sensation, vulnerability, and change need to be secured by the very rules of that world. The film

itself can be understood as a thought experiment that creates a controlled world for a sensation-based, democratic community to thrive. The film champions characters that are vulnerable to sensation, radical change, and becoming-minor through the category of the demos.

Change is Nature

For over 70 years Disney has been selling princesses and princes to democratic nations. Disney's early animated feature films (1940s-1950s) are mainly about lead characters discovering their authentic, noble selves, and this thematic was revitalized in the animated films of the 1990s. M. Keith Booker argues that we can read these films as placing the authentic self on the side of nature and biology instead of culture, which makes it a kind of "essential" self. Instead of endorsing an ideology about self-made, social mobility, Disney films have tended to advance messages about inherent nobility and virtue overcoming socially oppressive situations. The princesses and princes may start out as impoverished, persecuted, and oppressed, but their heritage and indomitable essence, and that of supporting characters, will eventually make things right producing the utopian, fairy-tale ending.[9]

Pixar's productions have inherited much from this Disney tradition. Many of their animators, artists, and directors worked for Disney before it acquired Pixar in 2006 for a net price of $6.3 billion, and many were trained at the California Institute of the Arts founded by Disney (Price 254). They have been influenced by Disney's illusion-of-life aesthetic and they share an optimism and belief in technology. Pixar's narratives respond to its digital medium and the technical contexts surrounding it, but these responses differ from classical Disney's idealistic naturalism. Pixar's films tend to acknowledge contemporary anxieties, or at least uncertainties, about technology, the environment, and aesthetics, which constitute the very context of their

digital medium. Unlike Disney, Pixar's films are void of musical numbers, magic, and the medieval worlds that provided a nostalgic salve to modern life.

Instead, many of Pixar's features present nostalgia for modernity in the context of post-modernity. This is certainly the case in the *Toy Story* films, *Monsters, Inc.*, and *The Incredibles*. And it can be read into *Ratatouille* as my metaphorical reading suggests by comparing the Remy-Linguini apparatus to computer animation and human technologized life more generally. After Remy experiences success through his partnership with Linguini, he is reunited with his family and clan. A critical conversation takes place between Remy and his father outside in the rainy street, while the two stand before a glass storefront displaying dead rats (an exterminator's shop). Remy's father, Django, reminds Remy that humans are a powerful enemy. He tries to persuade Remy to leave the human community and rejoin the rats in his rightful place. But Remy objects:

> Remy: No. Dad, I don't believe it. You're telling me that the future is…can only be…
> more of this.
>
> Django: This is the way things are. You can't change nature.
>
> Remy: Change is nature, Dad; the part that we can influence and it starts when we decide.

Through this naturalization of change, Remy justifies not only his becoming-human, but also his essentially anthropomorphic self. Remy experiences, within himself and in the world, existence as multiple and fluid: he identifies with both rats and humans, and he has changed along with his shifting environment. The "change is nature" theme maintains an essentialism and pursuit of authentic self typical of Disney, but presents a revised ontological formulation. Instead of Remy's search for his authentic self uncovering an inherent nobility that returns stability and security to the world, Remy discovers that subjects and worlds continually emerge. The utopian

ending of *Ratatouille* includes the formation of a harmony between human and rat communities. In Anton Ego's restaurant, Remy cooks in the kitchen with Colette and Linguini, the humans dine on the main floor, and the rats dine in human fashion in the rafters hidden from human view. This is the co-species order presented to us at the end, which is strikingly different from Disney endings which usually involve a return to utopian stasis and hierarchy as in *The Lion King*. If *Ratatouille* had been made in classical Disney style, the character Linguini would be the lead with Remy as sidekick. The Linguini character, after all, is part of an inheritance plot.

Remy's motto "change is nature" naturalizes cultural change. Instead of expressing cultural evolution as apart from biological evolution, this motto replaces the modern split between culture and nature with a single narrative that recognizes human activity as part of nature. It does not endorse a social constructionist view since Remy qualifies the motto by indicating that he is referring to "the part [of nature] that we can influence." The rats, as anthropomorphic, autonomous individuals, take part in constructing nature but Remy's word choice indicates the recognition of a natural world extending beyond their influence as well. In other words, they are a part of nature, they take part in shaping it, but they do not constitute its totality nor do they consider it as only having meaning through their subjective viewpoint. Bridging the culture-nature divide contributes to preparing us for the post-human outcomes of our own cultural evolution (i.e. our self-destruction or displacement by the technology we create) and recognizes the agency of nonhumans in a way that Disney's magical worlds never could.

The main claim here is that while classical Disney animation refers back to gothic and romantic imagery and to fairy tales when presenting its innovative, illusion-of-life animation, Pixar animation refers to modern consumer goods, media, and industry when presenting its hyper-realism animation. As I have discussed in respect to Leon Gurevitch's work, Pixar films

can be understood as offering a form of consumerist, media culture training.[10] This capacity is effectively enhanced by the lack of essentialism in animation to the extent that it opens space for alternative forms of essence, like the product essentialism of the *Toy Story* films. On the other hand, classical Disney's naturalism holds on to a modern biological essentialism, while Pixar's naturalism incorporates nonhumans (animals and artifacts) that more thoroughly disrupt modern social hierarchies. The same openness that lends itself to the product essentialism of *Toy Story* is that which lends itself to the democratic allegory presented in *Ratatouille*. The latter offers a more promising form of socio-cultural change by showing how sensation, becoming-vulnerable, and creative apparatuses contribute to new modes of existence within a democracy.

Ratatouille employs the premise of sensation as central to democracy to bring a nonhuman-human apparatus into the diegesis of the film. The Remy-Linguini apparatus is a heterological element within the "anyone-can-cook" democracy and persists through the category of the demos. Democracy, in the world of the film and in Rancière's formulation summarized above, is inherently variable in its generation and integration of the heterological, which necessitates repeatedly reorganizing the political system. The implication then is that this notion of democracy is well suited to accommodate the increasingly serious demands of post-human scenarios and to recognize the agency of nonhuman actors.[11] But the film's characterization of becoming as a vulnerable process, susceptible to history and material conditions, complements this theory of democracy with a representation of some of the work needed to maintain it. As described above, the Remy-Linguini apparatus requires support from other characters, and it needs the support of inheritance law. This is not too different from Pixar's history with its own list of benefactors: Alexander Schure, Lucasfilm, and Steve Jobs.

Without these investors and the capitalist state supporting them, the technical innovations and the brain trust of the group would not have developed into Pixar Studios (Price 254).

While not resolving the tension between the film's materialist and speculative depictions, the film's final theme, "change is nature," provides a rationale justifying mediated expertise and merit against the classical political claims of Remy's father Django who argues that there is a natural order to be followed. By dethroning natural order and reason, sensation, becoming-vulnerable, consensus ("the new needs friends"), and creative apparatuses become even more powerful in the politics of reorganizing democratic society. Unfettered by external authorities (Nature, Reason, God, etc.), the allegorical democracy presented in the film is subject to an internal authority, sensation, and with sensation as judge, the "anyone can" category is extended beyond national borders, and then beyond species borders. Pixar films tend to be about the formation of new collectives of humans and nonhumans—whether toys, animals, monsters, super-humans, or robots. I do not think it should be lost on viewers that these speculative narratives are sincerely imagining contemporary, political and cultural values in familiar but radically different worlds. Informed by the creative teams at Pixar, this imaginative work contributes to the recalibration of these values in the face of ongoing modernization.

Notes

Introduction

[1] Lev Manovich's comments on this point have received much attention. In *The Language of New Media*, he writes, "Digital cinema is a particular case of animation that uses live-action footage as one of its many elements," and adds, "Born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its periphery, only in the end to become one particular case of animation" (302). Before Manovich, however, similar articulations can be found in Kristin Thompson's "Implications of the Cel Animation Technique" and Alan Cholodenko's "Introduction" in *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation*.

[2] Tom Gunning advocates for attending to cinematic motion over photo-indexicality and famously writes: "a renewed focus on cinematic motion directly addresses what I feel is one of the great scandals of film theory, which I previously mentioned as an aporia resulting from the dominance of a photographic understanding of cinema: the marginalization of animation" ("Moving Away" 38).

[3] Suzanne Buchan is quick to point out that in many libraries animation is a genre: "The Library of Congress Moving Image Genre-form Guide allocates animation to a sublist, as one of three appendices (the others are experimental and advertising), that is classified in 10 subdivisions solely according to techniques and technologies" ("Introduction: Pervasive Animation" 3).

[4] Here I am primarily referring to the work of Alan Cholodenko, which figures animation as a deconstructive mode and deconstruction as an animated mode. But there are many interdisciplinary works that utilize or invoke elements of animation and animated film to support arguments against regimes of power and privilege. A couple of recent examples include Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and Mel Chen's *Animacies*.

[5] Lasseter has given many interviews in which he discusses his approach to making animated films, but one of the more comprehensive interviews that I have relied on is that conducted by Charlie Rose on December 1, 2011.

[6] For more explanation of how *WALL-E* presents both liberation from and perpetuation of natural and cultural practices, see my "Life, Love, and Programming: The Culture and Politics of *WALL-E* and Pixar Computer Animation."

[7] Shaviro writes, "The critical aestheticism that I discover in the conjunction of Kant, Whitehead, and Deleuze helps to illuminate contemporary art and media practices (especially developments in digital film and video), contemporary scientific and technological practices (especially the recent advances in neuroscience and in biogenetic technology), and controversies in cultural theory and Marxist theory (such as questions about commodity fetishism, about immanence and transcendence, about the role of autopoietic or self-organizing systems, and about the ways that 'innovation' and 'creativity' seem to have become so central to the dynamics of postmodern, or post-Fordist, capitalism)" (xv).

[8] The *Critique of Judgment* distinguishes between beautiful objects, agreeable sensations, and the morally good. The latter is distinct in that it requires interest and a governing concept beforehand. Kant claims that agreeable sensations have a sensual interest while only judgments of beauty are disinterested. It is worth noting, as Patchen Markell does, that beauty refers to presentations that bring the understanding and imagination into a state that Kant variously calls "animation," "free play," and "harmony." This state is pleasing because it marks a fit between our cognitive powers and the presentation of the object (Markell 69-70).

[9] In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt describes the totalitarian effort to quench this potentiality through the rigid, logical application of ideology. Against the tyranny of logicality, Arendt explains, "nothing stands but the great capacity of men to start something new" (473).

[10] Markell addresses this explicitly in his analysis of Arendt's "The Crisis in Culture": "Whenever we insulate an artifact from the immediate demands of use in order to encounter it differently, to linger—as Kant says—over the shape that it cannot help but display, to let the question of what the object is good for to open out into the larger question of 'how [the world] is to look, what kind of things are to appear in it' ("Crisis" 223), we're establishing the conditions for an aesthetic experience or—better yet—for an experience that is at once aesthetic and political" (87).

[11] Paul Wells discusses *The Flintstones* and other animated television shows that continue this tradition of exploiting an incongruity between the animated world and the external world of everyday life in his chapter "Synaesthetics, Subversion, Television" in *Animation and America*.

[12] The hybrid film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (Robert Zemekis, 1988) makes this point by highlighting the different rules that "toons" follow that do not apply to humans. *Roger Rabbit* and other hybrid productions tend to foreground that animation constitutes a world distinct from the human world even within a single diegesis. As Scott Bukatman observes, the hybrid genre restricts excessive cartoon physics when animated characters interact with human characters. Even in superhero films that utilize computer animation for effects, the animation remains "tethered" to the human. See Bukatman, "Some Observations Pertaining to Cartoon Physics; or, The Cartoon Cat in the Machine."

[13] Instead of describing Bazin's ideas about cinema's realism as excluding outright highly stylized cinematic expression, many of the contributors to the recent *Opening Bazin* collection, describe Bazin's approach to realism as one concerned with aesthetic choices and style over technical aspects such as photo-indexicality. For instance, see Jean-François Chevrier "The Reality of Hallucination in André Bazin" (51); Colin MacCabe "Bazin as Modernist" (71); Diane Arnaud "From Bazin to Deleuze: A Matter of Depth" (88); Philip Rosen "Belief in Bazin" (109); Daniel Morgan "The Afterlife of Superimposition" (131). See *Opening Bazin: Postwar film Theory & Its Afterlife*.

[14] In Daniel Morgan's revisionary reading, Bazin's concept of realism appears to err on the side of openness, not restriction. Morgan explains that it is misleading to highlight Bazin's comments about cinema's photographic basis when the majority of Bazin's analyses of realism have little to do with photo-indexicality, but have everything to do with directors' individual responses to social, psychological, and physical reality, and how they understand cinema to relate to, address, and express those realities.

[15] Bazin writes that depth of field "obliges the spectator to use his freedom of attention and at the same time makes him feel the ambivalence of reality" (qtd. in Arnaud 90).

[16] For Thomas Lamarre, the work of compositing is crucial to theorizing animation since movement is discernible only through the relative movement and stillness of other objects and compositing involves arranging movement between layers and components. Rather than compare and contrast animated film with live-action, Lamarre evaluates moving images in respect to oppositional poles: cinematism, or movement into and through depth, and animetism, or movement between layers or planes. Both cinematism and animetism can be created from the same moving image technologies, but they offer different modes of perception and epistemology; cinematism is more closely associated with instrumentalism and violence, and animetism with an anti-instrumentalist, contemplative mode. Cinematism "give[s] the viewer a sense of standing over and above the world and thus of controlling it," and it "collapse[s] the distance between viewer and target, in the manner of the ballistic logic of instant strike" (*Anime Machine* 5). Animetism on the other hand, separates the image into multiple planes and emphasizes looking at speed laterally, with a sense of openness: "when movement is rendered with sliding planes, the world is not static, inert, lying in wait passively for us to use it" (*Anime Machine* 62).

[17] This conclusion echoes Leslie's claims in *Hollywood Flatlands*, which examines the historical affiliation between modernism and animation and explains how both were overcome by the commercialization of media and art following the Second World War. Critical of Disney's "idealist naturalism" in a fashion similar to Lamarre's critique of the illusion-of-life, Leslie writes, "From Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs onwards the laws of perspective and gravity are reinstituted, flatness is repelled and the films no longer explode the world with the surrealistic and analytical cinematic dynamite of the optical unconscious that had been developed in 1920s' cartooning" (*Hollywood* 149).

[18] Cavell argues that ordinary language philosophers, such as himself, differ from logical positivists in that they deal with the elements of life that cannot be addressed through straightforward logical proofs and agreed upon criteria for judgment. Cavell writes, "philosophy, like art, is, and should be, powerless to *prove* its relevance; and that says something about the kind of relevance it wishes to have. All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own" (emphasis in original, *Must We Mean* 96). The philosopher, like artists and art critics, moves from subjective experience out to the world, which then prompts others to reflect on their own subjective experience.

[19] Cavell's reflection on the ontology of film does not refer to its essence or teleology, but rather to a mode of being that correlates with the modern fall into skepticism. This fall refers broadly to the plight of the modern subject after the Reformation and the spread of Enlightenment philosophy, which diminished theologically-oriented notions of self, society, and political direction, and elevated the role of intellectualized knowledge and modes of scientific and empirical inquiry that reinforce the limitations of the human senses. After World War II, nationalist and ethnic ideologies became less likely to fill in the many philosophical gaps opened up by modernity. Equipped with science,

the autonomous modern subject is faced with the responsibility of discovering, knowing, and acting within a world not necessarily designed for meaning, immediacy, and agreeableness. Such isolation renders a person susceptible to her own fantasies, and perception becomes a fraught endeavor. It is in this general context that the reality presented through film and photography emerges as a means for modern subjects to reconnect with the world. The analog process of photography that captures an isomorphic impression of past space forces viewers to reckon with the reality of the past in the present, and prompts them "to reflect on [their] own ontological situatedness in space-time" (Rodowick, *Virtual Life* 65). See also Cavell's "The Avoidance of Love (External-World Skepticism)" in *The Cavell Reader*, 89-93.

[20] The camera provides some reassurance and comfort to those modern persons who doubt their own ability to perceive the world and who are fatigued by the responsibility of perceiving accurately. Rodowick explains:

> the condition of viewing in photography and film expresses the situation of the modern subject. But they also express a displacement of the subject, or even a kind of de-subjectivization or the dissolution of this subject in the anticipation of something else. This happens, first, by relieving us of the burden of perception by automating it ("*a succession of automatic world pictures*"). Photography and film 'overcome' subjectivity not only in removing the human agent from the task of reproduction, but also in relieving it from the task or responsibility for perceiving in giving it a series of automated views. (emphasis in original, *Virtual Life* 65)

[21] Pierson explains how the industrial standardization of animated cartoons probably contributed to Cavell's comments. Animation techniques that do less to obfuscate how to judge its recording of reality may not even qualify as animation for Cavell. Unfortunately, this was not Sesonske's contention. A suitable example would be *Neighbors* (1952), in which Norman MacLaren animates human actors in a frame-by-frame method that he refers to as pixilation.

[22] For instance, Buchan writes, "the animated figure is not 'dissociated from creative imagination'; it embodies just this, in that the figure's existence and character are defined entirely by the conceptual, stylistic, and technical processes of its design, construction, and animation" ("Animation, in Theory" 119).

[23] Alan Cholodenko demonstrates this through a poignant anecdote about Warner Bros. animator Chuck Jones who recalls being introduced to a young Bugs Bunny fan as "the man who drew Bugs Bunny," but was then corrected and readdressed as "the man who drew pictures of Bugs Bunny" Cholodenko, *Illusion of Life* 59). In the imagination of the fan, the character had taken on a life of its own detached from creator and context.

[24] Perhaps the recent hybrid feature by Ari Folman, *The Congress* (2013), is an indication that the interpretative traditions could soon change. The film depicts a future in which people can elect to live in a fully animated world through the use of manufactured drugs. The lead character's final escape to the non-animated world functions as the film's expression of disruption.

[25] In addition to basic drawing courses, employees are encouraged to expose themselves to new ideas and fields of study through Pixar University and to remember what it is like to be a beginner. Catmull relates this explicitly to childhood: "Most of what children encounter, after all, are things they've never seen before. The child has no choice but to embrace the new" (221).

[26] In facilitating the creative culture of Pixar, Catmull takes seriously the work of protecting ideas and people to engender trust and candor. Ironically, Catmull's protectionism includes removing Pixar's labor from market forces. Like other companies within creative industries, Pixar has found that maintaining an unfettered space for aesthetic practices and new ideas is crucial to product and content development, and within such a space the category of labor is masked by creative freedom. The advantage for companies exploiting creative labor is the ease with which labor as a category disappears. Animators who love what they do are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in this context, which demonstrates the effective marketization of a set of aesthetic logics that, supposedly, do not adhere to market rules.

[27] For instance, Paul Wells recounts that puppet-animation was successful among oppressed audiences under authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe during World War II. The puppets helped artists to present narratives and metaphors that expressed resentment and protested authority, while maintaining a supposedly harmless facade. The puppets were human enough to be expressive and identificatory, but inhuman enough to seem harmless to authority (*Understanding Animation* 64).

[28] Horkheimer and Adorno write, "Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment" (138)**.** This interpretation is typically contrasted with Walter Benjamin's more optimistic, utopian reading of Mickey Mouse. Both are overstatements, but, in both, whatever might be childish about the inability to immediately discern the laws of an animated world does not amount to political neutrality. See Miriam Hansen's "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney."

[29] Television mitigated the circulation of these wartime depictions to an extent as studios became sensitive to creating content that could accommodate long-term series of re-runs (Sharm 82-83), and the major studios themselves have worked to suppress many of these depictions from their animation canons (Sammond 280).
Chapter 1

[1] For instance, in his writings about early Disney animation, Sergei Eisenstein argues that both the protean, plasmatic quality of animation and its propensity for humanized, animal characters relates to primitive human existence. In short, anthropomorphic animals refer back to the totemistic union between humans and animals (53), and the closed line and mutable bodies of animation allude to a "primal protoplasm" essential to biological existence. Eisenstein speculated that such protean representations were highly appealing to audiences in the early twentieth century who were living through the static monotony of industrial of capitalism (21). With this in mind, Eisenstein praised the work of early Disney animation for its protean and dialectical quality, comparing animation to the entrancing, destructive, and regenerative properties of fire (24-47).

[2] See Marx, "Chapter One: Commodities" *Capital Vol. 1* https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm, especially Section 4: The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof.

[3] E-waste is frequently exported to Asia where there are fewer regulations about its handling (Parks 38-40).

[4] Jodi Dean employs psychoanalytic categories to make this point in *Blog Theory*: "in communicative capitalism, the gaze to which one makes oneself visible is a point hidden in an opaque and heterogeneous network. It is not the gaze of the symbolic Other of our ego ideal but the more disturbing, traumatic gaze of a gap or excess, *objet petit a*" (56). The subject cannot control, anticipate, or understand this gaze as it would previous authoritative institutions be they religious, governmental, or commercial. The objet petit a gaze pierces the subject's symbolic network and hinders the psychical faculties that the subject uses to make sense of the world. Dean probably overstates the trauma in general as social media and online life become more socialized as consumers learn and then make demands.

[5] Toys have consistently served children as transitional objects, that is, objects that facilitate a child's separation from her mother and realization that there is an external world with which to interact. Hence, many of our stories about toys involve metamorphoses—e.g. *Pinocchio*.

[6] Granted, toy torture and toy play are not always distinguishable. Andy's new toy, Buzz Lightyear, refers to Sid as "that happy child" during Sid's first scene when the toys espy him from Andy's window. Indeed, Sid appears quite happy in the scene as he ignites a small explosive fastened to an action figure.

[7] Despite the fact that there is no conclusive evidence that the peripheral figure is Sid's father, the room is coded working class and masculine through typical markers—a large foot in a plain white sock, a mounted hunting trophy, brown-beige wallpaper featuring duck images, a wrench fixed to the television dial, and crunched cans of soda next to the recliner that resemble beer cans. Of course none of these objects are essentially masculine but have only become so through repetition and cultural instantiation. The point is that, like Sid's room, they are juxtaposed with the polished, shiny, newly furnished, feminine space of Andy's home.

[8] See Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 75-81.

[9] Andy's mother appears complicit in this reading since her character is primarily depicted as a source for Andy's new toys via birthday parties and holidays. And the juxtaposition of a fatherless boyhood and a boyhood with a disinterested father presents a false choice between a boy prone to violence and a boy prone to commodity fetishism. There are alternatives, but the film's limited depiction of parents and gender contributes to the limited comparison of the two boy characters.

[10] Freud contends that "the uncanny element we know from experience arises either when repressed childhood complexes are revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been *surmounted* appear to be once again confirmed" (emphasis in original, *The Uncanny* 155). This position treats primitive beliefs and repressed feelings similarly, thereby equating a kind of Western modernization with adulthood. This imperialist, Eurocentric view discredits Freud's theory but the logic of his explanation remains interesting. Freud explains that those who have remnants of belief in a more primitive way of thinking experience the uncanny, but for those who have "wholly and definitively rejected these animistic convictions, this species of the uncanny no longer exists" (154). The uncanny, in this definition, is about regimes of belief and how uncanny experience plays upon one's doubt in reality. It raises the specter of doubt in life's explanations and science's rationalization. It can be an indication that the world is not what a person thought it was, or more precisely, it indicates that this world bears unseen possibilities that the person secretly knew all along. Freud's point is that the experience is not one of pure intellectual uncertainty or inexplicability. It is an inexplicability that harkens to an earlier time. In this way, the uncanny is subversive, and the secret life of toys and dolls has been a recurring example of the uncanny in fictional media for generations.

[11] Computer animation has a history of being received as uncanny when human characters become extremely life-like but fail to pass completely as human. This "uncanny valley" phenomenon has been described as a prediction error experienced by a spectator. That is, the person watching the animation makes subtle, involuntary predictions about the perceived movement—e.g. does it belong to a machine or a biological organism. As the images and figures move, those unconscious predictions can be wrong, leaving an uncanny feeling with the spectator (Saygin et al. 413-420). This can happen in many ways, as when a figure looks strikingly real and biological in one sequence but then mechanical and artificial in another, or when a mechanical looking figure suddenly begins to move and gesture in a manner associated with biological creatures. Both roboticists and computer animators study the human Action Perception System to learn about the unconscious cues that inform a person as to what is alive and what is not.

[12] For Paul Flaig, animation is able to capture the comic uncanny because animation can express amorphous energy similar to the death drive, or the uncontainable life-force of the libido that escapes the constraints of the ego. Flaig explains that, "Like the ghost-obsessed cinema of attractions, these films privilege gag, surprise and shock over narrative continuity, character depth or spatial consistency," and a spectator's reaction to such scenes in traditional hand-drawn animation is based in sensation more than cognition (12).

[13] Frequently, digital media have been designed to signal how a new medium improves upon the old. As Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin explain, this tends to involve two logics: 1) immediacy or less mediation—more immediate access to the objects represented; 2) hypermediacy or enhanced experience through greater mediation—as in the interactive platforms of the Web (33-34).

[14] See also Wolfgang Schivelbush's *The Railway Journey*.

[15] Isaacson notes: "[Jobs] went so far as to design special tools so that the Macintosh case could not be opened with a regular screwdriver" (138).

[16] Wooden and Gillam note how strange it is that Woody closely identifies with his character on from the television show. If Woody supposedly has a unique identity, memory, and consciousness, then he should know that he is modeled after the character, which is ontologically distinct from being the TV show character (114). But Woody's easy identification reinforces the product essentialism; it is his design and purpose that matter and fulfilling the continuation of the television show character is a reasonable interpretation of product purpose—some toys are made to be collectibles.

[17] The best example of Pixar simulating distinct camera effects remains the first act of *WALL-E*. This first act simulates the camera perspective and imperfections that viewers would customarily find in 1970s science-fiction films (Price 264). For additional examples of Pixar sequences that play with an inability to discern media/reality see J.P. Telotte's *Animating Space*, pp. 210-211.

[18] Ackerman notes that the ethics of cloning were being debated in the 1990s when the first two films were being made (903).

[19] The decay of this aura is a result of modern life—urbanization, industry, mass society, mechanically reproducible art, etc. Baudelaire in particular explores how being jostled by the crowd produces a "mirrorlike blankness" in subjects and this opaqueness between people diminishes the reciprocation of the gaze. But, as Benjamin observes in Baudelaire's work, this can be a pleasurable, liberating experience. The gaze of the other can be burdensome as well as pleasurable: "But looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. Where this expectation is met…there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent." Then, "Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man … To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return" (*Illuminations* 188-90).

[20] Gurevitch claims that this "aesthetic continuity" reinforces the spectator's point of view as a consumer. While this may often be the case, the consumer-spectator is not the only subject-identity encouraged by these films and their continuity with design industries is not total. When commenting on Buzz Lightyear's reaction shots, animator Glen McQueen notes that the detailed, emotionally rich style used to animate Buzz differs from the less detailed style used in short advertisements: "It's not like the kind of advertising stuff a lot of us are used to, where you have fifteen seconds to capture an entire character and everything's got to be very broad. John [Lasseter] kept encouraging us to keep things very small and very quiet" (Lasseter and Daly 107). This counters Gurevitch's argument by reminding us that in terms of practice even what may seem like a two-hour advertisement tends to differ from advertising custom because it is two hours long. McQueen's comment shows that character depiction in a big screen feature, which includes subtle facial expressions, presents industry-specific challenges and possibilities that break up "aesthetic continuity."

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[21] Lash and Lury construct their argument by following the life-cycles of cultural objects and brands. They explain the life-force of these objects as distinct from artworks and commodities, but resembling self-organizing organisms. Brands such as Nike or Swatch consist of a vast array of parts—logos, slogans, material products, human icons, etc.—and these components at times coalesce to form larger bodies, but they are always capable of breaking off and generating another life-course or being incorporated by another system. *Toy Story* serves their theory quite well because as a popular feature film it consists of many parts that circulate broadly and interact with other media, and that contribute to various products. Central to this argument is the capacity for characters to become products in their own right, separate from the narratives and cinematic screens from which they emerged.

Chapter 2

[1] On this point Bukatman quotes a well-known passage from Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media*: "Once the cinema was stabilized as a technology, it cut all references to its origins in artifice. Everything that characterized moving pictures before the twentieth century—the manual construction of images, loop actions, the discrete nature of space and movement—was delegated to cinema's bastard relative, its supplement and shadow—animation. Twentieth-century animation became a depository for nineteenth-century moving-image techniques left behind by the cinema" (Manovich 298).

[2] Fear has been a consistent component in processes of globalization, and it is important to note that the film's November release shortly followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which led to a global "war on terror" and a revitalization of fear for many people. Given that its production preceded these events, I am less inclined to read *Monsters, Inc.* as offering a directly corresponding comment, allegorical or otherwise, about the "war on terror" and the "culture of fear" associated with it. However, the broad conditions referenced in the film have continued through the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century and were certainly involved in the tragedy of 9/11 and its aftermath.

[3] For my discussion of animation's interrogation of nature see the introduction, pages 24-26.

[4] For example, Jim Blinn and Alvy Ray Smith produced 3D computer animated videos for the Voyager 1 and 2 NASA missions in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The cameras onboard the ships produced photographic images but these took a long time to send to earth and were difficult to process. Computer animation proved itself to be more efficient and dramatic (Sito 48-50). See Tom Sito *Moving Innovation: A History of Computer Animation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), pp. 48-50.

[5] The terms technical mediator and delegation are used by Bruno Latour to describe the agency of nonhumans, actants, working within agential networks (*Pandora's Hope* 178-189).

[6] Monory's *Sky n°39* is an example that Lyotard refers to in his essay "Sublime Aesthetic of a Contract Killer" since it is a painting of a star-filled sky that relies on a map of the sky produced by a computer in 1976 (*Assassination* 195). In this case, the sublime has already been framed by the sublime instruments of capitalism and techno-science; it is immanent, not transcendental. But because painting is not exclusively part of this technologically reproducible world, it can disturb it and draw attention to the social order that has become natural. Lyotard's emphasis on the medium indicates the considerable weight he gives to the kind of industrial, aesthetic continuity observed by Gurevitch. The task then is to find and circulate media with affiliations to alternative systems, as in the example of Monory, whose work comments on techno-capitalism while maintaining affiliation with an older aesthetic system.

[7] The major difference between Lyotard's differend and Ranciere's dissensus is that Lyotard's relies more on incommensurability between discourses whereas Ranciere's dissensus relies on partitions of the sensible; this is a difference of emphasis between intelligibility and sensibility. Lyotard's sublime troubles discursive intelligibility and therein preserves the potency of sensation from being delimited by discourse. Ranciere's theory figures how sensations are already partitioned and configured (Jean-Louis Déotte and Roxanne Lapidus).

[8] For example, Russian literary theorist and aesthetic philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin locates "unfinalizability" at the core of human aesthetic instincts. In short, we create and imagine characters as unified wholes in order for them to serve as personalities that could potentially see us as complete in return. This aesthetic theory understands a subject's sense of self as developed through seeing others and by being seen by others in return. From this premise there is a need to surround oneself with a diversity of others in order to have a fuller sense of self because this reciprocation must come from an Other who is different, who possesses "outsideness." "Outsideness" for Bakhtin refers to every entity's unique situatedness, thus, socio-cultural differences enhance outsideness (Emerson 221-4).

[9] Many queer theorists understand childhood as always queer, and families and other institutions as participating in normative training. Queer culture, in these terms, has been described as failing to grow up or about "growing sideways" instead (Halberstam; Bond-Stockton).

[10] One of Žižek's favorite film examples is M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* (2004), which tells the story of a community whose elders fabricate a series of outside threats, literally monsters who live in the surrounding forest, to maintain the community's isolated, close-knit, primitive existence (*Violence* 26-7).

Chapter 3

[1] According to Agamben, a state of exception creates a space in which norms need to be applied, and therein, new norms can be established. But the exceptional space also does the work of "welding norm and reality" through a process influenced by referentiality:

> The state of exception is the opening of a space in which application and norm reveal their separation and a pure force-of-~~law~~ realizes (that is, applies by ceasing to apply) a norm whose application has been suspended. In this way, the impossible task of welding norm and reality together, and thereby constituting the normal sphere, is carried out in the form of the exception, that is to say, by presupposing their nexus. This means that in order to apply a norm it is ultimately necessary to suspend its application, to produce an exception. In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference. (emphasis in original, *State of Exception* 40)

[2] For a comparison of Agamben's "pure violence"/"pure medium" and Benjamin's "pure violence" / "pure language" in relation to Kantian aesthetics see Benjamin Morgan's "Undoing Legal Violence: Walter Benjamin's and Giorgio Agamben's Aesthetics of Pure Means."

[3] Consider Jack Zipes' explanation of the liberating potential of the fantastic in fairy tales: "On a psychological level, through the use of unfamiliar (*unheimlich*) symbols, the fairy tale liberates readers of different age groups to return to repressed ego disturbances; that is, to return to familiar (*heimlich*) primal moments in their lives, but the fairy tale cannot be liberating ultimately unless it projects on a conscious, literary, and philosophical level the objectification of home as real democracy under nonalienating conditions. This means not that the liberating fairy tale must have a moral, doctrinaire resolution but that to be liberating it must reflect *a process of struggle* against all types of suppression and authoritarianism and posit various possibilities for the concrete realization of utopia. Otherwise, the words *liberating* and *emancipatory* have no aesthetical categorical substance" (emphasis in original, *Fairy Tales* 176).

[4] For a discussion of the realism-fantasy balance in the Fleischers' Superman cartoons, see J.P. Telotte *Animating Space*, pp.102-112.

[5] The propensity for animation to present biopolitical expressions influences the work of Thomas Lamarre who contrasts the planar composition of animation (e.g. Miyazaki's work) to character animation through the terms animetism and cinematism. In short, "when movement is rendered with sliding planes, the world is not static, inert, lying in wait passively for us to use it, in the form of standing reserve, to evoke Heidegger's term. The world is not "enframed" or made into a picture. On the contrary, Miyazaki assures that when we move, the world moves, and vice versa. Opening a relation through animation technology to the dynamism of the world promises a way for us to gain a free relation to our modern technological condition, to save ourselves from it" (*Anime Machine* 62-3). A preference for animetism leads Lamarre to champion compositing and to criticize illusion-of-life and character animation for inserting an ideology of realism into biopolitical politics. In short, it contributes to a politico-aesthetic regime in which certain movements denote life, while other movements, even though they are equally technological, do not (Lamarre, "Coming to Life" 139-41).

[6] The production notes elaborate on the technology: "This changed the entire animating process. Animators are not so much technicians as they are artists-actors or puppeteers of a sort who creatively choreograph the characters' movements and expressions through specially programmed computer controls. Now, the animators had greater, and deeper, control of the characters than ever before. Explains [Rick] Sayre: 'It's very typical in visual effects for an animator to animate a rigid skeleton, and that's all they see. But with the complex characters in this film, that wasn't going to be acceptable. What I think is groundbreaking is that we ended up building a system where the animators are essentially moving the underlying skeleton, and the muscles are being activated, and the fat layer is causing the skin to slide over the muscles, and then the skin is rendered. The animators can see all that happening while they're working. When they move Bob, they're posing his full muscle-skin-skeleton rig, and it's happening essentially in real-time, giving them far more information and flexibility.'"

[7] According to *IMDB*: "The name of the island that Mr. Incredible is summoned to, Nomanisan Island, is a reference to the well-known book title: 'No Man is an Island,' written by Thomas Merton, in turn a reference to John Donne's

Meditation XVII, 'The Bell': 'No man is an island, entire of itself...' http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0317705/trivia accessed December 7, 2012.

[8] From *IMDB*: "Most of the story takes place in a city called Metroville. It's a combination of Metropolis and Smallville, which are, respectively, the cities where Superman lives and where he was raised. In the beginning of the film (supposedly before they were relocated), Bob, Helen and Lucius Best (Frozone) are living in Municiberg, another play on Metropolis, both roughly meaning 'hometown.'" http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0317705/trivia accessed December 7, 2012.

[9] The film opens with a series of black and white television interviews of the Supers before they are forced to retire. In this newsreel, the heroes are in their prime, they are ambitious, confident, and fully committed to their vocation. The interviews follow the convention of using a newsreel to introduce a diegetic world and to generate nostalgia for a fictional, alternate past. When Elastigirl concludes her interview by refusing to leave the "saving of the world to the men," she repeats the phrase "I don't think so" with diminishing fervor. As her eyes drift away from the camera, the impression is that she does not believe what she is saying.

[10] In the context of modern democracy, Francis Fukuyama subdivided Plato's thymos, or spiritedness, into a desire to be recognized as equal, isothymia, and a desire to be recognized as superior, megalothymia (326-7).

[11] Considering that the animators on the DVD commentary remark that Edna emulates Bird's own approach to filmmaking, Edna can serve as a hallmark of a competitive, liberal ethos that resonates in Bird's films, such as *The Iron Giant*, which features a villainous, 1950s, American government acting against the heroics of a small town boy who befriends a giant robot from outer space. Similarly, *The Incredibles* is set in an alternative mid-1960s vision of the future which influences the film's mise en scène and musical score. Bird's handling of nostalgic themes and Americana approaches that of the other core directors and writers at Pixar.

[12] Nietzsche's Zarathustra tells of the last men who have discovered happiness and refuse to live difficult or dangerous lives. They no longer struggle for recognition or power but are content with comfort, health, and the satisfaction of petty desires. Nietzsche argues that the pursuit of contentment is a rationalization of the Christian pursuit of redemption, which replaces the tragic, Dionysian comfort with metaphysical comfort, or an ethic of asceticism that domesticates passional life and infects it with meaninglessness. Zarathustra intends to disrupt the rational culture or Socratic culture of the last man; he wants to interrupt modernity and its culture of nihilism (*Zarathustra*, 1.prologue.5). See also Robert Gooding-Williams' *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism*, pp. 45-6.

[13] Envy is a critical element in Žižek's discussion of violence because it has been critically attributed to the revolutionary Left—i.e. that their animosity toward the ruling class is primarily motivated by envy. It also can evolve into a sacrificial form of evil—i.e. when the envious person is willing to suffer if it causes the Other to suffer as well. This enables Žižek to disparage the logic of sacrifice that conservative critics, such as Stephen Gardner, endorse. But alas, Syndrome does not go to this extreme and remains a more generic egotist.

[14] The plot of the film actually bears some resemblance to the seminal comic. While very different in scope and tone, *The Incredibles* raises similar political questions to *Watchmen*—namely, how would individuals with superpowers reshape modern democratic society, and then, what would their personal experiences be like. In *Watchmen* superheroes either retire or become government agents once a police strike disrupts their domestic social function. Also, in an ironic sequence when Ozymandias explains his plan to the characters Rorschach and Nite Owl, Ozymandias remarks that he is not the typical villain who reveals his plans to the heroes in a monologue that enables them to save the day at the last minute. Ozymandias initiates his plan before telling the other characters and makes sure it is too late for them to act against it.

[15] For a discussion of over-orthodoxy, or a revolutionary's propensity to practice social and political ideas more devoutly than members of the orthodox class, see Slavoj Žižek's *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 99.

[16] Mary Ann Doane claims that the "woman's film" struggles to abandon the conventionalized male gaze of cinema. This produces masochistic narratives with unstable women characters who represent the male fear of losing epistemological dominance. The women seem to lose their own bodies and pleasures, while embodying the male fear of lost dominance. The woman spectator then oscillates between identifying with this male position and with the persecuted female ("The 'Woman's Film'").

[17] I hesitate to laud these images too much given that Elastigirl's elasticity seems to reduce her character to a purely metaphorical plane—e.g. she is a parachute and life boat for her children. This extreme is more akin to Heather Warren-Crow's concern that plastic, mostly digital, images contribute to a series of biases based on associations between girlishness and lability and malleability (*Girlhood and the Plastic Image*).

[18] This is Hannah Arendt's term for the unpredictability of action and politics that enters the world with every birth (*The Human Condition* 178-9).

Chapter 4

[1] Representation here alludes to the social and political order built upon "habits of indexicality," or the standardization of correspondences between our perceptions and assigned meanings (Panagia and Richard, "A Return to the Senses").

[2] "The new" is an expression used by the food critic character Anton Ego.

[3] See chapter 2, p.109.

[4] Here "ethical" refers to the Platonic, ethical regime that is primarily concerned with how ways of making and doing affect the ethos of individuals and communities (Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics* 20-21).

[5] Panagia's equivalence of sensation and aesthetic experience strays from Kant's original formulation. In a passage where Kant distinguishes agreeable sensation and the judgment of beauty from moral and utilitarian judgments of the good, it appears that beauty and sensation share a kind of immediacy but not the durational immediacy that Panagia purports:

> in the case of the good there is always the question whether it is good merely indirectly or good directly (i.e. useful, or intrinsically good), whereas in the case of the agreeable this question cannot even arise, since this word always signifies something that we like directly. (What we call beautiful is also liked directly).
> (*Critique of Judgment* 48-50)

The translator Werner S. Pluhar notes that "mediately" and "immediately" are more literal to the German "mittelbar" and "unmittelbar" than "indirectly" and "directly," but Pluhar chose the latter intentionally to avoid the temporal sense of "immediately." Panagia is insisting then, that Kant's notion of the direct/unmediated nature of the agreeable and beautiful has durational implications in addition to a nonconceptual structure. He describes this "durational intensity" as referring to the subject's state of attention when engaged with a beautiful object, which can then be applied to a pleasant sensation as well given that both are "immediate" or "direct." Whereas Kant deliberately elevates beauty above sensory pleasure, Panagia latches on to the fact that Kant equates their immediacy. Kant's elevation of beauty has to do with his effort to treat it as symbolically related to the good. Panagia is not interested in this Romantic project, but is interested in a democratic project comparable to Arendt's efforts.

[6] Panagia's passage borrows from Kant who was writing in response to Hume, "although, as *Hume* says, critics can reason more plausibly than cooks, they still share the same fate. They cannot expect the determining basis of their judgment [to come] from the force of the bases of proof, but only from the subject's reflection on his own state (of pleasure or displeasure), all precepts and rules being rejected" (emphasis in original, Kant 149).

[7] It must be noted that the film *Ratatouille* also lends itself to a psychoanalytic interpretation. Naming the critic character Ego and having him represent order and judgment is only a slightly less explicit allusion to psychoanalysis than the chef Gusteau character who doubles as Remy's conscience/superego. While such a reading is beyond the scope of this paper, it may be useful to recognize that Freudian psychoanalysis has been credited with contributing to the narrativization of early cinema and to the structuralist, representationalist treatment of aesthetic objects generally, which is precisely the regime of the sensible that Panagia argues against. *Ratatouille* could potentially support an anti-psychoanalytic argument through the dethroning of Anton Ego and the diminution of Remy's conscience, chef Gusteau, but it would not be as simple as that since the film relies heavily on these two characters as interpreters, judges, and beacons of psycho-social order.

[8] For a discussion of the techniques and approaches used to produce food imagery and sequences in *Ratatouille* see Apurva Shah's "Anyone Can Cook – Inside Ratatouille's Kitchen."

[9] See especially the first two chapters for the history of this essentialist theme in Disney's animated films (Booker *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*.

[10] I discuss Gurevitch's articles in chapter 1 and chapter 2.

[11] For an example of such a scenario, see Lev Grossman's "2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal."

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ERIC HERHUTH
Curriculum vitae

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Department of English

EDUCATION

Ph.D. English, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee 2009–2015
      Emphasis in Media, Cinema, and Digital Studies
      Dissertation: "Animating Aesthetics: Pixar and Digital Culture"
      Dissertation Committee: Patrice Petro (chair), Peter Paik, Kennan Ferguson

M.A. English, Wayne State University, August 2008
      Master's Essay: "'At Last Going to Speak': Bakhtin, Dialogic, Rhetoric, and
      Chronotopes in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*"
      Director: Renata Wasserman, Wayne State University

B.A. English, Grand Valley State University, *Cum Laude*, April 2006

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

Film and animation studies; modernization; theories of aesthetics and politics; media theory; globalization

PUBLICATIONS

Articles

"Life, Love, and Programming: The Culture and Politics of *WALL-E* and Pixar Computer-Animation," *Cinema Journal* 53.4 (Summer 2014): 53–75.

"Cooking like a Rat: Sensation and Politics in Disney-Pixar's Ratatouille," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 31.5 (May 2014): 469–485.

Reviews

Review of *Animating Space: From Mickey to* WALL-E, by JP Telotte, in *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 8.3 (November 2013): 311–314.

Web-Based Publications

"Cinematic Monsters and the Power of Characterization," *In Media Res: A Media Commons Project*. April 25, 2014.