

**‘Drawing Comic Traditions’  
British Television Animation from  
1997 to 2010**

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## **Declaration**

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the original work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the shifts within mainstream British television animation between 1997 and 2010 and it discusses how British animation's close relationship with live-action television comedy reveals a map of contemporary attitudes and tastes. The British animated texts in this period reacted to their shifting industrial and broadcasting landscape. The historical moment of the late 1990s was determined by the successes of the American animated sitcom *The Simpsons*, which profoundly affected the way British practitioners conceived of the medium's capabilities within a mainstream television environment.

This work argues that disparate animation programmes on terrestrial and non-terrestrial television in this era all sought to assess aspects of contemporary society. It suggests that British television animation and British television comedy were so united in their aims and cultural capital that this unique historical moment can be understood as a transformation. This conjunction is a hitherto neglected area of television comedy and animation history. Such a study necessitates a full account of the issues of agency, tone and emphasis in appropriate texts. The thesis analyses these factors, and indicates that UK animated shows under study exemplify an intense engagement with the concept of political correctness. Because of this, the entire production moment was a reaction against what had gone before, and reconstituted representation within comedy and animation. The themes of family, race, gender and social institutions provide fertile ground here. The thesis analyses the cultural

consequences of the post-industrial milieu in this field and asks whether the ironic and nostalgic qualities of postmodernity present a particular problem for the medium. Bearing in mind the scope of such an enquiry, and the animation medium's own fluid constitution, an interdisciplinary approach is an appropriate method to deploy here.

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## Dissemination

### Publications

(2010). “Touching Cloth...”: Considering Satire and the Clergy in Popular Contemporary British Animation. *Animation Studies – On Line Peer Reviewed Online Journal for Animation History and Theory*.

(2008). “Taking an appropriate line” – Assessing representation of disability within popular animation forms. *Animation Studies - On Line Peer Reviewed Online Journal for Animation History and Theory*.

(2008). “Yeah Looks Like It N’All”: Mapping the relationship between the ‘live action’ universe, abridged figurative design and computer animation within Modern Toss. *animation – an interdisciplinary Journal*, 3(3), 213-249.

## **Presentations**

(2010, July). *'In the City': Animating 21st Century Britain – 'Animation Evolution'*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Society of Animation Studies Conference: 'Animation Evolution', Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh, Midlothian, Scotland, UK.

(2010, June). *'Them come from Tipton...they take it dead serious up there...': Negotiating 21st Century TV Animation Representation*. Paper presented at the meeting of NECS European Conference: 'Urban Mediations', Kadir Has University, Istanbul, Turkey, UK.

(2010, March). *'Watch Me': Animation, Representation and Incongruity*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Arts University College Bournemouth Conference 2010, Bournemouth, England, UK.

(2009, September). *'It'll never feel this good again': Nostalgic narratives within The Animated Comic Book Adaptation*. Paper presented at the meeting of Cinema and the Visual Arts: 'Framing Film' Conference, University of Winchester, Winchester, Hampshire, England, UK.

(2009, July). *'Touching Cloth': Satire, Representation and The Clergy in Contemporary Mainstream UK TV Animation*. - Paper presented at the meeting of the Society of Animation Studies Conference 2009: 'The Persistence of Animation', Savannah College of Art and Design, Atlanta, Georgia, UK.

(2008, July). *'Taking an appropriate line': Assessing representation of disability within popular animation forms*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Society of Animation Studies Conference 2008: 'Animation Unlimited', Arts University College Bournemouth Conference, Bournemouth, England, UK.

(2008, June). *'What a nice lad...he does take his jihad seriously though doesn't he?': Assessing comic interpretations of the 'threat within' through the narratives of Monkey Dust*. Paper presented at the meeting of the 'Funny People Those Foreigners': Comedy Conference, University of Salford, Salford, Greater Manchester, England, UK.

(2008, March). *'C'mon Mum, Wednesday Night is Jihad Night...'* - *Ideas on Regionalism, Representation and Comic Narrative within BBC TV's Monkey Dust*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Popular Culture Association Conference, San Francisco Marriot Hotel, San Francisco, California, USA.

(2007, August). *'You're stuck in a rut, mate...'* Assessing the alliance between repetition, form and meaning within Link and Bunnage's *Modern Toss*. Paper presented at the meeting of the 'Aesthetics of Trash Conference': Reassessing Animation and the Comic, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, Greater Manchester, England, UK.

(July, 2007). *'Yeah, looks like it n'all...'* – *Abstraction, Space, Graphic Images and Thematics within the work of Link Bunnage*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Society of Animation Studies: 'Animation Universe Conference', University of Portland, Oregon, USA.

(2007, May). *'Unpack that...!'* - *Isolation and Working Class address within Link and Bunnage's Modern Toss*. Paper presented at the meeting of the 'What Have You Got in That Box?' - Regional/National Comedy, Screens & British Identity Conference, University of Salford, Salford, Greater Manchester, England, UK.

## **Introduction**

### **Overview, Rationale, Methodology and Literature Review.**

#### *Introduction*

This thesis will serve two fundamental purposes. Firstly, it will map the evolution of British television mainstream animation as the 20th century moves into the 21st. The second aspect of this work will tie this development into a hitherto unexplored sub-narrative of British TV comedy. The animations I will be examining here represent an underworked, but pivotal, area of study which responds to the changes taking place within UK network television of the 1990s. By using a precise historical focus I will construct a picture of the industry, its creative and cultural milieu and analyse the various kinds of animations that emerged during the period between 1997 and 2010 on network television. This will be a substantial critical examination of what has been a neglected area of television production. As today comedy is featured more centrally than ever within TV scheduling culture and it exerts a massive cultural prominence, I will assess here its interrelation with animation. This issue will form the spine of this thesis.

I will look at a range of specific animated comedies that say much about our lives and values, which were achieved through specific approaches to creativity

that reflected and reacted to common consensual views, as well as challenged them. As this animation that supplies a portrait of Millennial Britain, Third Wave Animation, is also a range of works that discussed prevalent socio/political dialogues and – cast from various perspectives – that said much about the broader contemporary cultural condition. From this I will assess animated comedy's reactions to the shifts that dominated the 1980s and 1990s around labelling, subsequently referred to as political correctness, and examine these works' contribution to what can be termed a post-PC UK comedic landscape. For as much as this thesis will be all about analysing depictions of Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in animated settings, it will also focus on conceptions of contemporary tastes and attitudes within a particular timeframe. This thesis is about how animation, using modes of comedy and within in a mainstream setting, in effect essayed our culture. When one looks back on the work produced through the period I have specified, it is apparent that each of these animations told particular stories and they compiled a set of points which lead us towards larger conclusions about television and our surrounding culture. I wish to assess, across each of the chapters here, what those stories were and what was said within them to reach my conclusions.

This survey will shift focus away from a hard statistical analysis of audience figures, critical reception and fan responses, in any intense fashion. The material that is present on the first two points within the writing is in place to illuminate specific points but with enough balance as not to derail the central arguments. The debates around fan cultures have of course become more intense as the internet, issues of interaction and cross-media narratives have become more

commonplace and complex in their construction and function in the latter part of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This emphasis is certainly addressed within Chapter Four but, (appropriately to the narrative within that chapter), but not extended in the interests of focus and to remain true to the temporal setting, which is after all focussing on a period on the very lip of these shifts. I have chosen to concentrate more on a production-side and subjective analysis path to reveal the cultural capital associated within these key texts.

I have conceptualised these shifts into a history of British mainstream TV animation that can be read over three distinct eras, First, Second and Third Waves. In the first chapter I will outline the constituent elements of each era in detail and I explain how these eras interact, interlink and progress and what factors have informed the Third Wave's extension away from what has gone before. It is the Third Wave where the changes I will be highlighting occur.

This introductory chapter will prepare the ground for the main discussion and it will address four areas. Firstly, I will present a rationale for the thesis. In this section I shall highlight a number of key points to consider around overview, establishing a series of sub-narratives that will run throughout the thesis and that will provide a framework for the reader. From there I will then proceed to offer a methodological rationale. In quantifying a range of comedies that speak of British life in a distinctive medium that often refuses an easy clarification it is necessary that I address the types of research pathways and intellectual ethos that will inform the work. I will outline and explore how a range of appropriate academic disciplines will intersect with and inform my narrative. The third

aspect of this chapter will complement the second, in that I will be conducting a literature survey, fed from these methodological ideas and drawing together a picture of the kinds of primary and secondary sources that have informed the work. The final component of this piece will be a thumbnail outline of all five chapters' content and intent, and it will highlight how each component fits into the overall thesis narrative. This will supply a foundation for the reader, to prepare them for the approaches taken with this material.

***Rationale: Animating the industrial and cultural landscape***

There are a range of interlinking areas that need to be established before proceeding to the main body of the thesis. Before I discuss the specific contexts that inform what I have termed Third Wave Animation and highlight that moment's connection to comedy, in industrial, thematic and historical terms, some account needs to be taken of the shifting broadcast landscape of the 1990s. During this time the British television industry was adjusting to the possibilities offered by the arrival of non-terrestrial channel Sky TV in February 1989, and the opening out of the existing four-channel framework that had dominated the 1980s, with Channel Five initiated in 1993 and finally broadcasting in 1997 (Raffella, 1992, para 1). The reorganisation of broadcasting services epitomised a larger shift in the ever-expanding global market. This also placed more emphasis on the viewer, cast more now as 'consumer' and, as such, placed more strain on the extant public service channels – Channel Four and the BBC – to justify their remit, and thus forcing them to compete in a more explicit manner

with the non-terrestrial networks that appeared more compatible with this new broadcasting environment. The animations I will be looking at are products of this increasingly hyper-fragmented environment. They are exemplars of British television's cultural accession to American media forms. They also respond to the more opportunistic set of business practices that developed within network television of the 1990s.

The cultural and industrial influence of mainstream American animated *and* live-action comedy shows during this period cannot be overlooked. It is here where animation and comedy in a very particular fashion became conjoined. Throughout the 1990s both BBC and Channel Four deployed American live-action sitcoms to add colour to terrestrial schedules, with shows such as *Grace Under Fire* (ABC 1993-1998), *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989-1998) for BBC, *Married With Children* (Fox 1987-1997) for ITV, *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997), *The Golden Girls* (NBC 1985-1992), *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004) for Channel Four and, most notably, *The Simpsons* (Fox 1989-to date) (Jeffries, 1995, p. 28).

What these US imports scored over UK examples was in the levels of sophistication, organisation and execution on display. This importing of US shows into UK schedules not only provided cost effective entertainment for networks – £20,000 per purchase maximum as opposed to £600,000 per UK episode – but it also eroded a kind of cultural conservatism that appeared as a residue of a post-war critical perspective, tied to anxieties over American Imperialism (Herbert, 1995, p. 13). These were prejudices informed by an innate suspicion of the industrial nature of the American TV landscape along with romantic notions of authorship that in truth spoke more of fading

modernist ideals. Marketed by networks as ‘connoisseur’ shows, this move subverted a particular set of mythologies around US comedy programmes that suggested that they appeared as less the outcome of creativity and expression and more that of industrially-created, light entertainment product.

That Sky television prioritized *The Simpsons* as part of its channel identity since its inception, and as an incentive to lure potential subscribers, certainly exemplified this sense of change. *The Simpsons*’ contribution here is profound in reviving the seemingly-exhausted situation comedy format, as well as returning this most traditional of broadcast forms to a more credible status. Its freshness was compounded by its animated aesthetic and that further invigorated perceptions over what tasks the sitcom could actually perform. *The Simpsons* soon gained iconic status, and as Gray says of the show’s sophistication: “one could study the programme from any number of angles and still only scratch the surface of its cultural resonance” (2006, p. 9).

*The Simpsons*, a product of Rupert Murdoch’s Fox network, is an animated satire of contemporary US family life that used the structures and modes of situation comedy. What makes the show so important to this thesis is that its success allowed access to audience demographics that, up until 1989, many felt were excluded from animation. So pervasive was the show that *The Simpsons* can now be seen as the prime legitimising force for animation within a mainstream network environment and its very presence informs almost everything that is discussed across each chapter. It soon became the kind of

product that came to dominate perceptions, on both sides of the Atlantic, of what mainstream animation could be. Although *The Simpsons* was a show that spoke directly about American culture, it exemplified everything that UK animators sought to achieve, directly *and* indirectly. Other shows that followed, like *King of the Hill* (Fox 1997-2010), *Beavis and Butthead* (MTV 1993-1997), *Ren and Stimpy* (MTV 1991-1992) and particularly *South Park* (Comedy Central 1997-to date), latterly also played roles in undermining the preconceptions of what function narrative-driven animation could perform. But it is Matt Groening's show that has to be situated as creating the most impact on a worldwide scale and is commonly cited most as an aspirational model. Such were its ratings, merchandising and syndication achievements that comedy and animation writer/creators were forced into the position of either incorporating what *The Simpsons* had achieved or were tasked into finding ways to resist it.

Pre-1989, the expectations around US mainstream animation appeared to be shunted into two categories of perception, either as endlessly re-run Hollywood shorts or as low-budget original children's programming (Mittel, 2004, p. 64). Here in the UK this assumptive perspective was certainly mirrored within television networks but from a more nuanced history. The main point of differentiation between UK and US TV animation broadcast culture settings was that up until the late 1990s, - which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter - there was more of an availability, through a much smaller range of channels, of European, and European-influenced, animation. This was animation that drew from a heritage of avant-garde, progressive, experimental, auteurist and resolutely non-commercial areas that appeared polarised against

the practical, often American, entertainment-based children's shorts that dominated British screens and that supposedly lacked the requisite depth needed to reach an adult, prime-time audience.

*The Simpsons*' impact changed this polarity for good, as that particular success story offered both revitalisation and containment for the television animation industry. The animations I will be discussing are a product of an industry keen to exploit and replicate *The Simpsons* by looking for an easily-assimilated formula that could achieve ratings in an increasingly fragmented and competitive market-place. They are also an indicator of how American shows briefly dominated British comedy and enforced a landscape of creative accession. This imitative impulse manifested itself in network policy throughout the 1990s as even gentle, understated shows like Channel Four's 1997 *Pond Life* by Candy Guard – covered in the next chapter – was inaccurately pre-sold as a UK surrogate of US animation forms. Guard's show was touted by the channel upon its launch as being a "home-grown *South Park*", which was a more acerbic treatise on small-town US life by Trey Parker and Matt Stone that followed Groening's show – which in fact couldn't be further from the truth. No doubt perceptions around the show, upon its release, were damaged accordingly through such inaccurate comparisons ("Animation - Toon planning", 1999, para 2).

Certainly the comment made by Jay Kandola, who was a series buyer for Channel Four, that "you've got to be really careful not to just sign stuff that looks like *South Park*. The viewers would just see through it", appears

particularly disingenuous here especially when measured against the generally expedient disposition of broadcast television (cited by Dalton, 1999, para 18). For despite protestations from Claire Kitson that her tenure as a Commissioning Editor for animation at Channel Four was not dominated by such an imperative, it was soon apparent – through what followed her time at the channel – that the opposite was true and that she was seen as representative of an earlier, more experimental era (C. Kitson, personal communication, July 12, 2010) (see Appendix A). Camilla Deakin, then deputy Commissioning Editor of Arts and Music at Channel Four, replaced Kitson in 1999 as Deputy Commissioning Editor for Animation and Arts and, in tandem with Cheryl Taylor, Deputy Commissioning Editor for Entertainment, and Ruth Fielding, a supporter of animation at the channel since 1997. She was put to work straight away to search for a UK-produced narrative-based comedy animation series at the same as Geoffrey Perkins, the Production Head of Comedy at the BBC, was also deployed alongside animation advisor Colin Rose to try and initiate a primetime animation for BBC 2 (Dams, 1999, para 1).

Independent animation festival organiser Mark Taylor identified this moment as a marker of stasis when he stated in 2001 that “TV commissioners are not prepared to take the necessary creative risks... broadcasters are forever saying we want the new *Simpsons*” (cited in “Animation - An industry that's dogged by caution”, 2001, para 1). This was corroborated by reputable TV animator Tim Searle, who lamented at the time that “There has been a too simplistic a search for *The Simpsons*” (cited in “Animation - An industry that's dogged by caution”, 2001, para 2). As TV networks commissioned product from more

independent production sources as a cost-effective way of supplying more content in a deregulated climate, established UK animation studio/companies like Telemagination, Aardman, Siriol and Cosgrove Hall were soon joined by a plethora of newer, smaller transient studios in not only continuing to create advertising, titles and children's television but also trying to initiate a home-grown animated sitcom ("Animation - Toon planning", 1999, para 2). This deference to *The Simpsons* also commenced a process of broader cultural, industrial and creative assimilation in comedy as well as animation. The levels of quality at work within the show soon came to profoundly influence British animation and live-action comedy settings, but what emerged was a narrative that spoke of compromise and incorporation as much as innovation.

What made *The Simpsons* - and the shows that followed - so attractive to networks was the amount of cultural capital that animation could now supply. In this climate this now appeared as a credible medium that could be fully exploited for TV ratings, animation had also undoubtedly benefited from its availability within cinema and feature film entertainment, through its constant flow within advertising, show titles and inserts and through its ubiquity and accrued history within children's narratives. What marked *The Simpsons* apart from previous animation shows was that it was a convincing comedy programme regardless of medium, that dissected contemporary themes and that promoted a kind of quality of writing and performance usually saved for live-action examples. In effect this was comedy that just happened to be animation. Such a shift in perception meant that old prejudices could be superseded and that animation no longer had to be just a schedule-filler or a minority taste. *The*

*Simpsons* (and its US, and UK antecedents) were animations that were expected by schedulers to compete on the same terms with live-action comedy counterparts.

The shows that followed *The Simpsons*, *Beavis and Butthead* (1993-1997), *Duckman* (1994-1997), *Daria* (1997-2002), *King of the Hill* (1997-2009), *South Park* (1997-to date), then latterly *Family Guy* (1998-to date), among many others, marked out similar creative terrain, in being broadly satirical, countercultural – to varying degrees – and usually deconstructive of either the family, suburbia, consumerist society and/or small-town America. Just how these factors were mapped onto UK derivations will be addressed in much more detail throughout the thesis, but what these shows gained from this shift was a sense of self-awareness and the confidence to be market-driven, confrontational, adult comedic texts that were somehow protected by dictates of taste by the very nature of their mediated construction. What this embrace of animation and comedy in a UK setting also contributed to, was, more profoundly, a breakdown of avant-garde animation's position within the schedules. It also finally undermined the withering Alternative Comedy impulse of the 1980s and early 1990s that had worked almost exclusively through a British comic emphasis (Cook, 2001, p. 35). The revitalisation and reassertion of previously devalued light entertainment forms heralded the return of very familiar structures, dialogue, rhythm, iconography and totems that could be recalibrated for a more knowing, TV-literate audience.

*A marker of the times*

I will be dissecting the constitutive elements of First, Second and Third Wave Animation in more detail in the first chapter. However a broader cultural context has to be outlined before proceeding. As the new millennium began, animation's pervasiveness was compounded by its relationship to contemporary cultural conditions. To contextualise what I mean in this instance, I refer to a Western post-war culture that produced texts that expressed the contemporary media's historical confusions and its increasingly fragmented nature, which are the sum of the conditions outlined by Denzin of "social, cultural and economic life under late capitalism" (1992, p. 3). In what has retrospectively been termed the postmodern condition, as a result of the fluid nature of contemporary culture we can now observe a shift towards a more individualistic emphasis on visual interpretation over traditional modes of authorship (Jameson, 1991, pp. 44-54).

Thus, what *The Simpsons* dictated to the UK live-action *and* animated comedy shows that followed in its wake was that an embrace of quotation, distance, extra and intertextual referencing, set into an ironic mode of address was to be *de rigueur*. Indeed Dobson saw that these factors were endemic in the show's connection with its viewers (2003, pp. 84-85). Third Wave Animation, in all of its forms, reports on the culture in a knowing fashion and, like *The Simpsons*, the shows that fall into this category mirror the definitions of what we understand a postmodern text to be, in displaying an "aesthetic self-consciousness, self-reflexiveness", celebrating "juxtaposition/montage, paradox, ambiguity, uncertainty" and blurring the "boundaries of genre, style and history" (Barker, 2000, p. 155). But in many ways mainstream animation has

always demonstrated aspects of the postmodern. *The Flintstones* (ABC 1961-1966), arguably the animated sitcom precursor to *The Simpsons*, had always openly commented on 1960s consumer culture, as had the 1940s Warner Brothers and 1930s Fleischer Brother shorts before that, and all of these cartoons managed to operate through a range of deliberate temporal narrative confusions, whilst ironically reporting on the culture as it happened. Commercial animation's formal fluidity, in tandem with its consistent desire to quote, to reframe and to assess histories and images casts it as a perfect example of a postmodern medium long before many academic commentators had actually noticed.

Animation is a medium that exists not so much as a definition of the *postmodern*, but more that of the *late modern*. Animation is an exemplar of what Lyotard saw as less about an actual cultural schism but more about the cultural processing of the passing epoch (of modernism). The “flashing back, feeding back... *ana*-lysing, *ana*-mesing... reflecting” of *late modernism*, as he saw it, was merely the coming to terms of the project of modernity itself in this current temporal space (Lyotard, 1993, p. 145). Animation is a highly fluid medium that continually reinvents itself and it has never been subject to modernist formal rules of cohesion, as its continual “self-enunciating” qualities seemingly match the aesthetics we now commonly associate with postmodern texts (Crafton, 1993, pp. 11, 347-348). It is also apparent that the prevailing cultural snobberies around the form have emanated from this self-conscious, deconstructive disposition, which has never been a prominent factor of most modernist texts. This “playful” constitution, along with its close relationship to

commerce and entertainment, has hindered animation's lack of cultural and academic legitimacy (Lindvall & Melton, 1997, p. 204). As a result, its lowly cultural position as an outsider medium has always rendered it unencumbered by modernist, hierarchical notions of taste and quality.

The broadcasting moment I will be looking at in this thesis, Third Wave Animation, embodies a postmodern sensibility through its construction. This tendency also connects to animation's recently elevated cultural status, as *The Simpsons* finally seemed to cement animation's prominence as a credible medium in itself. Though narrative animation, however crude, has been in existence since the end of the 19th century it had, of late, been relatively ignored by academia. We return to Lyotard once again, whose notion of the broader dissolution of belief around the fixed metanarratives of society, science and thought that also exemplify late modern thinking, undoubtedly would have benefited such a retrieval (2001, p. xxiv). *The Simpsons* also arrived at a time of renewed visibility for animation throughout the 1980s, complemented by Robert Zemeckis's 1988 cinematic animation compendium, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. This in truth spoke as much of corporate interests, such as Disney and Warner Brothers reviving their back catalogues in the name of historical reclamation, as much as it did as an indicator of a postmodern elevation or retrieval of a medium consistently relegated to the critical sidelines. However, whatever position one takes on *how* animation rose to prominence, there is no doubt that the medium's protean nature now appeared to suit the contemporary climate.

The texts that embody a Third Wave Animation impulse may well be late- or post-modern but they also demonstrate an intense association with television itself. Animation, through the dissolving of discrete boundaries, the free-play of history, image and structure, appears as a perfect fit for the fractured television landscape which, as Nelson notes, is the exemplary model of a postmodern conduit (2006, pp. 86-92). Television sits at the very heart of late 20th century capitalism. It traditionally embraces a disjointed relationship to conventional conceptions of authorship, it refutes authenticity and stability. Television's multi-faceted nature also mirrors the fragmentation, nostalgia, irony, reflexivity and depthlessness of our broader contemporary culture. It is like a window into, and is an entrenched part of, culture itself.

Television animation's place in this has meant that it has always been expected to operate along a differing set of precepts than its cinematic counterpart, which has usually been tied to expectations of engagement and scale. The fragmented nature of mainstream television scheduling complements this issue. Klein states:

... cartoons were always designed as a media punctuation, to be sandwiched in while the projector changed reels. So instead of a newsreel, cartoons were followed by commercials about uranium-flavoured barbecue chips or marshmallows as a breakfast cereal. Cartoons seemed to belong to this madly anarchic three hours on TV... despite the extreme censorship, degenerated redundancies and tiny budgets. Of course one does what one does: and cartoons became TV (1993, p. 245).

Embedded within the very fabric of television, this type of animation has continually been defined through functionality and industry and, as such, has been reduced in status when compared to cinema. For as film animation draws some benefit from the historical legitimacy conferred upon it by Film Studies, television animation has been marked as a simplistic, industrial escapist form intensely tied to its temporal moment, as a marker of its time and held in suspicion because of its proximity to mass entertainment. Yet as TV animation may well be among late/postmodernity's most potent markers its continual connection to the 'now' sees it as a medium that can, with great alacrity, facilitate a way of looking at our culture and ourselves in it. This factor serves the narrative of the thesis entirely.

### *Animating Britain*

Another factor needs to be addressed before proceeding to the main thesis itself, in that a kind of irony – postmodern or otherwise – frames many of the shows that I will be discussing. Although these were comic animations highly reactive to the success of American narratives, these were texts that were also unified through a desire to construct a portrait of contemporary Britain. *Third Wave* shows investigated the socio/political/cultural shifts that were taking place in the late 1990s into the new millennia. Forging an intense relationship with common contemporary experience, explicitly and implicitly in a highly mediated form, these shows processed the consensual attitudes and values of Britain just after the election of Tony Blair in 1997. The New Labour project demonstrated not

just dissatisfaction with 13 years of Conservative government but it also exemplified a socio/political consensual shift to the middle-ground that complemented and reinforced an individualist impulse within contemporary British society.

While this correlated with the core centrist, moralist values of the Blair ethos, on the one hand this re-order served a more Left-wing sense of tolerance around issues of race and homosexuality, and yet on the other, one of the prevailing factors of the coming 21st century was that of a more individualist Right-wing embrace of consumerism that appeared as a continuation of 1980s Thatcherism (Reitan, 2003, pp. 75-197). All of this was conducted against the rise of the global marketplace and was compounded by the cultural dominance of the tabloid press, as an institution that continued to promote dialogues of suspicion around progressive ideals and that appeared to reserve a special wariness for Socialist ideology in any form. Blair's view was that emancipation was possible through a kind of benevolent capitalism and New Labour centralised the marketplace as a defining feature of all of our lives, ensuring that the answer to any ideological question in the new millennium appeared to be simply: Capitalism.

With these cultural factors in place it is worth restating that this thesis is considering British TV comedy's relationship to animation, and vice versa. Thus comedy is the primary mode that underpins the animations I will be discussing and these animations not only signalled a change in the way

networks deal with comedy, but also they revealed what thematic trends comedians and performers of this period were setting and engaging with. The conjoining of animation and comedy here is highly appropriate as this thesis will investigate to what extent the UK relied on comedy during this period to talk about, and to, itself.

Comedy became a dominant mode within TV schedules at the end of the last century and as such then its role has to be accounted for here. Medhurst and Tuck observe that televisual comic forms like the situation comedy replicated the “collective experience” of the music halls, early cinema and melodramatic forms (1996, p. 112). Whilst this statement needs transposing to the much more complex, omnipresent mass entertainment setting that we enjoy today, this still fundamentally rings true when considering comedy’s role within our lives.

Comedy is a corrective, reflective mode that actualises dialogues about society itself. Whilst Freud stated that humour was an incomplete and sometimes evasive marker of our interior desires, he noted that its success was dependent entirely on taste, culture, choice and context (Freud, 2001, pp. 90-116). He also saw it as a lubricant to ease social interaction, as much as it was a way to draw boundaries and to facilitate cohesion through its tendency in addressing taboo and morality (Freud, 2001, pp. 1-30). Douglas’s anthropological view, that the joke or comic situation “are expressive of the social situation in which they occur” and that “humour can only operate in a system of such correlation”, further confirms the ritualistic nature of comedy (1975, p. 98). Yet it was Bergson who saw that comedy’s social function was to provide a momentary

space, to allow the open critique and deconstruction of mechanisms of hierarchy and power (2007, pp. 14-15).

Considering animation's now more explicit relationship with comedy here, certainly what is also highly apposite to this thesis is the way that TV networks felt the need to establish a necessary differentiation from animation's misunderstood history, as being primarily that of a children's medium. Almost immediately these more 'adult' animations reminded us that this is a form that is capable of relaying depictions and scenarios that would be untenable within a conventionally recorded situation. Animation's distance from live-action formal principles lends it a cultural permission. As Wells noted, any subversion within animation can be cloaked behind populist preconceptions and this can mean that difficult material can be diffused behind the "unambiguous" visceral pleasures that are often associated with it (1998, p. 6). The medium's fluid formal construction licenses the author to confront issues of politics, consensus, sexuality, morality, identity, representation etc. in a relatively unhindered fashion. Thus, I will be taking Wells's idea much further, for not only does animation bear the capacity to illustrate complex ideas through design, diagrammatical, impressionistic and symbological means, but whilst doing so its removal from recorded 'real life' means that the process of confrontation is protected from critique. Discomfort is avoided as the medium affords difficult subject matters a free pass and thus dilutes the shock of confrontation. This is never more evident as when *The Simpsons* engages with dialogues on family abuse or questions authority, or when *South Park* confronts societal taboos and

issues around labelling. Animation's abbreviated nature undoubtedly diffuses potential offense and yet, curiously, it can simultaneously intensify debate.

For what defines many of the animations I will be looking at is the adherence to themes and tonal choices of an adult nature. I would like to unpick the innovative aspects of many of these animations by investigating their make-up and framing these against debates over what 'adult' animation actually means. Is the animation I will be looking at more challenging and intelligent or perhaps merely transgressive? Is this narrative work that explores the term 'adult' more in terms of notions of taste than sophistication? Following this, how far does this notion of 'adult' animation extend to embracing what appears to be a more progressive impulse? Does progressive, in this instance, propel mainstream audiences and animation forward into new terrain or does it mean here simply embracing certain aesthetic or tonal choices, modes of humour and manners of expression? Does this millennial UK animation simply define 'adult' as meaning the inclusion of certain types of comedic material and themes that would be often saved for a live-action comic context? And if so, then what does this say about our television culture and, more broadly, our values?

### *An Alternative to the Alternative*

Another facet of the debate that emerges around 'adult animation' is the implications around the very terms that are built into this nomenclature. That the

producer of animated sketch-show *Monkey Dust* (BBC 2003-2005), Harry Thompson, felt the need to say that “You’ll never see anything PC or ‘right-on’ in my shows”, not only says much about his approach but it also reveals much about how these animations were reactive to larger comic trends and seemed to be painfully aware of the comic past (cited in “Obituary of Harry Thompson Television producer whose iconoclastic wit informed *Have I Got News For You*”, 2005, p. 25). Thompson’s suspicion of political correctness isolates a correlating shift within the broader comedy mainstream consciousness.

For the purposes of establishing another sub-narrative that will run through the thesis, I would like to conceive of political correctness as a perpetually ill-defined term that has been derived through repetition and cultural expression, which encapsulates the gradual reassessment of terminology around race and gender over any clear rationale (Cameron, 1995, pp. 116-165; Hughes, 2010, pp. 3-59). These societal shifts responded to feminism and multiculturalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s and they have become fundamental socio/cultural dialogues. Political correctness’s relationship to mainstream comedy has been profound and also complicated. Any acknowledgement of its supposed existence has proved problematic. I will address this issue throughout the thesis by confronting the common misconceptions that surround the term and I will be locating this historically and thematically within Third Wave Animation.

But for now, however one defines political correctness within comedy, the way creative personnel in British live-action and animated comedy chose to

acknowledge its existence throughout this period as a determinant on comic narratives is undoubtedly of some note. If we can return back to the notion of 'adult animation' once more, I would like to ask to what extent were these works defined through their relationship to conceptions of political correctness, implicitly or explicitly. This raises questions about the nature of Third Wave 'adult animation', i.e. does this term simply mean post-politically correct animation? If the new comedy of these Third Wave animations manifests a relationship with past forms, then what shape does this connection take and also to what extent is the resistance of what has gone before a major determinant here? For I will be asking, what does the acknowledgement of political correctness in comedy animation say about matters of consensus and how does this UK animated comedy differentiate itself from what has gone before?

### *Methodology*

Bergson's idea that comedy not only performs a social function but is a mode that explores social norms and boundaries suggests that a sociological bias should inform the themes under discussion (2007, pp. 3-4). In focussing on race, gender, the family and social institutions and authority to structure my analyses, I am touching on familiar topics that are prevalent within broader mainstream comedic narratives. These ideas unite seemingly disparate texts and industrial and creative conditions and their deployment here enforce a connection with the shared experience or a commonality within modern UK life that Third Wave

Animation seeks to access. It is also notable that animation has rarely been conceptualised through a comic framework. This work seeks to address this.

To perform this task of deconstruction, this dissertation will intersect with a range of academic disciplines. In many ways live-action television comedy arguably features as large in this debate as animation. But my observations are cast into a linear history of British animation and television that covers three discrete stages of progression. This is the most appropriate path to take, as each period is typified through a range of discernible features sufficiently unique to merit such a construction. The identity of each era is measured against what has gone before in broadcasting, industry and authorship terms, and they are defined through the nature of their construction and their relationship to the cultural milieu. The shift in animation production and execution that I have identified as Third Wave Animation still exhibits some aspects of what has gone before. Defining aspects of the previous two ‘waves’ continue to exist within it, and many aspects of the past are still running concurrently underneath as sub-narratives. Third Wave Animation exhibits enough unique features to justify it as a marker of a radically different terrain. It is an indicator of the contemporary and its very existence is dictated by its surrounding culture.

This lineage has been determined by the weight of critical material available across all three periods alongside my own retrospective analysis. The setting is all-important here. It is imperative that the over-used and often pejorative term ‘mainstream’ is conceptualised here. I will be referring to animated works that are broadcast nationally on UK public service, commercial and terrestrial

channels. 'Mainstream' here means as dictated by the accessibility and availability of communication, merchandising, investment and distribution channels. It is defined by its relationship to and in service of corporate/network interests. These works are widely available and part of the traffic associated with mass entertainment. It is important to mention the likes of Paul Wells, who have previously attempted to provide a nuanced theory about animation production that circumnavigates simplistic polarities. It is conceivable that we can consider Third Wave Animation as part of his typology, in that it is resolutely not "experimental animation" (Wells, 1997, p. 43) but can be thought of as "orthodox" (p. 36) and indeed, due its reflexive, re-constitutive nature, as "developmental" work also (p.51). But still this typology does not, as Wells himself notes, fully account for broader exhibition and cultural contexts and the divisions that typify each stage in this critical framework appear to rely entirely on the outlining of a conception of 'mainstream'.

As part of this definition, the mainstream texts I will be analysing reinforce traditional genre/narrative structures as a central facet of their pleasures and are in service to goal or protagonist centred and narrative-based animation. This is demonstrative of what Wells refers to as "personality animation", in that interior psychology is framed within standard conceptions of the performance and modelled on human behaviour patterns to enforce audience identification (1998, pp. 59-72).

'Mainstream' is undoubtedly where debates on agency, value, representation, availability and progression are at their most potent, for this is the polarising

arena that elicits the most mass approval and critical disapproval. The term suggests a common ground. It appears bound by connotations of concession, by a negativity that is often reserved for ‘mass’ entertainment. Examining the conditions of these compromises is always necessary and how a text is tasked to function in such a setting should always be worthy of close study. It is a pertinent area that needs to be regulated, observed and quantified. ‘Mainstream’ supplies a picture, often through the absences as much as the inclusions, of our culture, our society and our history.

For me this concept also has to be considered against another over-familiar but entirely apposite word, ‘popular’. As utopian as this statement initially appears, in fact much of it holds true in terms of the inescapable nature of ‘the popular’, as Combs states:

...popular culture is so much a part of our lives that we cannot deny its developmental powers... Like formal education or family rearing popular culture is part of our learning environment. Though our pop culture is informal – we do not usually attend to pop culture for its educational value – it nevertheless provides us with images upon which we develop our opinion and attitudes. We would not be where we are and neither would our society be quite the same, without the impact of popular culture (1984, p. 24)

This conceptualisation of television animation is dependent on a subjective reading of media and television history and industry, measured alongside critical perceptions around production and authorship. The periodization framework I have chosen appears as a logical choice under such conditions. As with my individual analyses, context is all. This extends not just to the examination of each individual theme but also how each show fits into the

television landscape of the time, and also how this *then* maps onto a history of British TV animation and comedy.

Tosh notes that “as well as an intellectual edge the historian requires imagination”, this is a very necessary critical acumen (1999, p. 105). In assessing the evidence that has been found when piecing together any historical endeavour, the historian’s imperative is to complete the gaps and to draw connections together between disparate areas. It is imperative that primary and secondary sources are linked, via appropriate reasoning, to finalize the picture. As Tosh states, “How is the historical imagination nurtured? It helps to have your eyes and ears open to the world around you ... history is essentially a hybrid discipline, combining the technical and analytical procedures of a science with the imaginative and stylistic qualities of an art” (1999, pp. 105-107).

The conditions of the research have shaped this approach entirely. As I am drawing together a number of, what appear to be, disparate strands, the most appropriate methodological path for me to follow here is an interdisciplinary one – such is the broad area of intersecting themes, areas of study and critical contexts that inform this debate. The role of an historical discipline is imperative when considering overview and context. This works in collusion with the anthropological, sociological and philosophical material I will be drawing upon as it is important to locate these texts within particular societal conditions and, from there, tie them into a comic conception, often informed by an ontological and psychological base. These disciplines will also be considered

against extant material from television and cinema studies frameworks when necessary and appropriate.

Ward notes that not only is Animation Studies – when compared to other disciplines that interact with visual-based media – still very much in its infancy, but the methodological and practical diversity and the myriad of formal constitutions, executions and applications that it encapsulates transmit inherent difficulties that negates a single disciplinary path (2006, pp. 242-245).

Interdisciplinarity not only prevents reductivism but also it matches the “self-enunciating” capacity of the medium itself – through animation’s constant revision, subversion and reiteration of its own form it can often appear indefinable, as a result (Crafton, 1993, pp. 347-348). Thus, this means that, as a result, there appears no one clear overriding rationale when constructing this field in terms of a master narrative. Appropriately a range of models jostle for dominance in an area that many critics agree is still open to interpretation.

Darley observes that animation’s methodological “commonality” with other fields of visual entertainment actually mirrors the hybrid traditions that have informed other more established disciplines such as literature, aesthetics, philosophy and so forth (Darley, 2007, p. 65). Animation Studies has traditionally cemented links with a practice base and this is something Ward draws from when he highlights the necessity of “interrelationships”, a practice that extends into a multi-disciplinary philosophy of cross-pollination (2006, p. 232). This is an ethos that dominates my own writing, as I seek to bring together disparate research areas that correlate with Ward’s notion of a “pathway” determined by “weak classification”, yet still conforming to an overriding

mission, i.e. is this “coherent and of interest, rather than “does this belong in Animation Studies?”” (2006, p. 242).

At the heart of the thesis lies a fusion of both structuralist and culturalist critical frameworks of thought. A structuralist emphasis will inform the detailed breakdowns of key animation shows, episodes, sketches, images, narratives etc. This is an approach exemplified within the work of Eco, most well-known in this area for his 1980 study, *Role of the reader*, that insists that a text’s formal make-up is always among the final determinants of meaning (pp. 3-43).

Although too often placed at the other end of the theoretical spectrum, I will set this into a culturalist approach, principally based around historical, anthropological and sociological disciplines, whereby focus is placed upon a given text’s social functions. A corresponding illustrative example here would be Kaplan’s 1986 *Sea changes: culture and feminism*.

Neither polarity fully defines a cultural commodity’s meaning. But a combination of both practices appears the most apposite in justifying why specific cultural texts are so prominent. A full knowledge of text and context offers the most possibilities. In terms of a model then Thompson’s *Ideology and modern culture: critical social theory in the era of mass communication* offers a process that embraces historical foundation with close textual engagement and it is one that resonates most here (1990, pp. 7-151). By today’s practice, this is not uncommon at all. As Bennett notes, the production and consumption of cultural texts is an active and mutually constitutive relationship and this methodological tactic recognises and accounts for this (1994, pp. 217-224).

There are undoubtedly potential pitfalls here. Of course much of the success of this approach will be dependent on the subjectivity of the reader, who brings with them their own methodological bias, which can reflect on the choice of focus and thus affect the nature of conclusions drawn. In this case, dealing with animation, one has to assess already sizeable areas of study such as television and comedy alongside sociology, philosophy, historical, politics, all set into a film *and* media visual studies consideration of aesthetics.

In assessing cultural value and importance, I will analyse the style and content of these texts by marrying together the textual and contextual through attention to the visual codes at work, in line with primary interview material and a relevant secondary theoretical base. Animation's primacy of the visual demands an understanding of the aesthetics of television animation. The transient, disposable nature of much British television animation – certainly when considering the advertising arena, for example – means that not only has much of what has been produced escaped any kind of rigorous cataloguing procedure, but also that a set of perceptions have become fixed around the visual nature of television animation itself. I am assessing, in truth, a small number of key shows, but to do this it is apparent that a fusion of descriptive terms will have to be constructed to serve the demands of this thesis.

One of the most common stumbling blocks in this is that too often the limited nature of most industrial animation, which is informed by cost, time and the availability of labour, means that deconstruction is often lazily measured up

against hyper-realist/limited animation debates. This suggests that an animation's visual/symbolic quality is dictated by its proximity to 'realism' or that, more conservatively, less fluid animation infers some kind of ineptitude (Furniss, 1998, p. 135). As a result the prevalent critical view is that commercial broadcast animation, and indeed television per se, can rarely be a site for such debates about style.

Pilling highlighted about animation writing in general that:

There is no taxonomy of animation styles on which writers can draw, never mind challenge or redraw. In informal discussion with other animation specialists about films, it is often the case that descriptions rely on a form of insider's shorthand: 'very Zagreb' (which can indicate a visual style but also an attitude): 'updated UPA': or 'feels a bit National Film Board-ish'... But there is no sustained attempt to commonly agreed set of descriptive tools (1997, p. xiii).

Critical language around form, she correctly notes, has often been stymied in trying to achieve any sense of completeness. This issue has to be considered here when trying to negotiate the kinds of descriptive cul-de-sacs that Pilling highlights. TV's refuge in 'limited' - i.e. static - over mobile, 'full' animation – meaning completely articulated and in the very term itself carrying a residue of cinematic discourse, with its implication of a 24-frames-per-second ratio, which has reinforced the mantra that style holds great import over movement. Perhaps, when one considers the oft-held example of Hanna and Barbera's 1960s animation, exemplified in *The Flintstones* for example, that is built around the recycling of backgrounds, limiting single movements of mouths, arms, legs etc., then it is undoubtedly true that TV animation has been more than capable of

finding innovative ways to reconceptualise stasis. Although this suggests a contrary gesture to the entire project of bringing life to the inanimate, we must be aware that the tyranny of fluid hyper-realist animation is a formal choice that too often is used as a tired justification for critical debates on conceptions of 'worth' within commercial settings.

If stasis dominates the TV animation lexicon, then half-finished designs, impressionism and abstraction, in figurative or background terms, has to be accounted for. This aesthetic refuses the easy location offered by modernist, avant-garde definitions. The postmodern condition's emphasis on ambiguity and the nature of the visual has blurred such lines entirely. Barker sees avant-garde aesthetics as distinctive through a "self-consciousness", a "questioning representation" and tied to notions of artistic and intellectual progression (2000, p. 137). In this commercial context such a design choice has become absorbed and incorporated. I will be measuring this interplay of style throughout the thesis, aligning and extending this from Furniss's statement that abstraction in design in such a mainstream televisual context often signals an often highly ambiguous countercultural statement (1998, p. 5-6). It has become the dialogue of the 'cool'. She elaborates further that: "If full animation represents the *status quo*, perhaps limited animation can be interpreted as an alternative practice, allowing for more effective of marginal points of view" (1998, p. 151). The abstracted figurative and background design that permeates the range of disparate UK shows I will be looking at say as much about industrial expediency as they provide an implicit commentary on Disney/Pixar-style hyper-realistic modes of animation being the chosen grammar of the middle

ground. Although these shows exhibit incomplete designs and fractured movement they sit, aesthetically, totally apart from that mode, yet curiously, still fundamentally part of the mainstream.

In refuting a naturalistic rigor in figurative representation and in embracing reduced movement and spatial concerns, this suggestion that the visual language here infers 'alternative' is all but a bluff. Most of the TV animations here still use narrative, understood performance rules and with designs constructed to engage the viewer. When Wells states that in today's design terms, "symmetry is ungodly", (which reflects on the stylistic compromise towards identification that hyper-realism infers), in truth the abbreviation of form has evolved to become the mainstream's formal choice to signify 'difficult', 'different', 'satirical' or simply 'not Disney' (2003, p. 226). TV animation is now more a quotation of style that serves a commercial, as well as an ideological purpose, that has shifted far from avant-garde roots.

What also has to be accounted for here is a necessary acknowledgment of the corresponding formal elements – sound, editing, dialogue, inflection – alongside not just film grammar – approximations of editing, camerawork etc. – but also taking in the influence of other media, such as graphic narratives that also collude with the recent strides made in computer animation, which has revolutionised industrial texts. Close analysis is a gateway to meaning, a doorway to the core of the work.

An assessment of the unique codes that inform animation leads us to the heart of this thesis, which is looking at television animation through a comedic lens. This work is about how comedy and animation interact. Wells notes that both became conjoined in commercial settings from the medium's earliest days, and became embedded through early animation's need to differentiate itself from cinema and to offer audiences the surprises and incongruous "divergences" unavailable in live-action film (1998, p. 128). What has been missing to date within assessments of, particularly television, animation is a consideration of how the prime "general theories" of humour, superiority, relief and incongruity, can be used to quantify the meaning and the operation of a given text (O'Neill, 1990, p. 46). These foundation theories are incredibly useful in offering structure to the analyses and it is remarkable that these models have not been exploited more often within such a context.

I will also be taking on board Darley's concerns about the relationship between primary texts, practice and theory within Animation Studies, as he noted that a requisite sense of distance was imperative around the potentially exclusionary nature of theoretical debates. This is to avoid the potential dangers of elitism and embedding a separatist ethos that, if too prevalent, could stifle and contaminate the freedom of Animation Studies itself. Thus, I return to Ward who, when relating the study of the medium to a practice ethos, is mindful of the need to remove any separation between the "reflexive" and the "theoretical" animation practitioner, whereby "A truly critical practitioner is therefore someone who is willing and able to think through the implications of what they do, and place it in its social, historical and political contexts" (2006, p. 234). I

will be adding a voice to the British cultural history terrain of television animation, to date all but ignored, and I plan use a discipline – comedy – that is often held hostage to subjective interpretations but continually merges psychology, anthropology and philosophy into one continuous narrative.

### *Literature review*

Comedic television animation is a field dictated by absences. The story of this television animation moment has unfolded through contemporary newspaper stories, interviews, obituaries and headlines, more so than hard archival research. It is in this area where the narrative suggested itself, evident of the kind of “imagination” specified by Tosh, joining events, sculpting a timeline and mapping correlations (1999, p. 105). Early television animation has rarely been attached to any academic discourse, so much of the scene-setting material is constituted from footnotes and the odd line from texts such as Rotha, Road and Griffith’s 1968 *Documentary film*, or from the plethora of articles and news items found in British film journals such as *Sight and Sound*, *The Monthly Film Bulletin* and, in particular, one of the few publications that proudly featured regular updates about contemporary British TV animation, *Films and Filming*. This vast pool of raw, primary material, coloured by a small sample of interview material and e-mail contact I had managed to accrue from practitioners and industry personnel during the period under study proved invaluable, of course taking great care with the emphasis of agency from source to source.

What has informed the timeline of First, Second and Third Wave Animation is the extant histories associated with the British medium and is drawn from material located within archival sources such as Farnham's Animation Research Centre at UCA and the BFI, alongside key secondary texts. Durgnat's welcome, but actually superficial, 1970 chapter, 'Suspended animation' – placed almost as a postscript in his *A mirror for England – British movies from austerity to affluence* – offers the beginning of a real overview. However it is typical of the period and an indicator of the paucity of real critique about British animation itself from this period. Tellingly, it is also cinema that dominates this incomplete summary of avant-garde and mainstream works. TV work here is notably neglected almost entirely. This is addressed in Burrow's précis of UK cinema, and latterly television, animation in 'Live action – a brief history of British animation', within Barr's edited collection, *All our yesterdays*. Although this study reiterates common – and inaccurate – suspicions around mainstream animation as being created solely for the province of children, it does at least rightly acknowledge the importance of ITV as a catalyst for UK animation production (1986, pp. 272-285). Lant's suggestion that the fragmented nature of academic writings and overviews of British animation mirrors the circumstances that practitioners have consistently struggled against, holds true here (2007, p. 162). UK TV animation has continually had to negotiate a constant barrage from the American feature film market as well as manage a correspondingly less organised practice landscape.

Most available published documentation on the early years of TV animation has been restricted to list-based efforts that omit material from the forgotten history

of advertising and offers little real critical engagement. This reflects on academic hierarchies surrounding both animation *and* television studies – both of which were practically non-existent as serious disciplines around the time Gifford’s, admittedly otherwise exhaustive, reference piece *British animated films, 1895-1985 – a filmography* was released. Any credible critical assessment remains relegated to scattered chapters across disparate texts. Burrows builds on Durgnat, and their emphasis on historical linearity also demonstrates that the grammar needed to express analytical discourse on animation had yet to evolve at that point. This matches the larger cultural snobberies aimed at not just animation and television through the 1970s but also around the struggle to establish convincing dialogues around popular culture that the likes of Hall, Storey and Fiske were, at that juncture, retrieving.

This stands in contrast to the explosion of academic writing on American animation, livened by an adherence to auteur theory that coalesced after the famous 1975 US *Film Comment* issue into an escalation of critical assessments initiated by the likes of Carabaga, Adamson, Ford, Corliss, Maltin and Canemaker et al and rightly cast as “hagiographic” by Langer (1997, p. 148). Yet it is curious that such a primary component within television has somehow eluded quantification. Animation’s absence within Television Studies reveals the modernist impulse that informed that field’s early critical remit (Caughie, 2000, pp. 2-3). As Television Studies gained prominence through the late 1970s and early 1980s, led primarily by dissections of the thematic and formal preoccupations commonly associated with the Social Realist tradition and filtered through the heavily-politicised, structuralist *Screen* magazine academic

culture, the fantastical nature of animation – perhaps inevitably – hindered academic discourse of the period. Even today, British popular animated texts are often sidestepped, or measured, against the preponderance of American mainstream examples. For me, critical writing on US shows has provided some useful guiding frameworks, but the failure to address the intersection of specific industrial and cultural conditions remains a continual deficiency. Mittel's *Genre and television: from cop shows to cartoons in American culture*, places animation in a broader network TV context and Stabile and Harrison's edited collection of articles, *Prime time animation – television animation and American culture*, both lead the way in offering quality academic critique that blends analysis with historical overview. Although cast from US perspectives, both books offer rational interdisciplinary methodological pathways. Like them, especially when nailing down conceptions of the American and British sitcom, I draw upon the writings of Eaton, Medhurst and Marc in isolating animated comedy's relationship to past forms. Obviously, as useful as they are as a beginning of a serious TV animation debate around form, industry and critique, they offer little on the type of British socio/political/cultural contexts that I wish to engage with here. But they certainly supersede texts like Neuwirth's *Makin' toon - inside the most popular animated TV shows and movies*, which concentrate more on a US and Canadian industrial situation and which tend to refute critical/analytical academic dialogues.

*The Simpsons* not only appears to be a kind of 'year zero' in terms of production, creativity and cultural impact in my thesis but its impression on academic writing too has been profound. Numerous academic statements have

been informed by this show's success. As such, the raft of texts exemplified here by Booker, Dobson and Johnson-Woods et al are as much in debt to the recent shifts in animation production, broadcast and consumption as they are attempts to quantify a cultural moment. Booker's, in particular, represents the common flag-planting exercise that says 'just enough' about television animation without providing the definitive summation one would desire. Dobson's very useful 2003 article which brings to the table the term "anicom", albeit in a slightly inductive fashion, is concerned more with organising generic components and minimising socio/cultural/political/industrial critique and contexts associated with the show (p. 285). Johnson-Woods's text provides some cogent points about *South Park* in my Chapter Five and she stands out from the plethora of texts now on the market aimed at the undergraduate, that align popular shows with extant ontological academic theories. By this I include – or very purposely here, *exclude* – books like Hanely's 2006 *South Park and philosophy* or Irwin, Conrad and Skoble's 2008 *The Simpsons: the d'oh of Homer (popular culture and philosophy)* for example. The preponderance of these critical perspectives on television animation prompts two conclusions. Firstly, that through *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *South Park*, *King of the Hill* et al we now have a raft of primary texts to assess that undoubtedly create a picture of American culture and go some way to legitimising animation, as much as any credible medium as television and/or film. But secondly, as welcome as it is to see animation entrusted with the potential to bear weight and meaning, one does suspect there is expediency at work here, in service to the academic teaching and publishing industry that this post-1980s explosion in cultural studies has precipitated.

For this thesis, Kitson's 2008 book, *British animation: The Channel Four factor*, is a cornerstone work. It not only supplies an admirable and very necessary amount of industry insider detail on how British animation had been conceived, produced and exhibited up to the late 1990s but, as valuable as this work is, its very existence reinforces the necessity of this thesis entirely. Not only does the work stop off at the point when TV networks really begin to consider what the cultural impact of *The Simpsons* actually was it is also a work that doesn't really account for the concession to American models of production that impacted on the future of UK animation. Kitson's book also fails to offer a comprehensive stance on the way that humour and light entertainment are deployed, post-Groening, to consolidate ratings. In the area that this thesis will be addressing there does exist the occasional oddity, such as Monk's 2007 assessment of *Monkey Dust's* connection to real locations in *British Cinema and Television*. Monk's article doesn't begin to fully account for the show's satirical impulse and neither does it assess the show's unique relationship to TV comedy and animation. This absence is addressed within my own papers and articles published in *animation: an interdisciplinary journal* and *Animation Studies Peer-Reviewed On-Line Journal for Animation History and Theory*. These are to date among the very few serious academic investigations into contemporary British mainstream television animation that blends extant academic discourse from the fields of popular comedy and animation towards a contextual reading.

I mentioned earlier that I wished to locate animation language away from a singular conceptualisation and in doing so I have drawn on graphic traditions of design. Bearing in mind the static nature of much industrial television animation this appears as entirely apposite. This methodological fusion realises the tensions between art practice, ‘still painting’ and cinematic movement that have consistently framed animation. Gombrich’s aligning of art analysis with psychology provides not only a way of assessing how form and representation correspond but also stress the importance of highly subjective reception contexts (1968, pp. 279-303). Alongside this I will also be taking into account Darley’s summation of computer imagery, which offers a platform from which to extend in determining what visual expectations inform early examples of the medium (1996), and also the foundation works of Furniss (1998) and Wells across several key texts cited throughout the thesis, which supplies useful information which aids my conceptualisation of common formal tropes located within television animation. Both authors are mindful of the differences between avant-garde, independent practice and mainstream contexts. In fact the sheer wealth of material that has come through the key academic journals, *animation: an interdisciplinary Journal*, *The Animation Journal* and *Animation Studies – On Line Peer Reviewed Online Journal for Animation History and Theory* is revelatory of the exponential growth of writing on the grammar of animation and, as a result, there is much to draw from, when amending common rules and conceptions here.

But it is both Barrier’s 1999 *Hollywood cartoons – American animation in its golden age*, and Klein’s *Seven minutes – the life and death of the American*

*cartoon* (1993) that have to be highlighted as influential texts where the approach to textual analysis has profoundly informed my own work. Both admittedly draw from a cinematic base, and Barrier famously distrusts academic discourse, but what both of these writers recognise is the importance of the creative process, which they marry to a full understanding of form. These writers appreciate and, (as comprehensively as possible), fully account for animation's ethereal, poetic properties. Both authors' writing expresses a dialogue between form and theme and their approaches to textual work are formidable and are an undoubted influence on my own narrative here.

Of course discourse on comedy draws from a richer terrain of available academic material, having benefited from its attachment to the classics of literature, art and performance traditions. This relationship speaks not just of the practice of drawing from an extant, esteemed, proven body of thought but also this serves another function as some kind of necessary justification for comedy as a form occasionally still undermined by associations with vulgarism, as a low-brow, insubstantial area of study. Stott's point that the fluid nature of comedy's construction, further complicated via receptive conditions, highlights that this field of study shares a similar sense of confusion with animation when constructing a definitive statement on its make-up (2005, p. 8). Like animation, comedy and television too has struggled to extend beyond old prejudices forged in outmoded high/middle/low-brow debates.

Like animation, critical discourse on popular cinematic and televisual forms has emerged at a more intense rate in the past decade, but within this it is notable that the animation medium is often reduced to merely a citation of several titles. This has been, of course, beneficial to my studies. Critchley's *On humour (thinking in action)*, though not actually cited in the work directly proved to be an important stepping stone to much of the work here, as was Wagg's edited collection, *Because I tell a joke or two*. Both texts are leading lights, in that both the monograph and the anthology are happy discussing contemporary culture and comic institutions, and combine a spread of methodologies that do not conflict and that adequately tell the story at hand.

Thompson's 2004 overview, *Sunshine on putty*, posits a well-constructed timeline on British TV comedy of the 1990s which parallels my own. What Thompson's work lacks in critical faculty it makes up for as a source of useful interview material from some of British comedy's most valued practitioners. But this work, too, embodies the absences that I have been stressing around British comedic animation. This paucity continues within Mills's 2005 *Television sitcom*, which extends out of Eaton's cornerstone 1978 *Screen* article, (cited in this work), but that still doesn't adequately account for animation's undoubtedly profound position within millennial comedy. Medhurst's 2007 work, *A national joke – popular comedy and English cultural identities*, whilst helpful in conceptualising the boundaries and slippages permeable in assessing comic identity and the nature of the shared comic experience, appears somewhat reductive in his choices over what comedy texts are deemed worthy of

inclusion. His fixations on a class-bound narrative are often overly-defined through a nostalgic, occasionally exclusionary critique.

This all reinforces academia's curious refusal to engage with comedy and animation in one setting, despite both having been seemingly conjoined in a mainstream setting since animation's beginnings. Yet this has never really been adequately addressed. Wells' 1998 chapter in *Understanding animation*, '25 Ways to Start Laughing', recognises this absence but approaches this area from a curiously fractured, overtly formalist perspective. His introductory model floats a number of cogent ideas and his adaptable précis of personality animation – a key determinant within popular forms dependent on identification – and his processing of Freudian models of humour have been important in informing my own work here. But once more this offers more of an opening out of the debate around comedy and animation's interrelation rather than providing any definitive statement on the matter, and these comments now appear tied to an earlier time and are in need of revision. Thus I will draw upon a fusion of approaches to meet the demands of the topic. The structuralist debates offered by Davis (1993) and O'Neill (1990) will be used in conjunction with historical overviews, such as Billig's *Laughter and ridicule – towards a social critique of humour* (2005) and I will deploy Charney's work around comic archetypes that supplies a useful range of transmutable constructs, which connect with my own ideas (1978). I will be further interconnecting these with the work of Berger (1997) and Morreall's work (1983 and 1999) and his 1987 edited collection, *The philosophy of laughter and humor*, who blend philosophical, anthropological and psychological methodologies with examples of how comedy operates in a

given context. When drawing comedy, animation and conceptions of political correctness together, two secondary works inform my model. These are Cameron's 1995 linguistic model in *Verbal hygiene*, which rightly posits the concept as extending from a debate around labelling and which highlights misconceptions around the term, and Hughes's 2010 *Political correctness – a history of semantics and culture*, alongside Ben Thompson's book which both contemplates this shadowy notion more from the position of overview and contextualises the idea against popular culture and through distinct settings such as newspapers, television comedy, language etc.

I have quantified each chapter under sociological themes – keeping in mind a Bergsonian emphasis – and I have used these disciplines as they can be appropriately transposed to these contexts and within each of them they provide clarity in definition and categorisation. The highly mediated nature of animation actually precludes me following that discipline further. I will not be using sociological methods – statistics or quantitative surveys – to prove points within a creative statement. The anthropological emphasis that appears throughout the thesis exists more as a background narrative, and this addresses the nature of ritual and how this phenomenon informs the texts under study. This is vital when one considers how important thinkers like Douglas and Apte are to the field of academic writing on comedy. However, what this catholic approach to methodology has afforded me is the opportunity to bring together cultural discourses from Giddens (1990), when considering personal identity in a post-industrial milieu, Jenkins (2004 & 2006), when making sense of the increasingly fragmented new media landscapes, and Hoover (2006), processing

religion in today's media, can be usefully deployed alongside and within the sociological theories proposed by the likes of Bichnerri (2006), Beck (1996), Modood (2005) on race, liminality and normalcy, to appropriately quantify the animations under study.

From here I have approached broader cultural discussion from two distinct angles. Setting all these animations into a British societal context insists that I draw from Rosen's 2003 statistical survey, *The transformation of British life 1950-2000 – a social history*, which provides a useful grounding on the social trends within post-war Britain and also locates the ideas about identity, representation and attitudes in a clear setting. However when considering the larger, more abstract ideas on nostalgia that appear throughout the thesis, Sprengler's (2009) dissection of that concept across film and television is deployed alongside 'slab' theorists such as Lyotard (1993 & 2001), for a broader cultural definition of late/postmodernism, and Jameson (1991). Jameson's position, as fed from Lyotard and Baudrillard and coloured by framing comments from Denzin and Hutcheon, among others, appears most apposite. His merging of both cultural and textual debates into a narrative entirely benefits the conclusions of my thesis.

### ***Chapter overview***

Excluding introduction and conclusion, there will be five themed chapters comprising the thesis, set into the wider progressive chronology. Chapter One,

“Drawing Comic Traditions’: Outlining the conditions of Third Wave Animation”, will provide the necessary historical overview of British Television mainstream animation needed to contextualise the ideas I will be later discussing. Here I will be outlining the functions of mainstream animation, what the perceptions are surrounding it, how we can quantify it and then what distinct stages of evolution we can observe at work. I will ask what makes each era so distinct and I will set out a series of narratives that will run through the thesis.

The second chapter is “The Family Myth’ – A Quotation of Normalcy”. This chapter will discuss the construct of ‘family’ and how it has been deployed within this Third Wave of animation within comic settings. Using work on the sitcom and consensus by Eaton (1978) and ideas on the function of archetypes in animation by Wells (1998), this chapter will assess how animated sitcom utilises notions of the ‘everyman’ to frame the definitions of normalcy deployed by programme makers to enforce identification. It will do this initially from a sociological emphasis, detailed by Bicchieri (2006) and L. J. Davis (1997), to clarify these ideas and then I will investigate how three distinctive categories of ‘family’ have emerged through the period under discussion, that can be seen as staples of situation comedy and as a marker of change. These are ‘The Contemporary Family’, considering work by Nancy (1991) and English (1994) as starting points, ‘The Nostalgic Family’, extending on ideas about the postmodern condition from Jameson (1991), and ‘The Ironic Family’, framing arguments around ‘irony’ itself raised by Colebrook (2004).

Chapter Three is called “‘C’mon Mum Monday Night is Jihad Night...’: Race and Nostalgia in a Third Wave Setting”. Here the debate intensifies as this chapter will address several themes relating to representation and socio/cultural attitudes. The chosen primary text will focus on how the potentially difficult area of terrorism is intertwined with debates around race, political correctness and nostalgia. This chapter will frame UK TV comedy and animation’s continually problematic representations of racial minorities as cast against Said’s work on conceptions of Islamophobia (1997), Beck’s dissections of liminality (1996), Modood’s discussions of Hyphenization (2005), Porter’s notes on the female comedy grotesque (1998), and framed within a discussion of nostalgia by Jameson that informs the spine of the thesis (1991).

The fourth chapter is “‘Unpack that...’: Animating the Male in a Third Wave Context”. Here it is important to take account of the larger shifts happening in contemporary culture, as quantified by Jenkins (2004 & 2006), which now dictate the broadcast comedy and animation landscape. Starting from work completed by Eco, this chapter will consider how TV animation has been guided into avenues of gendered humour that dominate this period of production. I will consider how debates around cultural constructions of masculinity, via Beynon (2002), and conceptions of gendered comedy from Walker (1988), inform a larger debate about the constitutional nature of Third Wave Animation. I will be asking whether this pronounced emphasis on humour has sublimated more progressive dialogues and, considering Billig’s ideas on seditious humour (2005), whether we can consider this particular animation moment through tone, subject matter and *absences* of representation.

The fifth and final chapter is “‘Touching Cloth...’: Nostalgic Satire and the Third Wave”. Here I will finish with a discussion of social institutions and ‘authority’. This chapter ties together a range of key ideas and will illustrate how we view society’s relationship with what was, previously, considered to be a monolithic, unshakeable power structure – the Church. The chapter will process depictions of religion in comic terms, using ideas expressed by Berger (1997), Morreale (1999) and Charney (1978), and offer commentary on the role of faith in contemporary life, drawing on Giddens’s (1990) ideas on the post-industrial self, in combination with Hoover’s (2006) attendant framing of our relationship to faith and Spencer’s guiding notes on Catholicism (2012). Here I will return to debates raised in earlier chapters about Third Wave Animation’s connection with nostalgia, fed from discussions highlighted by Booth (1974) on irony, then latterly the writing of Cook (2005) and Sprengler (2009).

The conclusion of the thesis will draw together the various strands and sub-narratives that have been discussed throughout the thesis and will then address a larger question. In that we will have analysed what the important constituent elements of Third Wave Animation are, thus we have to begin, even at this temporal juncture, to suggest a tentative definition as to what Fourth Wave Animation might mean and where this might lead us.

The aim of this thesis is not to construct a comprehensive list of British TV mainstream animation between 1997 and 2010 but more to assess what are the most important touch-points during that period and what they say about us, our

culture and our attitudes. This has been achieved through the research I have gathered, the stories that have bled through the primary and secondary material that I have located, and in piecing together the notable absences *in* those stories. Now as we know, historical writing can be compromised by subjectivity. Narratives constructed in retrospect, defined through their exclusions, can bear the imprint of the writer's bias, of the research path that has been selected, the availability of primary and secondary materials and they can be, in effect, *contained* through what materials are available more than through any actuality over what really occurred. Inevitably history always needs revising, reconsidering, redefining and reconstituting, for such is the manner by which history progresses. Indeed a narrative can be outmoded as soon as it is committed to paper. I have taken great care over all of these factors and am aware of these potential flaws.

But what I have amassed is an original framework that presents a neglected area of study that bears great cultural significance. This is a story of the relationship between culture and industry, of how TV animation shifted to meet a very different set of imperatives than previously and how representation revealed British life in the new millennia. The heavily mediated form of animation does raise a number of questions about agency. How does this form offer credible perspectives on cultural and social attitudes and what is being said here on issues of British identity and how that has been perceived and represented on television? Also, to what extent do comedy and animation now appear conjoined to achieve this?

## **Chapter One**

### **‘Drawing Comic Traditions’: Outlining the conditions of Third Wave Animation.**

#### *Introduction*

As highlighted in my introduction, this chapter will map the shifts within British television mainstream animation, production and innovation as the 1990s moved into the new millennium. Here I will discuss three definite movements as part of a historical framework detailing the evolution of UK TV animation. The writing here will perform a different function from the chapters that follow in that it will be focused more on an overview of distinct periods of production and will define what typifies each of these eras. It is important before proceeding on a series of test cases that I highlight the contextual terms. Here I will be drawing sharp distinctions between different periods in order to establish what I mean by Third Wave Animation.

Although this thesis will be focussing on animation, it is this medium's intense relationship to British television live-action comedy that features as a central preoccupation here. For as the amount of narrative-based animation work significantly increased through the 1990s in the wake of American shows like *The Simpsons* and its descendants, it soon became apparent as the British models reacted to these successes that this moment has to be considered as both emancipation and accession. The freedoms that were promised with these shows appeared to be contained within specific boundaries. These post-*Simpsons* UK animations claimed to be challenging, tonally and thematically, but the reiteration of traditional sitcom and sketch show forms demonstrated that a more pronounced industrial expediency ultimately informed this entire moment. The term 'adult' animation – one so often lazily ascribed to these new works – whilst undoubtedly inferring a sense of confidence in the possibilities of the medium, did at the same time reveal a problematic set of limitations that we will discuss across each of the following chapters in more depth.

To set the scene for the thesis, this chapter will raise questions about agency, industry and animation's shifting relationship within British culture. What this chapter will prove is the existence of a Third Wave of mainstream animation production, 1997-2010, which was characterised by, (and was reactive to), a number of very specific factors which meant this moment was different to what had gone before. The texts under study throughout this thesis were markers of their times. They embodied the aesthetics and ethos of the contemporary postmodern cultural condition, as they were revelatory of animation's recent elevation in terms of their status and through their performative role as ironic,

cultural commentary. As a sub-narrative that will inform all of the chapters directly and *indirectly*, this is undoubtedly animation that spoke as much of the past as it did the present.

Third Wave Animation also contributes to a picture of a hitherto ignored aspect of British TV comedy. It tells us much about tone, taste and comic trends. It processes a time in live-action as well as animated comedy when comedians and performers took on the challenges of embracing humour that reported on our culture and society, but also set about challenging perceived orthodoxies within comedy. That Third Wave Animation can be seen as post-politically correct comedy suggests a range of issues that will be explored throughout the rest of the thesis in more detail. What I aim to ascertain here is the nature of millennial mainstream animation in a post-deregulated broadcast environment. I will be posing a number of questions about how functionality and genuine artistic intent converge to shape the way animation was presented and constructed in the first decade of the 21st century on UK TV.

***First Wave Animation: Energy and movement (1955 – 1978).***

Compromise appears built into British television animation from its inception. Burrow's précis of British cinema, and latterly television, animation adheres to common contemporary suspicions around the mainstream form as being constructed solely for the province of children and advertising (1986, p. 273).

She notes the importance of the arrival of commercial television in September 1955 as a revitalisation of the British animation industry, yet she also observes that this moment, historically, has also been equated with a cheapening and diminution of the British form. This perception has been intensified through the demand for “advertising and entertainment” work that dominates this period and, undoubtedly as a result of this, more personal television projects within the landscape of the 1950s were sublimated or sidelined (Burrows, 1986, pp. 280-281). This situation was also recognised by Darley, who observed that advertising promoted a new-found ubiquity of the animation medium through jingles, idents, brands and, what he refers to as, “the information film” - which is an extension from the propaganda shorts of the 1930s and 1940s and a communication tool utilised for educative purposes by the Central Office of Information that became a large part of British visual culture from the 1950s onwards (1997, p. 50). Walker too saw that by 1957 the industry had expanded radically to meet those demands as, “In Britain alone” there were “about forty producers of cartoon films... [that] sprung up with the arrival of ITV” (2008, para 8). This emphasis cast the arrival of television as a boon *and* a curse for the animation industry of the 1950s and 1960s. John Halas – with his wife Joy Batchelor arguably Britain’s most prolific generators of animation – argued that this moment was in fact a revival that re-focused the animation trade and that went some way to undermine the malaise enforced by the dominance of US animation – Britain’s “inferiority complex” as he put it – that they had seen characterize the UK industry (“Personality of the Month – John Halas”, 1957, p. 3).

‘Functionality’ undoubtedly appears as a key determinant in this tentative, highly fragmented first wave of production. Certainly this is apparent when casting an eye over the vast range of work produced during this time. What emerges when considering the historical narratives that surround British animation, in cinema *and* in television, is that they tend to uniformly express a story of sporadic, but notable, touchstones of production. This can be seen in well-covered academic/historical observations on Anson Dyer’s work as an independent, as a supplier of advertising film and as intersecting with music hall and musical forms (DeVries & Mul, 2009, pp. 11-29), through David Hand’s invitation by J. Arthur Rank in 1944 to consolidate UK animation via a Disney-style production method (Macnab, 1993, pp. 212-261), or via Halas and Batchelor’s relationship with the Ministry of Information and COI (Wells, 2006, pp. 90-92), or indeed also through Len Lye’s abstracted 1930s collaborations with the GPO film unit (Armes, 1978, p. 138). These all appear now as fixed points within Britain’s historical production story and, more often than not, British animation has been shaped by what Bendazzi terms “individualists” liberated through the freedom of “poverty” (1994, p. 25).

Early 20th century British cinema work paralleled European production in that it was propelled by small-scale, experimental efforts conducted on limited budgets and away from any support by large production/exhibition/distribution combines, which the American system has traditionally favoured. Thus Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, Dudley Buxton, Sid Griffiths and Dyer et al all worked in stop-motion, cut-out and celluloid forms to make short films that remained distributed within the UK cinema market and owed as much to newspaper strip

origins as they did the more opulent absurdist/surrealist Atlantic influences propagated by the likes of Otto Messmer and the fine line portraits of Winsor McCay. Of the UK studios that did find moderate success, as Burrows states, were those formed in the 1940s:

... British Animated Productions; British Industrial Films ... Analysis Films; The British Instructional Films animation unit; Diagram Films; The Mack Cartoon Unit; Pinschewer Films; Signal Films ... were among the many names which survived longer or shorter time by turning out advertising, educational or instructional films, all financed by outside sponsorship, with varying degrees of artistry (1986, p. 280).

Only Halas and Batchelor and the Larkins studios – established in 1939 and ran by ex-German P.O.W. Peter Sachs from 1941 onwards – went on to survive as institutions across several decades and continued to dominate the industry in terms of output and ubiquity (Wells, 2006, p. 158). These foundations of First Wave TV Animation extend from European traditions and both overseers had served with Hungarian filmmaker George Pal before the breakout of World War Two. Halas's shrewdness and understanding of "the importance of having the factory behind you", in particular cemented his own outfit in terms of versatility and ubiquity (Halas cited by Holliss, 1985, p. 22). As undoubtedly the most well-organised, expansive and prolific industrial template, Halas and Batchelor embodied the adaptability and pragmatism that typifies First Wave UK animation, working in a rapidly-evolving industry landscape hand-in-hand with creative progress. This ethos can be seen throughout the late 1930s into the 1940s, in their contributions to propaganda shorts, information cartoons and

cinema advertising alongside their more personal, experimental projects such as *The Magic Canvas* (1949) and *The Owl and the Pussycat* (1953). By the very beginning of 1959 they had doubled their previous year's production schedule to thirty-nine one-reel shorts for theatrical and television exhibition and had initiated alongside ten industrial reels some two hundred and fifty television commercials (Maucer, 1958, p. 4). They embraced not only celluloid animation – a form favoured for its speed and manageability in industrial situations – but also variations on stop motion, glass work and cut-out figurative and non-figurative forms. In their commercial guise the company supplied public relation films typified by titles such as *Invisible Exchange* (1956) for Esso and *All Lit Up* (1957) for the Gas Council, and children's TV programmes such as *Snip and Snap* (1960), *Foo-Foo* (1960) and *Habatale* (1960) as part of an ongoing funding relationship with US TV network ABC. Halas and Batchelor also internationally-distributed shows like *Do-Do: The Kid from Outer Space* (T5: 1965-1970), along with a raft of TV adverts and titles for films like *Passport to Pimlico* (1949), animating Maurice Binder's title designs for *Surprise Package* (1960) and *Once More With Feeling* (1960), providing lettering, maps and effects for *The Guns of Navarone* (1960) and animation effects for the Titanus film *The Thief of Baghdad* (1961). Kitson notes that Halas and Batchelor's prominence also had a lasting effect in also training a generation of young animators across not only a range of techniques but also to meet the demands of this profound industry shift (2008, p. 15).

As effective as this model was, there was still room for smaller, less ambitious, studios like Larkins which ran alongside them and preferred to remain

predominantly in the commercial sector, initiating long term-relationships with the likes of Barclays, British Petroleum, Coca-Cola, Fisons and Max Factor, among others (Rider, 1963, p. 35). The sheer amount of activity engendered by TV soon transmitted to other UK animation pioneers. Thus to colour this milieu even further, we have to consider the contributions of personnel such as ex-Larkins artists Bob Godfrey and Keith Learner, establishers of Biographic Films, whose 'Crompton Bulbs' advert was shown on ITV on its opening night. Among other prominent animators in this period are the likes of Vera Linnecar, Nancy Hanna and Richard Williams. Williams completed some 2000 adverts with his own self-titled company, before moving on to the inserts for the 1968 *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and then to Hollywood for the 1988 *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. George Dunning is another major name who not only founded his own influential 'TV Cartoons' company in 1957, as a result of this boom period, but also went on to produce the 1969 Beatles film, *Yellow Submarine*, which inspired UK practitioners and appeared as a welcome formal and industrial counterpoint to the dominance of Disney. Also less well-known contributors like Ron Wyatt, Tony Cattaneo, Charlie Jenkins, Mike Brown and Dick Taylor held key roles in organising and contributing to a variety of sub-divided companies that emerged in this period, from the ubiquitous 'TV Cartoons' to 'Trickfilm' to 'Logo Films' etc. All of these found this sudden industrial movement beneficial after struggling in the rapidly eroding independent cinema sector (Rider, 1965, p. 38).

Godfrey, in particular, was vocal about the positive aspects of expansion within the commercial arena that had eventually funded his own company in 1965. He

notes that any monolithic nature of studio production soon became subverted by what he referred to as a “boutique system”, whereby small groups of animators could hire equipment and flourish as “film production mushroomed into lots of little companies instead of a handful of bloody great big ones” (cited by Harrigan, 1984, p. 6). Thus alongside the bigger names, an open, collective, creative approach was allowed to flourish, one that countered the hierarchical, Fordist Disney-style method of production favoured by the larger studio set ups. Godfrey stated in 1979 that, initially, “We had more of a free hand in those days as the agency art director took a far less important part in the concept and design of the commercial” (cited by Lockey, 1979, p. 20). The result of this was that some of the most distinctive TV ads from the period, such as the UPA-inspired ‘Esso Blue’ jingles that ran from 1958 into the late 1960s, emerged via the animator’s own creative expression. As ex-Richard Williams employee Cattaneo added, the creative freedom and financial benefits offered to animators within advertising was welcomed and cherished:

Basically we’re advertising film makers. We happen to enjoy making commercials as much as appreciating the money that comes with them which allows us to maintain a reasonable standard of living. I reckon we only need to work really hard for about four months a year – the rest of the time we can relax a little and mull over some of the ideas we can have for other films (cited by Rider, 1965, p. 38).

Yet this creative moment had been tempered by the early 1960s. Once the advertising companies – who could be paying up to £1,200 for 30 seconds of film – realised they could control the product and dictate its form and structure from the secure position of investor, then this sense of freedom receded

(Armitage, 1966, p. 27). Animator Nick Spargo confirmed this shift towards more constrictive conceptual and working practices when he added, “Hence it was a *fait accompli*; all the ‘i’s’ had been dotted and all the production company had to do, and was in fact dared to do, was to ‘make it move’. We who had been architects were now bricklayers” (cited by Armitage, 1966, p. 25).

Alongside the need for programme titles and the odd insert, such as Mike Brown’s occasional 1969 work for BBC TV’s quiz show *All in the Family*, Kitson states of the pre-*Simpsons* animation landscape, “TV schedules were already based on half-hour programmes which did not leave much room for shorts and – like the cinema – television could purchase any it needed from the USA” (2008, p. 14). Thus animation became an expedient ‘filler’ of loose air time, and this meant that the most commonly available narrative-based material on individual commercial TV networks throughout this period up to the 1980s was, more often not, not just home-grown functional product but also American imports of UPA/Columbia, Walter Lantz, Fleischer, Disney and Warner Brothers cinema shorts. These were deployed from pools of available, bought-in cartoons by commercial and public service schedulers to plug five to ten minute gaps between afternoon and early evening schedules, or as a last-minute filler to compensate for under-running or timetable errors. Occasionally these shorts would be collated into semi-regular compendium shows such as Thames Television’s *The Bugs Bunny Show*, shown across the independent networks every Monday at 4.55pm, but mainly they were seen as ballast or as a solution to scheduling problems (Rider, 1969b, p. 20). What little emerged from the more explicitly European arena of production through this period, still serving

the purpose of ‘wadding’ across all time slots, was the odd anomaly, such as BBC TV showings of critically acclaimed works such as Dušan Vukotić’s *Surogat* (1961) or Ernest Pintoff’s *The Violinist* (1959) – animations that contrasted with US mainstream studio product – which were pitched alongside the likes of Serge Danot’s *La Manège enchanté* (1963), imported, re-named and dubbed to great success for BBC UK audiences as *The Magic Roundabout* (McGown, 2006, paras 1-5).

Curiously it is within children’s UK production, in this First Wave, where narrative animation and auteurism actually flourished and a village-business model prevailed. The likes of Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin’s Smallfilms (1959-to date) supplied stop-motion films like *Ivor The Engine* (BBC 1959), *The Clangers* (BBC 1969-1974) and *Bagpuss* (BBC 1974), and the cardboard/puppet crossover techniques filmed in real time – as opposed to frame-by-frame stop motion – that defined the work of John Ryan in shows such as *The Adventures of Captain Pugwash* (BBC 1957-1959, then 1974) and *Mary, Mungo and Midge* (BBC 1969) were all given prominence within the schedules, as submitted through Freda Lingstrom/BBC’s *Watch with Mother* slot (1952-1973). This move complemented shows like *Vision On* (BBC 1964-1976) that included full animation segments alongside live action skits and occasional items that offered a rare, and probably time-consuming, combination of *both* mediums.

In fact First Wave Animation mirrors the disjointed nature of the early British cinema industry. Although this era's fragmented creative/industrial situation suggests links to the past, in actuality it points to the future. Defined as it was by an industry-led lack of identity and cohesion of exhibition, distribution and promotion, this moment betrayed the common perceptions cast around the medium. Animation per se, narrative or otherwise, within the business and the general culture of the time, was dogged by limitations of perception, in terms of the potential business, artistic and critical possibilities of the medium and these factors undoubtedly hindered any sense of creative progression until the later shifts of the 1970s. This sense of fragmentation prevails into the next era of production. Also, despite Channel Four's support of independent animators and children's animation anthologies throughout the 1980/1990s, British animation production continued to be overshadowed by problematic issues of worth and value, especially in relation to European and American examples. This undoubtedly impacted on the creation and inception of narrative animation during this First Wave period and, as such, these factors would on to govern the nature of Third Wave Animation in more explicit terms later on.

***Second Wave Animation: A time of possibilities (1979-1996).***

We must be aware that characteristics of the First Wave continue throughout this Second Wave as a parallel undercurrent, and certainly aspects of that prevail today, albeit in an even more fragmented fashion. As of course we are aware, such cultural changes serve as a useful framework but often do not fall into watertight categories. There are 'lags' or 'leads' in and across any period of

history. Each stage of this development has not been so much a break or a disconnection from what has gone before, but more of an extension running as an undercurrent or as a parallel to the next shift in progression. Definitive and characteristic aspects of each previous industrial/creative production moment have persisted throughout the successive 'waves' or 'eras'. The kinds of mainstream British comic television animation, which conforms to the classifications that I am outlining here is never fully eradicated or rendered totally obsolete upon the arrival of each new epoch.

Certain kinds of comic animation can become a signifier or embodiment of an earlier time. The characteristics that embody the development of each of these waves often merely fall out of favour, and animated artefacts that encapsulate a particular contemporary flavour or aesthetic are usually at their most potent for a short period of time before then appearing passé or too obviously tied to a particular cultural or historical moment. These types of animation simply then fall into recession or become part of the televisual wallpaper that backgrounds contemporary media culture.

Nonetheless, it is clear that some distinctions can be drawn between First and Second Wave contexts and the difference between them can be mapped through a narrative of evolution. As First Wave work can be encapsulated through an emphasis on functionality, the next stage of animation production favours auteur-driven, politicised, independent work – in ethos and through its relation

to industry – and, to wildly varying degrees, it bears an explicit imprint of a modernist, avant-garde impulse. Certainly Second Wave Animation can be seen as an explicit reaction to the conditions of First Wave Animation.

Buchan may well have insisted that animation today is all-pervasive in nature when commenting on its ubiquity in our contemporary culture, but even within the UK of the 1970s the medium had actually already infiltrated British TV's limited set of broadcast opportunities in a somewhat robust fashion (2007, para 1). Yet despite this prevalence across the pre-deregulated terrestrial networks, animation itself still retained the position of insider/outsider, under-valued, critically ignored and seemingly forever on the periphery of acceptance as a credible medium. If we can consider this in industrial terms to begin with, then First Wave work can be typified as being all about a UK industry coming to terms with its own identity and about meeting the requirements of new media. Numerous other factors informed Second Wave Animation. We have to take account of the consolidation of television as a communication medium, intensified by the arrival of new home entertainment formats such as Betamax and VHS. What also has to be considered here is the moribund state of UK mainstream cinema. This has to be conceptualised alongside the beginnings of a real acceptance of animation as a more viable form, capable of bearing a significant meaning and being able to give a voice to those on the margins. All of these issues also have to be framed within the prevailing socio/cultural/political climate of the period, whereby Socialism accedes to the arrival of the Conservative government in 1979. Retrospectively, Second Wave Animation bears the imprint of the creative, industrial, financial and

promotional support offered by the terrestrial network, Channel Four. It is this channel's specific relationship with animation where a true renaissance can be discerned. It is here the debate around television animation evolution intensified. There are a set of conditions put in place here that also go on later to inform *Third Wave Animation*. But a profound issue that underpinned Channel Four's specific relationship with animation was the burgeoning independent filmmaking landscape of the 1970s. Undoubtedly, Second Wave Animation can be defined as work that extends from the artistic freedoms permitted during that particular moment.

Despite the 1950s' manufacturing expansion, the UK industry remained in a relatively disjointed state. Godfrey noted in 1984 that, despite being a respected force within a revitalised industry, his own company operated modestly as one set-up among the other fifty-six established within London of the 1980s (cited by Harrigan, 1984, p. 7). But in an industry still primarily dictated by commerce the possibilities for more personal, creative animated statements increasingly became feasible, albeit on a modest scale. Darley notes that the rise of autonomous voices during this time was down to the diverse funding pathways that were becoming available throughout the 1970s (1997, p. 50). This network of financial support aiding independent activity throughout the early 1960s and 1970s was incredibly fragmented, sporadic and occasionally haphazard in nature, so much so that a comprehensive picture of this phenomenon is difficult to ascertain. The BFI were responsible for the bulk of available funding for one-off animation shorts, but it was not uncommon to find limited revenue streams made available for animation projects buried within the competitive maze of

private financiers and broader community-based art programmes located across the country, as well as from sources as disparate as the Arts Council and the Foreign Office (Rider, 1970, p. 65).

Through this network a strain of 1970s independent British animation emerged that sat apart from the glut of information films and the clutch of enthusiastic comedic amateur efforts that secured the occasional release on UK cinema bills. This was a diverse vanguard of British director/writer/animators, epitomised by Thalma Goldman (*Amateur Night* from 1975), Antoinette Starkeiwicz (*High Fidelity* from 1976), Stan Heyward (*The Mathematician*, 1976), Tim Wood (*Full Circle*, 1971), Donald Holwill (*Adventures of Flutterguy* from 1976), Vera Neubauer (*Animation for Live Action*, 1978), Anna Fodorova (*The Loop*, 1977) and Alison De Vere (*Café Bar* from 1974), all of whom were prolific in a range of animation media throughout this period in comedic, figurative *and* abstract narratives (Brooke, 2003, paras 1-9). Much of the work produced was ideologically-driven, often difficult and obtuse in choices of imagery and united by a desire to avoid less obvious, immersive approaches to narrative construction, although by no means did these animations avoid comedy as a mode, simply the chosen registers were less mainstream in operation. These were films that often reflected personal experience, contested the commercial animation form and offered contrasting degrees of ideological independence from the mainstream.

This was the very foundation of Second Wave Animation production and it subsequently led to many artistic and creative organisations like the Aardman Studios, the Leeds Animation Workshop and individualists such as Joanna Quinn (*Girl's Night Out*, 1987), DeVere, David Anderson, the Quay Brothers (*Nocturna Artificialia*, 1979), Paul Vester (*Sunbeam*, 1980) and Phil Mulloy (*Cowboys*, 1991), among many others that became definitive Second Wave voices. As Darley notes, many had emerged from the Independent Filmmaker's Association of the 1960s and 1970s, but they still maintained close connections to advertising (1997, pp. 50-53). The 1950s and 1960s had reinforced the need to work alongside and within the commercial sector. Many of these authors maintained an expedient policy of keeping a foot in both commercial *and* independent camps – Quinn's advertising 1990s animation for 'Whiskas' and 'Charmin' and the Quays' work on Peter Gabriel's 1985 *Sledgehammer* video are examples of this – whilst some, like Mulloy, remained resolutely apart from the mainstream. Others, like Aardman, latterly became, in effect, the animation establishment itself.

The models of authorship that dominate this Second Wave correlate with the kind prominent within Film Studies that prioritise the director/ animator as the "personality who endows his work with organic unity" (Sarris cited by Buscombe, 1981, p. 25). Buscombe rightly stresses the importance of context, not just in terms of medium, but also bearing in mind the industrial setting whereby artists are conceiving and executing their ideas. This conception would appear entirely appropriate as many of the animators here not only wrote, storyboarded, designed, manipulated and executed, or at least fundamentally

contributed to the execution of, their films (Kitson, 2008, pp. 25-32). Indeed such was the level of self-conscious formal experimentation in live-action and animated film during the 1970s that by the end of the decade two parallel and very separate arenas had formalised: avant-garde and mainstream. These Second Wave animations fore-grounded what can be now seen as avant-garde practice, as non-commercial animation, that extended from progressive modernist conceptions concerned primarily with a self-conscious aesthetic approach.

This approach appears even more particularly apposite within a British industrial/cultural/temporal context, as the rejection of Americana and the embrace of the stylistic, authorial freedoms associated with a more European authorial paradigm perhaps are entirely understandable when one considers that the leading lights of British animation were in fact all immigrants. Halas, Dunning, Godfrey and Sachs came from Europe, Canada and Australia and they took advantage of an open, post-war industrial cinematic *and* televisual field. Thus it seemed entirely appropriate that their 1970s successors in both arenas would inherit a mindset that rejected American practice as a matter of course. Increasingly Second Wave artists strove to construct texts that spoke of a uniquely British, personalised experience and that forged links more with European art/graphic/animation traditions rather than commercial US forms. This situation was intensified by the cultural saturation of American media throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The centralisation of popular American animation was being enforced through its ubiquity on British TV and cinema screens and this posited a challenge to UK artists to subvert, invert and translate animation's potential into more a contemporised, local register.

Pilling elaborates on these conditions further when she highlights the range of cultural factors at play that influenced production of animation through this period. The centralising of animation, to not just the practical disciplines but also as part of a tentative approach towards serious elevation of both historical/theoretical traditions, was inevitably reflected in the kinds of films being made. The broadening of an academic/historical critical impulse is profound here, as the previously undervalued subject of animation had now made its way into interdisciplinary educative Higher Education settings, as part of “Fine Art, Media Studies, Graphics Illustration, Film and Video” courses across the UK, the role of St. Martin’s School of Art in London being a prominent voice in early days within the UK (1992b, p. 80). This factor also worked in tandem with leftist ideologies that were also dominating council and arts institutions. Both of these reasons played a notable role in facilitating funding for difficult projects, which were to become under threat in less supportive times as the 1970s progressed. The beginnings of Second Wave Animation were further enhanced by the increasing emergence of the specifically scheduled and programmed “animation festival”, which was another marker of the form’s acceptance as a site of exhibition, contextualisation, appreciation and consolidation during this period (Darley, 1997, p. 51).

The fractured funding and production dynamic managed to produce work that transmitted to network broadcasting settings. Within these limited, haphazard exhibition conditions the pathway that was most discernible was that between

cinema and TV. Some animation shorts during the 1970s could experience a life on mainstream cinema circuits in support of features or between double bills of live-action cinema – favourable distribution and critical conditions permitting – which could, in turn, lead to being shown on late night television as filler between adult programmes. Although public service channels like the BBC recognised that this mine of more difficult, non-comedic animation existed, the inclination to corral such a body of work into a cohesive programme of exhibition didn't really coalesce until the 1980s. Indeed the BBC not only funded some animation, in a very sporadic fashion, but it also showcased some of it too with expansive works by Danish animators like Michael Foreman and Jannik Hastrup, together with independents like Fiasco Films (Rider, 1969a, p. 73). However it was Channel Four who were eventually more proactive in this area and who seized the BBC's rather incomplete initiative by formalising this inclination into something more concrete, by supporting the likes of Peter Lord and David Sproxton of Aardman and promoting the 1981-1983 Channel Four series, *Animated Conversations*.

Indeed it is impossible to conduct *any* survey on British animation and avoid mentioning the Aardman Studios. Apart from their industrial authority within the mainstream form, the studio has produced work throughout First Wave Animation (in not just the arena of children's animation, but also through their ubiquity in advertising, programme titles – supplying animation for the BBC from 1972 onwards) as well as in more experimental Second Wave works that contain elements of social commentary aligned to comedy (Quigley, 2002, pp. 85-88). It would not be inaccurate to consider the studio as a kind of 'British

Disney', so embedded is it within contemporary animation culture, history and industry. The Bristol-based studio has, in effect, taken up the mantle of Halas and Batchelor as the UK's primary producer of quality, conventional animation. What has aided this now global success is the cultural acceptance of their character-based franchise, *Wallace and Gromit* (1989-to date), alongside the pervasiveness of their *Creature Comforts* template.

Their *Animated Conversations* effort for Channel Four superseded the BBC's version of what was, in effect, the same idea, *Conversation Pieces* (1979-1981). This particular collection featured shorts like *Down and Out* (1979) and *Confessions of a Foyer Girl* (1979), that made use of 'grabbed' conversations animated after the event and that tapped into a recurrent theme about small lives being defined through animated observation. This was a form that Aardman would return to again within their studio-defining *Creature Comforts* series at a later date. As part of *Animated Conversations* Channel Four commissioned from Sproxtton and Lord *On Probation*, *Early Bird*, *Sales Pitch*, *Going Equipped*, *Late Edition* and *Palmy Days* (all from 1983). This intersection between animation and comedy was defined by a pronounced mimetic quality and not only predicted the Third Wave still to come, but the incongruous properties of animation here also allowed the interjection of social commentary into the form in a more overt fashion. This also cemented animation as part of Channel Four's actual identity (Kitson, 2008, pp. 38-43).

Channel Four's role here was crucial. As overseen by Jeremy Isaacs in 1981, the network was responsible for instigating a series of progressive commissions that provided a departure from most mainstream television programming, for not only animation but also for comedy. Channel Four embraced the shifts in live-action comedy that were also happening around the same time, as the Alternative Comedy movement appeared a perfect fit for the channel, as many of the comedians from this moment had too expressed a Leftist political position. Isaacs used the channel to break down what he perceived to be a stasis in mainstream broadcasting by offering commissions to independent contractors, promoting left-field, marginal, occasionally intellectual subject matter, emphasis and programming in a bid to create a climate of energy and innovation. This radicalism, as Isaacs stated in 1981, was initiated to create programmes that would "show women as they are; programmes that explain the world and reflect a multicultural society; programmes to debate the great questions of the day – and lastly, as an afterthought, programmes to entertain" (cited by Brown, 2007, p. 43).

From here Channel Four engaged in a policy of supporting unknown artists and sponsoring work that continued the questioning of the mainstream. However the channel did not initially foreground a support of animation. Its appearance within the schedules in fact coincided more with Isaacs's own suspicion of studio-bound productions and with his own love of abstract art forms. As Issacs confirmed in an interview: "there were very few programmes on screens anywhere whose essence was to give visual pleasure or convey ideas in a visual way" (cited by Kitson, 2008, p. 25). Second Wave Animation's definitive

moment came through an otherwise forward thinking channel inadvertently attempting to rectify a gap in support for visual forms away from cinema.

What also benefited animation's position in this context was its brevity and flexibility. Ultimately, Isaacs conceived of animation as a problem solver, continuing its status as a short 'filler' to be deployed to plug gaps between programmes. This was compounded by an official 'received wisdom', more likely propagated by a broadcasting culture built around securing ratings and advertising revenues, that animation could only ever be of a marginal interest, a myth subsequently undermined by the arrival of *The Simpsons* in 1989. It was also a double-edged gesture that facilitated progressive animation's access to valuable airtime but still this did little to raise the medium's industrial status. The dissatisfaction expressed by film purchaser Derek Hill at the channel's inception when he reiterated that "animation has been abominably abused on television" was entirely justified (cited by Kitson, 2008, p. 26).

So under the guidance of Commissioning Editor Paul Madden in the early eighties, and following the advice from Hill, along with Eileen Baldwin and David Curtis, from 1990 Claire Kitson, Channel Four funded and showcased a range of films that reflected and extended that fragmented, diverse, ideologically-driven animation landscape that had developed during the 1970s. Kitson's role here was notable as she was a noted figure within the animation community, as a curator and festival organiser. Soon early crossover titles like Dianne Jackson's *The Snowman* (1982) and Jimmy Murakami's *Where the*

*Wind Blows* (1986), along with critically regarded shorts like Alison Snowden's *Second Class Mail* (1984), Quinn's *Girl's Night Out* (1988), Karen Watson's *Daddy's Little Bit of Dresden China* (1988), De Vere's *Black Dog* (1987) and Candy Guard's *Alternative Fringe* (1993), all began to push formal and thematic boundaries, addressing areas such as child abuse, objectification, body image and depression.

As Rider had noted in February 1975, up to this point animation had also been perpetually exiled to day time viewing (1975a, p. 57). Crossing the boundary into evening schedules and fulfilling a different function from just patching up errors in programme timing meant that this was an unheralded, but undoubtedly profound, moment. This batch of critically well-received work soon forced a more creative scheduling impulse and subverted criticisms within the animation community around the cursory way by which work had been treated in the past. Channel Four embarked on theme 'strands' such as *Sweet Disaster* (1984), which commissioned five shorts dealing with nuclear threat, *Blind Justice* (1985), which addressed inequalities in the legal system concerning gender, and *He-Play, She-Play* (1988), which focused on inter-gender communication. This practice continue to flourish into the early 1990s when Kitson made a feature of animated work's appearance in what she referred to as the "post-*Dispatches*" 15 minute slot, programming that could be transmitted after 9.45pm under the *Dope Sheet* umbrella (Brown, 2008, p. 65). Channel Four took full advantage of a moment of freedom where broadcasters were granted respite from ratings/audience demands. For a short period of time culturally available mainstream animation could be as much Russell Hoban's *Deadsy* (1989) or Paul

Berry's *The Sandman* (1992) as it could MGM/Hanna and Barbera's *The Yankee Doodle Mouse* (1943).

The roots of what was to become Third Wave Animation can be observed forming as Michael Grade arrived from the BBC at Channel Four in 1987. This had heralded numerous changes in perception around the channel, and during Grade's tenure the channel experienced budget cuts and was forced into the position (by 1991) of having to sell its own advertising (Brown, 2007, p.157). Grade's position within the broadcasting landscape appeared to be that of a pragmatic moderniser who understood the precarious relationship between commerce and art, areas that Channel Four had negotiated, not entirely successfully, throughout the 1980s. Grade recognised that Channel Four's direction had to be more competitive within the rapidly evolving deregulated, increasingly globalised market if it was to survive. Often he is portrayed, when cast against the bohemian idealism of the Isaacs years, as something of a villain. Undoubtedly Grade's rationalisation provided a bridge between the Socialist agenda of the eighties and the aggressive free-market years to come, and his innate understanding of television as entertainment and the prioritising of comedy as a ratings winner would indirectly *and* directly influence how mainstream animation later evolved (Brown, 2007, pp. 126-139).

Grade supported star-driven projects which heralded the arrival and support of Jonathan Ross, Clive Anderson and Chris Evans, and he recognised the potential of live-action comedy performers like Chris Morris, Vic Reeves, Bob

Mortimer, Charlie Higson, Paul Whitehouse and Rory Bremner among others. He also deployed a range of sensationalist ‘youth’ programming like *The Word* (C4 1990-1995) and *The Girlie Show* (C4 1996-1997). This predictive move laid a foundation for the cultural place of television comedy to come in the next decade, as Isaac’s original ethos dissolved. The importing of American sitcoms to the channel, such as *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997), *The Golden Girls* (NBC 1985-1992) and *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004), not only provided quality at an affordable price, but it also aided the dissolving of cultural snobbery around the supposed inferiority of US comedy. This move bolstered Channel Four Friday night schedules and, in retrospect, symbolically and tellingly supplanted Channel Four’s support of the withering Alternative Comedy impulse that had dominated the mid-to-late 1980s, about which more later in the following chapters (Herbert, 1995, p. 13; Jeffries, 1995, p. 28). It also supplied a foundation for what was to come considering Third Wave Animation’s intense relationship with mainstream comedy.

Grade’s successor, former Director of Television at the BBC Michael Jackson (1997-2001), promised a less controversial tenure and more of an innate understanding of the boundaries of a public service broadcasting remit. Although a critic of Grade and a champion of the early Isaacs years at Channel Four, he too promised there would be an inclination towards practicality. His time at the channel seemed to embody both of those agendas in harking back to the kind of progressive, liberalist ethos that Grade had seemingly neglected under his tenure whilst maintaining a pragmatic understanding of where to insinuate this in contemporary media cultures. Under his aegis, the Channel

Four we now recognise took shape, with *E4* and *FilmFour* brought into being to address the expansion of the evolving media landscape along with a continued embrace of populist shows like *So Graham Norton* (1998-2000) and high-profile, ‘prestige’ projects like *Queer as Folk* (C4 1999-2000). Jackson reduced the expenditure on American comedy imports and drama that had buoyed the company during the early 1990s, from 42.1 per cent of schedules being dominated by US films and shows to a more manageable 26 per cent, though he still maintained an explicit dialogue – and an appropriate differentiation bearing in mind the political climate – on the audience conceived more as ‘consumer’ than ‘viewer’ (Brown, 2007, p. 269).

This is the point where Second Wave Animation began to transmute into the Third Wave. For despite Jackson’s supportive stance on comedy as well as on animation – he had originally pushed for *The Simpsons* to be broadcast terrestrially on BBC 2 in 1996 – what became apparent almost immediately was a withdrawal of financial support for the short animated films that C4 had become known for (“BBC2 Loses the Simpsons”, 2002, para 2). This drove more commercial names like Nick Park towards more secure funding streams at the BBC when seeking finance for his 1994 *The Wrong Trousers*, and notably to guaranteed schedule prominence and thus ratings success. This shift of emphasis meant a significant reduction in organised support for avant-garde works, not just at Channel Four but indeed across all terrestrial channels. BBC Enterprise’s move away from “riskier-seeming projects” (Kitson, 2008, p.207) like Sylvain Chomet’s *La vieille dame et les pigeons* (1997) and the insistence on pursuing more overtly commercial material was evidence of a television

marketplace now keen to give consumers what they wanted rather than what networks felt they needed. UK TV terrestrial networks were no longer concerned with shorts that were expensive, difficult to place in timetables and often didn't return costs via syndication and repeats. Therefore Kitson's idealistic mission aim to retain an original Channel Four impulse towards innovation and balance would soon collapse in the drive towards accessible, ratings-friendly material. In many ways Second Wave Animation can be seen as an anomic state, a moment of flux where British television animation began to negotiate its own identity and prepare itself for what was to come.

***Third Wave Animation: This is the place where you live (1997-2010).***

From here we have to consider the role of agency with some clarity. Second Wave Animation undoubtedly appears a more appropriate moment to foreground auteurism, albeit in a manner open to interrogation from context to context. Of course the role of authorship in a contemporary television context is not considered to be solely the province of the director. The guiding intelligence for a text and who defines intent has to be conceived along more expansive lines, by taking note of the roles played within the creative process by producers and writers as well as the animators themselves. Agency has to be assessed in this Third Wave not just through a singular voice, but often through a collaborative situation and in collusion with the multitude of pressures imposed by larger network interests, commissioning bodies and independent production company politics.

These shifts away from a European-style auteurism, from ideological and formal independence and towards animation's incorporation define this moment. Third Wave of Animation has to ultimately be considered through narratives of concession, for the meaning of independence in this era now related more to the manner by which television work was commissioned and produced than any creative, formal, political or intellectual statement. As the mainstream itself figures so prominently within Third Wave Animation, its relationship to industry, commerce and consensus has to be highlighted here, along with a summation of what tonal and narrative emphases link these disparate works.

We must make clear here that Third Wave Animation cannot really be ascribed to a concerted artistic movement. It is not tied to any specific production/broadcasting situation in quite the same manner as Second Wave work, and it wasn't unified by any set of aims other than to reach the broadest of audiences and serve market needs. Notably it does not exclude what has gone before. This period carries within it a continuation of First and Second Wave undercurrents, albeit now within a deregulated marketplace.

Apart from industrial concerns, the conditions that heralded its arrival are complex, manifold and informed by a variety of converging phenomena and it is personified through the promise of a small number of British adult, commercial shows like Channel Four's *Crapston Villas* (1995-1998), *Pond Life* (1998-2000) and *Bob and Margaret* (1998-2001), and BBC 2's *Stressed Eric* (1998-2000),

among others, that emerged in the wake of *The Simpsons*' success. This moment was further intensified by BBC 3's arrival and its optimistic support of animation was latterly embodied in the highly significant show, *Monkey Dust* (BBC 2003-2005). Mainstream comedy animation appeared to be thriving with shows such as ITV's *2D-TV* (2001-2004), *Bromwell High* (C4 2005) and *Modern Toss* (C4 2005-2007), before being effectively brought to a close through the expensive collapse of *Popetown* (BBC 2005). Yet for a short while it appeared that this intense traffic of shows suggested that the medium's transition to the UK mainstream had finally arrived.

As mentioned in the introduction, the prevailing cultural condition undoubtedly has to be accounted for here. Third Wave Animation benefited entirely from the resetting and re-prioritisation of value within contemporary postmodern culture (Jameson, 1991, pp. 16-25, 234-235). Thus previously disregarded graphic sources, such as comics, sequential art, animation et al, exactly the kinds of low-brow visual media previously tainted by what Fiske sees as an inherently corrosive relationship to commerce, had become more readily accepted within critical/academic circles as now-credible media (1989, pp. 20-47). Animation, in particular, has benefited from these shifts in perception and acceptance.

This Third Wave moment also has to be conceived against the watchwords of diversity and convergence, intensified by the growth of the Internet, which precipitated a rethinking not only of "how media is produced but also how it is consumed" in ways that could only be speculated upon in 1997 (Jenkins, 2006, p. 16). Fragmentation extends not only to consumption but also to production

and exhibition. Darley quantifies this state as relating to an increasingly disjointed mid-1990s broadcasting and political terrain. This is further intensified by the now acceptable postmodern blurring between art and media which has contributed to the demise of a truly “oppositional” avant-garde culture, something he sees as an inevitable result of this specific industrial climate (1997, p. 52). Suspicious of the emergent mainstream sensibility dominant within late 1990s animation production, he saw that “Short-termism appears to reign... In the animation world it is possible to discern an unmistakable shift as the 1990s unfold towards heightened conformity coupled with increasing commercialism” (1997, p. 52). Whilst accepting the factors inherent in such moves can be dependent on internal politics, individual editors’ choices, tastes etc., he adds:

... One must take account of other shaping developments which parallel this change; in particular realignments in the broadcasting industry which followed deregulation ... The concomitant move to commissioning animation which is calculated as safer, that is likely to attract bigger audiences, is part of a global extension of market dependence and control (Darley, 1997, p. 52).

This funding/exhibition shift reflected back onto a more conservative commissioning policy and it suggested that networks would inevitably be producing very different kinds of animation to meet a very distinctive culture, thus establishing the conditions for the coming era entirely.

This UK broadcasting milieu was further shaped by an increase in advertising and children's programming alongside the rise of specialist cable networks and shows that explicitly addressed animation history itself. Ted Turner's 'Cartoon Network' channel, initiated in 1986, embraced an archival remit new to TV and this in conjunction with important terrestrial curator shows like *Stay Tooned* (BBC 1993-1994) and *Rolf's Cartoon Club* (ITV 1989-1993), latterly *Rolf's Cartoon Time*, all contributed to what was to come at the turn of the millennium. Although the BBC launched various attempts to embed independent-orientated animation, through projects like *Animation Week* (1988), under the guidance of Alan Yentob, Irene Kotlartz and Jayne Pilling, it was at Channel Four where Third Wave Animation really began to take shape.

Three Channel Four commissions laid the foundations for this evolution. *Crapston Villas* (C4 1995-1998), *Pond Life* (1997) and *Bob and Margaret* (1998-2001) are significant in that they were comedic shows that used personality animation to address adult themes, set within narratives that intersected with more traditional, televisual forms. These were shows that were expected to perform the same function as live-action examples. They are at the roots of Third Wave Animation itself.

Each of the animators responsible for these texts worked for Channel Four and they emerged from the independent British film sector. They served the channel's ethos in highlighting talent that had not achieved mainstream recognition as yet, (especially with Fine and Snowden whose work had been

acknowledged within industry circles). These artists also engaged with narratives that gave voice to a minority, be it broadly feminist (in the case of Guard and Kennedy) or in expressing stories featuring pan sexual characters to challenge mainstream animation orthodoxies.

We will look at *Bob and Margaret* in more detail in the next chapter, but the first example here, Sarah Ann Kennedy's stop-motion animated *Crapston Villas*, is notable as it provided a bridge between the Second and Third Wave in many ways, by extending from art-house origins into a more Grade/Jackson-style narrative expediency. Through its adherence to soap-opera structures and a willingness to broaden on-screen representation, *Crapston Villas* presented a progressive gender politic sensibility yet it insisted on marrying this to an abrasive, scatological mode of humour. The show also heralded an engagement with credible voice-over talent from the world of live-action comedy and theatre, such as Jane Horrocks, Morwenna Banks and John Thompson, in a gesture that would come to be standard practice within Third Wave texts.

*Crapston Villas*' ancestry lay in Kennedy's live-action/animation short *First Night* (1991) and it was specifically aimed at the post-watershed Friday night comedy audience that Channel Four had been nurturing at this time. Set within a fictional London urban community it addressed not only life from a multicultural perspective but also offered the first real mainstream animation depictions of gay life in the characters of Robbie and Larry, voiced by Thompson and Steve Steen. Kennedy cast her clay/stop-motion characters as a

series of grotesques and used them to explore gender, particularly via the Horrocks character Flossie, from a proto post-feminist position, establishing a dialogue that suggested to women to “feel confident enough to get away from the idea of positive images, to be able to explore their own weaknesses” (Kennedy cited by Pilling, 1992c, p. 95). However the emphasis placed on shock and vulgarity meant that the residual flavour left by the show was that it was more transgressive than progressive. Ironically, and as a sign of larger cultural shifts of the time, its underperformance ratings-wise resulted in the show being cancelled during its second series, in favour of the bought-in, and arguably more masculinist, *South Park*.

The second significant show here was *Pond Life*, which fore-grounded the work of animator Candy Guard, the artist/writer/director of *Fatty Issues* (C4 1990) and *Alternative Fringe* (C4 1993). Like *Crapston Villas* before it, this was a show which prioritised script and voice work as “a radio play” over “rudimentary” animation and it too provided a coherent animated voice that discussed women’s concerns and issues (Guard cited by Pariser, 1992, p. 88). The show appeared in an animation context purely for the sense of creative control the medium offered. *Pond Life* was a synthesis of influences which spoke as much of British comics as it did animation, and Guard also cited the work of live-action television social/behavioural observationists like Mike Leigh and Victoria Wood, as well expressing a tonal sympathy with Alternative comediennes like Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders (cited by Pariser, 1992, p. 88). The show’s themes detailed dilemma-based examinations of freedom versus security set within the, often self-imposed, confines of family life. This

was a co-production between Eva Productions, Channel Four and S4C, that it debuted from a ten minute pilot into two series, and which due to its parochial nature proved, as Eva Production Head Tony Stern qualified, “hard to shift internationally” (cited in “Animation - Toon planning”, 1999, para 2).

Both of these Channel Four auteurist shows failed to connect with audiences in the way Channel Four commissioner Kitson had hoped. They were narratives still allied to an increasingly outmoded ethos and, due to the less aggressive nature of the humour of *Pond Life* in particular, they failed to connect with the 18-24 male demographic so sought by Channel Four. As a result of this, Kitson expressed disappointment that “the climate for animation projects would not be as propitious”. These two shows, along with *Bob and Margaret*, may well have been pointing forward what was to come, and also signalled a souring of Channel Four’s love affair with home-grown, mainstream animation (2008, p. 64). Their relative failure in home-grown terms also highlighted how less room suddenly became available within the mainstream for marginal voices and, as will be investigated later, how comedy and animation consensus drifted towards more a conventional viewpoint. Symbolically, they opened Third Wave Animation and simultaneously closed down the Second Wave.

After this Kitson’s replacement, Camilla Deakin, wanted to redefine the nature of the Channel Four animated sitcom, especially after *Bob and Margaret*. In her view, the Alison Snowden and David Fine show was “well made and well written” but it did not “have the same fast tempo as the US shows and does not

sit well in that schedule... We have been good at accepting animation from America, but it makes sense to make our own animation when you look at the success of US programmes over here” (Deakin cited by McCubbin, 1999, paras 26-30). This suggested that Channel Four were looking for shows with a different emphasis from the kinds of narratives that Kitson had initiated. Though later shows emerged at Channel Four like the school-set 2005 sitcom *Bromwell High*, which like *Bob and Margaret* was co-financed and executed with Canadian input, and sketch shows, such as *Modern Toss*, neither of these texts reached mass audience acceptance or indeed particularly resonated within the corridors of the channel. Tellingly, by 2006 support of author-driven, idiosyncratic, less commercial work, that embodied Second Wave imperatives, was non-existent.

What linked these shows, and what continued throughout the rest of the Third Wave, was a mimetic quality. Despite Third Wave Animation being comprised of formally extremely disparate texts, constructed from a range of different animation materials, these were shows that ultimately exhibited what Barthes saw as a kind of “pseudo-logic”, that he saw dominate realist texts and that “answers our conventional assumptions about real actions”, more “than to reality itself” (1986, p. 181). Barthes noted that a realist narrative strike us as “realistic because its events are manifestly joined with a kind of ‘logical paste’ that establishes causal relationships between events or within a character’s personality” (1986, p. 181). How this feature manifests itself in animation will be fleshed out within the proceeding chapters, but for now I would like to suggest that the texts under analysis are united through this quotation of

‘reality’, whereby animation doesn’t just mimic the recording conventions of live-action formal grammar as such, but sets up specific narratives and representations that work more as an ambiguous, intuitive phenomenon. This connection to an everyday, shared experience demonstrates to us a mimetic quality, one that we “recognize as a presence” as we encounter it and that we “notice it when it is absent” (Potolsky, 2006, p. 4).

To define Third Wave Animation as Social Realist animation in any way is, of course, highly problematic in such a highly mediated context, however there are undoubtedly correlations here with William’s conception of that term, in that these are shows that refute divinity and prioritize a human truth grounded in a contemporary framework (1977, pp. 61-74). But from the stop-motion grotesqueries of *Craptson Villas*, to the impressionistic scribbles in *Modern Toss*, to the formally more conservative *Monkey Dust*, this is undoubtedly a discernible component which complements Bergson’s understandings of the function of comedy entirely. He recognised that comedy’s essential role was to identify humanity: “Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification” (2007, p .4). This is animation that is directly about our lives, cast in a very contemporary register.

Third Wave texts may well be unified through a desire to represent the essence of contemporary Britain. Certainly this is not a radically new project within mainstream animation. A distillation of the British character had been already essayed within David Hand’s ten *Musical Paintbox* films from 1948 as a series

of eight minute “Sketchbook Fantasy” cinema shorts that reflected markers of UK identity (Gifford, 1987, p. 142). However, since Hand’s abortive effort, television mainstream animation has rarely embarked on such an overview. TV animation has traditionally fixed on symbolic narratives or micro-observations, capturing moments that reveal local, regional, cultural and political attitudes, as embedded within comedic work from Nick Spargo to the ubiquitous Bob Godfrey and on to a whole host of individual Second Wave voices. Here the notion of animating our culture is shaped through a more pronounced, ironic, distant entertainment-informed bias, one that is conducted more as a quotation than as any simple reflection.

This sense of quotation, discussed in the next chapter, is also intensified through US and UK broadcast culture’s love affair with what was at the time an exhausted configuration, i.e. that of situation comedy. This was the comedic form that was re-ignited by *The Simpsons*. Certainly that Third Wave Animation offered animated, rather than indexical live-action images of ‘real life’ made little difference to their reception. *The Simpsons*, as an “anicom” (Dobson, 2003, p. 85), performs the same function of a sitcom, in that it is a self-contained, traditionally 20-30 minute comic narrative that dispenses views on moral, cultural and social consensus. It is a TV form more than capable of bearing meaning. Yet this derivation trades on the inherently distancing stance of the medium to make its points and it marks a shift away from a more earnest, direct representation that may well be all about ridiculing sitcom “and its surrounding apparatus”, but in fact also fits the demands of our more knowing postmodern culture (Gray, 2006, p. 57). Eaton’s seminal typology of situation

comedy remains apposite here in that he noted that the form's inherent resilience and its location/medium are immaterial. It is structure and intent that are the prevailing factors that define it and even when animated it remains the perfect vehicle by which to negotiate attitudes and norms (1978, p. 72). Third Wave Animation is, too, a typically ambivalent marker of the postmodern condition. This is an ironic register in its dealing with society, identity and culture as it supplies – and I include the parallel of the sketch show here too – forms that lend themselves to industrial reproduction, repetition and scheduling demands. From this gesture Third Wave Animation revealed the extent to which TV comedy and TV animation had now become embedded as one.

This transformative moment was also aided by a more intense, competitive free market commissioning ethos and this meant that licensing concepts could be brought to networks via independent companies, such as Baby Cow, Hat Trick, Tiger Aspect etc. These were creative set ups that worked primarily in live-action comedy and drama but now, alongside animation veterans like Aardman, in this climate acknowledged animation's potential to tell stories. This meant that projects could be constructed and executed specifically for the medium at an affordable cost.

Thus the industrial factors opened up by *The Simpsons*, through its global success as a production and syndication phenomenon benefited this commissioning culture entirely, in the production of quality network animation. *The Simpsons* demonstrated that larger scale TV projects could be farmed out to

South Korean animation workshops, like Rough Draft, Toonzone and AKOM, emulating Hanna and Barbera's cynical production model (Cain, 2010, paras 1-5). Traditionally the construction of industrial animation, on both sides of the Atlantic, had been farmed out to contractors of varying sizes, under the increasing demand by network production set-ups like Klasky-Csupo, alongside satellite studios like Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon Animation, Marvel Animation etc. These were initiated to feed an existing and established corporate/network structure, not unlike the cinema animation studios of old, and this in turn enforced a hierarchal system of dominant, larger studios that would oversee the landscape, farming surplus work out to the multitude of competing, small-scale up and coming houses sitting below this tier of production.

In the UK, however, the animation industry still continued a highly fragmented, less corporatized identity that harked back towards Godfrey's boutique system of old, whereby small, independently contracted, often temporary production houses operated within an outsourcing culture (Cain, 2010, paras 4-5), as shows like BBC's *Monkey Dust*, which became serviced by diverse houses such as Slink Pictures, Nexus Productions and Sherbet Animation, proved. On top of this, cross-national, inter-company productions, as typified by BBC3/Channel X/Moi J'aime's collaboration on *Popetown* or Nelvana/Channel Four's work on *Bob and Margaret*, soon became an accepted part of the landscape. This shift reacted to the demands offered by a multiple channel terrain of E4, BBC 3/Choice etc. These newer commissioning and network possibilities were the response to a desire to fill more air time and recognise the expansion of markets in a new climate. Third Wave Animation is an indicator of network TV

pragmatism. By pragmatism I refer to a landscape dictated by differing imperatives of niche and narrowcasting cultures that have now since moved away from Thompson's conception of a broadcasting culture that can be encapsulated merely as "One Nation TV", i.e. a limited number of channels serving a mass audience (2004, p. xii).

As the broadcasting climate had begun to change profoundly throughout the 1990s these ironic animated conceptions of British contemporary life emerged not *just* through Channel Four but now from other areas. Channel Four's main counterpart here was BBC 3, which was one of the newer broadcasting platforms that arrived in the 1990s. BBC 3 mirrored Camilla Deakin's sentiments at Channel Four, in searching for programming that conformed to the notion of 'adult' television but in actuality appeared to primarily be aimed at attracting "a youth audience" (McCubbin, 1999, paras 26-30).

BBC 3 extended from BBC Choice in February 2003 and among its many teething problems was a perceived lack of identity. It was a public service channel struggling to establish an appropriate remit within a contemporary free-market climate. It was also set up to court the 18-34 demographic in direct competition with Channel Four's own E4 and, as primed with a budget of £97 million, this digital channel set out to offer edgier comedy, contemporary drama and news for an audience that the corporation insisted felt alienated from its terrestrial channels (Sherwin, 2003, p. 8). Chasing a two per cent share of the ratings market on its £100 million-a-year, Controller Stuart Murphy's initial

promises appeared ironically as a free-market echo of Channel Four's opening salvos in the 1980s. Murphy's ambiguous emphasis on "untried talent" and "innovative and risk-taking" programming that would "support and reflect the diversity of the UK" soon became drawn into an embrace of "modern, radical, imaginative and funny British shows" that actually ended up following Michael Grade's earlier championing of comedy at Channel Four as a ratings security blanket (Sherwin, 2003, p. 8). Commissioning Editors Mark Freedland and Joanne Lumsden were all-too-aware of those channel-salvaging successes and they centralised comedy at the cornerstone of BBC 3 output too. This was also recognition of not only its growing cultural prominence, but also of comedy's potential to allow the BBC access to lucrative multi-platform market advantages and broadcast longevity. This was made explicit when Lumsden announced that they were attempting to replicate "the moment around *The Office*... comedy that's relevant to the way this country is now" (cited by Hessling, 2003, p. 12). Indeed this strategy paid off during the first year at the channel, for, as Andrew Billen confirmed, "BBC3 has turned out to be the comedy chalkface" (2004, para 3).

In this environment there also appeared to be no prejudice towards animation. The commissioning of Shaun Pye and Harry Thompson's sketch show *Monkey Dust* (BBC 2003-2005) alongside Darren Walsh's pixilated shorts, *Angry Kid* (BBC 2003), could both be seen on the one hand as a progressive move but on the other the very embodiment of the sensationalist and abrasive tone that had dogged perceptions of the channel. *Monkey Dust* in particular, through the ensemble of writing and performance talent assembled revealed that a palpable

shift was in evidence around the conjoining of comedy and animation. The manner by which actors/writers/creators like Matt Lucas, Kevin Eldon, Morwenna Banks, Mark Heap, Bob Mortimer, Julia Davis, Steve Coogan, Henry Normal, Simon Pegg, Peter Baynham among others – very much the live-action TV comedy establishment of the 1990s – fervently embraced the medium spoke volumes of how these performers weren't hampered by tired perceptions around the form. This was noted by animator Tim Searle who, when highlighting the discernible shifts in emphasis within contemporary animation itself, said:

The bulk of *The Simpsons* is pretty simple stuff, but no one gives a shit because it's so well written. We've got a fantastic heritage of craft animation, but the audience doesn't care. They are driven by scripts ... The sea change is that animators are going, 'We've got to entertain people, and not just do animation that works for animation festivals but doesn't entertain' (cited by Rees, 2002, para 13)

Along with a migration of credible comedy talent, what further facilitated animation's viability here was also the new labour potential opened up by advances in communication, computer animation, digital compositing and the culture of post-production, which had intensified during the 1990s.

Technological strides alone had enabled an increase in the amount of quality two and three dimensional images produced, quickly and efficiently, alongside the re-working, sharpening and re-animating of animation to order (Darley, 2000, p. 18-19). Searle again notes the changes here and in the power this has added to his own working practices when he stated that "Technology has empowered little blokes like me to overcome the barriers to doing narrative

comedy that lasts longer than 30 seconds” (cited by Rees, 2002, para 15).

Although budgets for labour-intensive, time consuming projects like animation will always be contestable within the TV financing landscape, the work rate has at least been considerably accelerated. Certainly this has made the turnaround rate on weekly topical animations like ITV’s *2D-TV* (2001-2004) much more feasible within a network context and thus much more attractive as potential comedy product.

An interesting conundrum presents itself here that will be investigated throughout the thesis, in that Third Wave Animation still appears as indelibly connected to a drive to reach younger audience demographics yet still insists it is now attuned more to an adult register. As stated earlier, the kinds of animation produced during this period were disparate in terms of narrative and formally, they were constructed to serve very specific functions but can be linked by tone and emphasis. For here the distinctions between what animation had been perceived to be in the past and what purpose it *now* served were being profoundly recast, as much Third Wave Animation was considered to be adult in tenor and was expected to expand away from historical conceptions around the medium. This was animation that was constructed to extend beyond a niche audience and was being asked by the networks to function as credible comedy shows, rather than as animated shows, and was expected to compete on the same terms.

Bearing this in mind, TV critic Phil Norman's assertion that cartoons tend to connote disarming, unpretentious entertainment, being commonly regarded as "free of self-regarding angst and, most importantly, able to cram ten gags in where live action could barely deliver two", is by and large correct (2003, para 6). Wells confirms this when he notes that animation has often been denigrated through populist perception, and often complex registers can be lost behind the "unambiguous" visceral pleasures often associated with it (1998, p. 6). This has led to the repetition of a continually problematic term within mainstream settings, that of 'adult animation', and this oxymoronic concept, raised in the introduction, informs Third Wave Animation profoundly.

Of course it is only the US/UK mainstream where such problems tend to occur, as certainly Europeans, for example, have always held animation in a higher regard than British audiences. Extending from the historical traditions exerted by prevailing modernist artistic castes it's beyond doubt that the term 'adult animation' here is something of a misnomer. Certainly numerous animators/directors working within the commercial sector have historically and continually refused to pigeonhole their work as being aimed at any specific age demographic. Warner Brothers auteur Chuck Jones went on record in 1971 by saying that his films for the company "weren't made for children either. They were made for me..." (cited by Adamson, 2005, p. 71). Certainly a further examination of Jones's *Roadrunner* cycle (1949-1963) alone can observe fears on failure, death, hopelessness and the nature of isolation within a chaotic universe. These were works aimed at mass audiences and spoke to them through a mature, knowing visual vocabulary. Prevailing misconceptions around

animation's close proximity to children's television are, as Maltin asserts, borne from misunderstandings initiated from the mass sales of cinema shorts sold to bolster TV schedules in the 1950s and 1960s, forever cementing the perception of the medium (1975, pp. 76-81).

Considering also TV animation's incorporation into children's programming within the functional definitions of First Wave Animation on UK TV, perhaps understandably 'adult' animation has maintained a somewhat ambiguous profile within the commercial domain. In the 1970s adult animation became cast as an oppositional term meaning simply: 'not for children'. Ralph Bakshi's 'X' rated animated US cinema feature, *Fritz the Cat* (1971), simply re-cast 'adult animation' as an explicit extension of what had already been residing in the work of Frank Tashlin, the Fleischer Brothers, Robert Clampett, et al (Holte, 1981, pp. 105-113). The nearest replication of this moment in the UK came through the independently-financed work of First and Second Wave auteur, Bob Godfrey. Godfrey's work too exploited the shock value of presenting unambiguous sexual – usually heterosexual – activity within an animated comedic milieu. His *Kama Sutra Rides Again* and *Henry 9 Til 5* (1970) were among a number of sex comedies released in cinemas of the period and were latterly canonised through late night Channel Four TV appearances. For Bakshi, adult animation meant the post-countercultural exploration of themes of oppression, i.e. subversions of censorship and moral hypocrisy dictated through explicit swearing, sexual imagery, contentious racial and gender representations, open drug use and the destabilization of anthropomorphic conventions. For Godfrey in a UK setting, this term embodied the prodding of British sexual

repression and revealing incongruities of middle-class sexual activity fed through a comic conception that benefited from a more lax censorship landscape. Both areas rely on the shock of the transgressive set within a supposedly children's medium. Ironically, as such, both conservatively play into a backhanded reinforcement of that view as a result. For 'adult' surely also encompasses dialogues of complexity, subtlety and suggests an engagement with dialogues on the human condition that require of the viewer a degree of sophistication. In Third Wave terms this soon became simplified to a less oppositional stance. This became all about simply replicating subjects and narratives that often *can* be covered in live-action shows, as much as just those that *can't*.

Although Godfrey predicted a fascination with comedy and sex that undoubtedly informed Third Wave Animation, certainly in television through the 1960s and 1970s the notion of 'adult animation' remained almost entirely absent. It was really only available as a differentiation from more commonly available children's animation through odd examples, such as the model work within Michael Bentine's *It's a Square World* (BBC 1960-1964), Terry Gilliam's inserted cut-out sequences in all four series of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC 1969-1974), and forgotten moments such as Mike Brown's *Evelyn Frogrotter Show* (1969), a three-minute satire on TV criticism commissioned for BBC 2's *Late-Night Line-Up* slot that filled the gap in this area (Rider, 1970, p.64). Once more what really cements TV animation's transference from the ghetto of children's programming is the US, and UK, acceptance of *The Simpsons*. Groening's show managed to exert what Mittel defined as "kidult

appeal”, which in itself fed from the pioneering cross-over work offered in US prime time shows like *The Flintstones* (ABC 1961-1966) and *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle* (ABC 1959-1964) (2004, p. 73). These US examples were vital steps towards achieving a mainstream acceptance that transcended expectations, due to their placement in schedules, access to broader family demographics and through their ability to resonate with audiences of all ages (2004, p. 73).

These stepping stones in turn engendered a particular viewing practice of “double-coding” that embodied the fusing of adult and children’s viewing pleasures and predicted the breakdowns in prejudice towards animation that informed the Third Wave, a process that was outlined by Farley about an American context in her piece on MTV’s *Ren and Stimpy in Prime-Time Animation* (2003, p. 150). This was a way of watching animation that thrived in the celebrated 5.35pm slot secured before the evening news on BBC 1 throughout the 1960s up to the 1980s, whereby a knowing, vaguely counter-cultural, ironic address could be ascribed to supposedly simplistic children’s cartoons exhibited in this slot, which allowed adults to connect with animation on its own terms. Interestingly this was the closest UK TV came to a credible connection with animation in a cross-demographic setting before *The Simpsons*’ arrival. This slot featured five-minute shorts like *The Magic Roundabout*, Nick Spargo’s *Will-O The Wisp* (BBC 1981) and Godfrey’s *Roobarb and Custard* (BBC 1974) and *Henry’s Cat* (BBC 1983-1993), along with occasional Hanna-Barbera MGM *Tom and Jerry* shorts, which later would be a staple of adult primetime too, by inhabiting the hinterland between both children *and* adult

entertainment viewing spaces (Rider, 1975b, p. 54). In many ways this was an important foundation for a mainstream engagement that led directly to Third Wave Animation.

By the late 1990s UK television had begun regularly offering adult animation which appeared fixated around showing the ‘un-showable’ and extended beyond the taste dictated by live-action comedy. This was possible due to a liberalising of not only the conditions of media ownership, which suited the free-market ethos of both the Major and Blair administrations, but also of the kind of material that was now deemed suitable to be shown on national television under the new body Ofcom, which policed these new boundaries of acceptability (Smith, 2006, pp. 929-940).

This freedom in animation terms was exemplified by the arrival alongside *The Simpsons* of Nickleodeon/MTV’s/John Kricfalusi’s “recombitant” *Ren and Stimpy*, in 1991. This was a notable evolution, broadcast on BBC 2 at an early evening, post-TV news slot between 6.30 and 7pm, which regurgitated a subjective history of advertising and low-budget television animation in a manner that spoke to young adults, historians and the middle-aged, as much as it did the children it was purportedly aimed at (Langer, 1997, p. 150). Kricfalusi used the themes of loyalty, play and friendship as a gateway to undermine television/corporate history, form and the myths of light entertainment and the show’s defining feature was a network troubling deployment, to incredibly convoluted degrees, of brutality and scatology. From this the arrival of

UK/Canadian sketch show *Aaagh! It's the Mr Hell Show!*, on late night BBC TV in 1999, saw that the “main joke” was “seeing cartoon characters bleed to death, swear, fornicate and do things that, like, you wouldn't expect cartoon characters to do”, and this revealed entirely Kricfalusi's influence, formally and tonally, within a British context (Norman, 2002, paras 6-7).

As *Ren and Stimpy* and *The Simpsons* exerted great influence, it is also evident that Comedy Central's *South Park* has to be accounted for, too, in establishing how comedy, animation and adult dialogues have converged. Although each one of these shows has played an instrumental role in convincing networks of the viable nature of animated comedy, *South Park* (1997-to date), offered something that even *The Simpsons*, in its ultimately deferent mode towards the centralisation of the family unit, could never quite achieve. It was an animated sitcom that possessed a truly subversive edge tied to major corporate interests, as will be discussed in Chapter Five. *South Park* allies itself to an agenda of disruption, provocation and transgression, and this has signalled to UK networks that animation is not only a medium capable of bearing such an approach but that work demarked for adult consumption of a satirical nature has to now include a shock component almost as de rigueur.

In mimicking *South Park*'s tonal choices and benefitting from the freedoms it had won, Third Wave Animation continually placed an emphasis on addressing taboo subjects within comedic situations. Be it the on-line paedophile posing in chat rooms as a thirteen year-old girl in *Monkey Dust*'s provocative first season

2003 scenario, ‘Chat Room Perv’, the blankly abusive characters that populate both series of *Modern Toss*, or the incongruous psychotic behaviour of the papal figure that presides over *Popetown*, these confrontational depictions of paedophilia, madness, sexual impropriety, disability – re-examinations of representation – also serve another function, in that they exhibit a response to the post-Alternative Comedy landscape.

As the softer, less nihilistic, more inclusive dialogues of early Third Wave shows like *Crapston Villas* and *Bob and Margaret* soon evaporated, it became apparent that comedians and writers were defining themselves as part of a TV comedy topography that had been informed directly and *indirectly* by a shadowy notion of ‘political correctness’. The confrontation of taboo in an adult animation context revealed another cultural dialogue that also will be discussed throughout the thesis.

Political correctness is, as Hughes sees, a concept that is less clearly defined than ever and today it exists more as a reactionary “buzzword” than any firmly defined agenda or manifesto (2010, p. 284). Yet this post-PC comic landscape is one also circled by Thompson, (in an incomplete fashion), when he makes note of the more “callous” registers of humour that have increasingly dominated mainstream television in enormously popular shows such as *Little Britain* (BBC 2003-2006). This example, in particular, extended from a seventies light entertainment consensus on representation that had been seen to be passé or politically incorrect in the previous decade’s comedy culture and the show

appeared to consciously circumnavigate areas of sensitivity by reconnecting with ‘black-face’ performance, drag and gay characters (2004, p.448). Its approach certainly appeared indicative of profound changes in taste, certainly when posited against more morally considered texts that mined areas of the physically grotesque, such as *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2002) as comic material.

Ultimately Third Wave Animation was reactive to and also dictated the shifts in contemporary comedy tastes and these shows seized full advantage of the medium’s facility to approach difficult subject matter. Yet curiously this all took place within the inclusion/exclusion hierarchal dilemmas that had returned within primetime television as the new millennium dawned, as outlined within Dyer’s critique of “Light Entertainment” (1973, p. 41). This reiteration of past narratives, this connection to pragmatic industry demands means that Third Wave Animation perhaps inevitably contains a range of ambiguities, politically, culturally, thematically, tonally and indeed formally, that need to be investigated further.

### ***Conclusion***

I have identified the prime determinants within Third Wave Animation that will be examined in more detail throughout the thesis. The shifting milieu of the terrestrial, satellite and cable broadcasting industry, the changes in comedy

taste, the cementing of animation as a viable prime time medium, the dominance of American product, and ultimately the political, social and cultural climate are all factors that inform this moment. What this thesis will do is map the texts worthy of discussion in this Third Wave era and read the cultural, social and political shifts that are mapped within them. In the next chapter, I will breakdown in more detail how these texts use familiar iconography that illustrate this period of animation's close proximity to live-action comedy and will say much about the nature of this phenomenon.

One of course has to accept that this Third Wave category is troublesome, as are all such conceptualisations. It is a term that brings with it as many questions as it does answers. The abnegation of gender and party politics from comic dialogues, the nostalgic bent found within our culture and our television, the obsession with form and the all encompassing nature of postmodern irony have contributed to a distinct moment. Undoubtedly though what defines this Third Wave is the broader reassertion within contemporary UK life of the first part of the 21st century of a more consensual middle ground, along with an abandonment of a Leftist political impulse. Comedian and commentator Stewart Lee isolates this shift which he sees as not only dominating stand-up comedy but broader live-action comedy discourses per se when he jokingly states: "When I started doing stand-up in the 80s it was all about crowds of people who hated the Tories coming to see comedy performed by a man who hated the Tories. And everyone left happy. Nowadays, it's about crowds of people who hate their electrical appliances coming to see a man who hates his electrical appliances. And everyone leaves happy." (cited by Logan, 2010, para 1). This

abandonment of politicised critique and opposition within mainstream comedy that Lee notes points towards a blank acceptance of consumerism and to a sense of political apathy. While certainly Darley, back in 1997, perhaps could not have fully predicted the nature of democratisation within the animation industry via the availability of tools and through the channels of distribution on-line, his predictions of political dilution within mainstream animation production appear borne out.

The period under study, i.e. the Tony Blair years and beyond, is determined by the proliferation of a global media and a culture of unchecked consumerism. This has conceivably enforced the malaise predicted by Jameson of a culture undermined by dislocation and irony (1991, pp. 16-25). Third Wave Animation is the product of access and choice. It is the benefactor of permission and acceptance and yet, as we will see, it appears curiously lacking in any forward motion. Perhaps, as Fukuyama states, the end result of postmodernism can only be apathy, in that if we can no longer believe in progress or in a world that can be better than the one we enjoy today, then are we left with traffic that has no meaning (1993, p. 46)?

If Third Wave Animation is primarily about the desire to court the laughter of recognition then through indexical *and* impressionistic means this appears to be perhaps the most effective medium capable of suggesting 'truth'. It certainly appears as vital as any live-action representation. Yet we must be aware that while Third Wave Animation appears to offer portraits of Britain that

circumnavigate the avant-garde in favour of an industry-forged compromise, we must not undermine the need to investigate. Quite the contrary, as what form those compromises take, how they are implemented and *why* they are in place lies at the very heart of this thesis's enquiry. If we stop assessing the compromises then we have in effect succumbed to the ultimate compromise.

## Chapter Two

### **‘The Family Myth’: A quotation of normality.**

#### *Introduction*

As I have discussed in the last chapter, Third Wave Animation is the moment where UK mainstream television animation became transformed. To conceive of Third Wave Animation has demonstrative of the postmodern condition serves this chapter entirely. It is a point in UK animation whereby texts exhibited, in a highly self-conscious fashion, inter- and extra-textual modes within their narratives alongside a permeable, detached sense of distance and irony. In embracing modes of humour that self-consciously abandoned the previous British Alternative Comedy movement of the 1980s and of the kinds of more left-field animation shown throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Third Wave Animation initiated an engagement with representation that suggested that nostalgia was a central component of this broadcasting moment.

The focus of this chapter will be on Third Wave Animation’s adherence to social, cultural and moral critique and the era’s highlighting of a particular narrative emphasis. For alongside the previously highlighted concerns another

common characteristic that linked these shows was the detailing in visual and narrative terms of a shared contemporary experience that differentiated from the more overtly symbolic, avant-garde registers commonly associated with Second Wave Animation production. Third Wave Animation shares with British TV comedy a repetition of social and cultural ritual to tell its stories. For when Dyer referred to conventions of sincerity and inclusiveness, “the illusion of reciprocity” that exists within mainstream network television, he noted television’s reinforcement of a commonality of experience as a central unifying component (1973, p. 14). Conceptions of the ‘everyday’ permeate game shows and talk shows and, to serve our purposes here, can also be observed working at a particularly potent register within sketch show and situation comedy forms. In a live-action environment, this presents a schema of convenience that allows engagement, suspension of disbelief and facilitates audience acceptance. Thus specific totems of experience, social/behavioural rituals and mannerisms, commonly understood displays of emotionality and so forth are all constituted within narratives so television can draft and redraft a subtly shifting map of accepted values. What makes this process unique to Third Wave Animation is how this is also informed by a history of television and animation, rather than a simplistic indexical reportage, in a highly mediated setting, as this chapter will focus on how contemporary British TV animation draws on familiar iconography of the ‘family’ and uses this to examine normative behaviour.

As live-action comedy and animation became conjoined during this moment, it is important to assess how key iconography that unites both arenas operates. In this chapter I will be looking at how such totems, specifically deployed within

television comedy, translate to a different medium and how they are managed during this specific production moment. To facilitate this analysis, the narrative of ‘family’ appears the most appropriate place to start, in that has been a continual presence throughout not just TV live-action comedy but also in the kinds of animation that appeared within, in the wake of, *The Simpsons* and it will allow me to shed light upon the nature of Third Wave Animation itself.

It is no co-incidence that conceptions of ‘family’ have been deployed consistently as a tool to enforce audience identification. This construct can be used to highlight, explicitly and implicitly, how social inclusiveness may well be central to our lives, but also how often this idea can fall short of our expectations. Representations of ‘family’ not only facilitate a deeper understanding of ourselves, but also of the culture and society around us. The family can be the ideal platform by which to discuss nationhood, i.e. who we want to be, who we thought we *were*, what we want to distance ourselves from, what we define ourselves by and how we see ourselves today. Indeed popular cultural texts are useful gauges to determine how ideology sits within the socio/political and moral consensus and they can tell us much about how ideals of ‘normality’ are positioned to bind together contemporary society, in itself a background narrative that runs throughout the thesis. Although ultimately informed by TV network demands, the family can operate as the perfect structure by which to discuss so-called normative behaviour, especially in a medium such as animation that is defined by its ability to boil down representation to a succinct statement. But what we have to consider is to what

extent the animated TV family discusses that particular hypothesis today more through a mythic dialogue, over any simple, indexical reflection.

### ***The mythic family***

As Stabile and Harrison note, “when the family is remembered in mass culture and political debate, it is represented in terms established by the culture industries” (2003, p.8). Up to the Third Wave, Second and First Wave engagements with the concept of family reflected their specific conditions. First Wave Animation advertising preferred to deploy the medium to illustrate fantastical or whimsical elements, and the industry felt more comfortable relegating any direct depictions of family primarily to the live-action arena, ensuring a greater connection. This trend continued in information shorts, whereby ‘family’ was often referred to merely in passing or through inference as a referent to normality or of common experience. It is in children’s programming where the reinforcing of conventional values and educational narratives occur most within the First Wave, such as in *Mary, Mungo and Midge* (BBC 1969) or the range of surrogate family dynamics seen in *Andy Pandy* (BBC 1950-1970) or *Hector’s House (La maison de Tou-Tou)* (BBC 1965-1968). Second Wave’s constructions of family were suitably fragmented and often abstracted, reflecting the production and authorship ethos of this moment. In this setting ‘family’ itself was rarely investigated in any explicit, intense fashion and this differs from the very specific model that dominated Third Wave narratives. For the Third Wave animated family has to be

considered through a distinctly historical, televisual framework, more than that of a specific representation of social construct. To aid our understanding here we have to conceive of this against its status today as more of a mythic totem. As animation is a medium freed from the necessity to replicate reality then this incorporation of the narrative of the TV family is a gesture that intensifies that process as well as any assessment of attitudes and social mores that are attached to it.

UK TV animation's reiteration of 'family' is not just as a useful industrial narrative device but also existed as a referent to the convergence of two distinct cultural histories. It spoke about the all-pervasive nature of television as a cultural institution. Crucially, though, each of the three key examples of family cited within this chapter work from assumed common wisdoms that highlight the nebulous nature of what normality and family are perceived to be. The family is also a construct which intersects with the very foundations of comedy itself. When O'Neill refers to the "humour of certainty" and its fundamental place within storytelling or jokes, he sees that comedic dialogues, critical or otherwise, require a recognisable, identifiable narrative/icon to function (1990, p. 50). The televisual family performs such a task here. Family, and its derivation, 'nuclear family', has evolved into one of the founding narratives within contemporary Western culture and it appears within comedy today, more as a 'cultural' conception rather than a 'social' one. This is further intensified by its extension into UK TV animation, a prime indicator of its significance as mythic totem.

‘The Family’, as construct, certainly conforms to the very nature of what we define as a contemporary myth. We can conceptualise myth as an ongoing cultural story comprised of a set of recurrent, cyclical images and stories (Coupe, 2009, pp. 59-81). To intensify this definition, Burke opines that contained within notions of myth are discourses on temperance and evaluation as detailed through an “essence” of truth (cited by Segal, 2004, p. 85). ‘The Family’ corresponds entirely here as a totemic narrative that, although not allied to a fixed, linear story as such, contains the same refutation of closure associated with traditional storytelling and contains adaptable, allegorical possibilities. Third Wave animated families all conformed to this principle, as they appeared less as a “literal depiction” of the world and more as a “guide” (Coupe, 2009, p. 136). They uniformly functioned as conceptions more borne from an American refraction than a British one.

Although of course British comedy can draw on its own historical lineage of sitcom families, (functional, dysfunctional, across class and regional boundaries, by birth or acting as a surrogate structure for the purpose of narrative) that have been a continual feature of television comedy such as *Bless This House* (ITV 1971-1976), *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC 1965-1975), *Butterflies* (BBC 1978-1983), *Steptoe and Son* (BBC 1962-1974), among many, many others. It is, however, *The Simpsons*’ quotation of American sitcom tradition that provided the obvious engine for Third Wave Animation. The emphasis here is clear when one observes that path taken by Aherne and Cash’s *The Royle Family*

(BBC 1999- to date), which disregards Americana in favour of a re-establishment with British kitchen sink traditions, (a stress perhaps more commonly associated with UK television comedy).

As we un-tether ourselves from post-war social imperatives, which locate marriage, responsibility and conformity as cornerstones of our socio/cultural constitution, the very idea of the familial unit has changed drastically across both American *and* British contexts. Moss highlights how this particular cultural myth was forged in the wake of US New Deal social protocols of the 1930s and then became embedded within 1950s conceptions of suburban life. Its derivative, ‘the Nuclear Family’, may well be a term built on numerous histories stretching from a sociological category identified as early as the 17th century, however today it is informed more by the American Post-War population boom in the mid 20th century (Moss, 2000, pp. 350-351). At its heart, the myth and label are now conjoined and this suggests that a heterosexual narrative of one father, one mother, a child of either sex living in one domicile is the desirable, acceptable embodiment of conformity. It implies balance within its very make-up.

The suburbs and family appear conjoined in our imaginations. For not only is location a potent sub-theme within its construction, but it is also an archetype defined by a recurrent theme of materialism. Along with homogeneity, dialogues of exclusion have become historically embedded within this myth. As Moss observes, “Suburban community identities were based more on a shared

style of consumerism than on ethnic ancestry or culture”, thus it was economic status that forced Hispanics, Blacks, Asians etc. to remain in the built-up areas of the city and moulded an apartheid founded on wealth (2000, p. 351).

Conversely, British cultural narratives around the suburbs were informed more by the expansion of available inter-war housing and the diffusion of consumer goods that created the condition for a new kind of salaried middle-class to thrive (Scott, 1994, pp. 162-177). Both of these cultural moments were subsequently rooted into the global consciousness by advertising, magazines and television throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, cementing a unique vision of a lifestyle of freedom and profligacy unmatched anywhere else in the world and reinforced alongside a proliferation of signifiers found within this all-pervasive, new media. ‘The Nuclear Family’ emerged as central to this. Whilst reductionist 1930s debates around a sterile, smug petty-bourgeoisie, “secure in their suburban retreat”, became familiar for the UK, the American family became more overtly rooted in conservative, repressive pre-War mythologies around gender roles and rigid views on career, lifestyle and sexuality, and through the rejection of spirituality for more orthodox religious practices (Bailey, 1999, p. 280).

In time the 1950s US family, as Tueth notes, was an idea that was not just about “‘the way we live today’ but also ‘the way we ought to live’” (2003, p. 136).

The emphasis on ‘family’ as a white, utopian ideal soon became cemented as a potent symbol for prosperous American society throughout the popular media of the 1950s. Initially this was reinforced through acquiescent filmic texts like *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1950) and then latterly in more questioning modes in

*Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (1956), before becoming explicitly detonated within countercultural dialogues such as *The Graduate* (1967).

### ***The sitcom family***

However it is in television, and particularly in the sitcom form, where this relationship between myth and culture became most intensified. Jones acknowledges the template for the situation comedy family:

... the father was the breadwinner who laid down most of the family rules and refereed disputes ... the wife and mother was attractive, witty, sociable and supportive of her husband's authority, sometimes interceding on the children's behalf. The children ... were good natured, if sometimes confused, and always managed to learn that, indeed 'father knew best', even about their own childhood issues (cited by Tueth, 2003, p. 136).

These appeared to be clear roles within 1950s narratives before their erosion, subversion and, latterly, parody. American cultural institutions such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC 1952-1966) and *Father Knows Best* (CBS/NBC 1954-1963) offered a gentle, un-troubling, nudging questioning of patriarchy, although filtered through an Eisenhower lens and infused with a morality dictated by Christian temperance and American egalitarianism.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s in the US, the still significant family unit became seen as something to question, fear, reject and despise, or at the very least distrust. The acknowledgement of ambiguities in the previously held certainties of patriarchy, heterosexuality, authority and cultural narratives, be it a late modern scepticism or otherwise, ensured this. The countercultural subversions of this symbol shifted it into an ironic register, permanently undermining this monolithic conception. ‘Family’ became cemented as the consolidation of middle-ground consensual values, frozen within a post-McCarthyite moment. This alteration was taken full advantage of by US comedy shows like the Norman Lear-produced *All in the Family* (CBS 1971-1979) – expanded from Johnny Speight’s 1965 BBC UK dissection of working class bigotry, *Till Death Us Do Part* – and *The Jeffersons* (CBS 1975-1985). This intensified by the 1980s when shows like *Roseanne* (1988-1997) and *Married with Children* (1987-1997) presented a “burlesque of situation comedy” (Marc, 1989, p.192), and cast ‘family’ as an irretrievably dysfunctional unit. All of this led to the manifestation of Homer Simpson as the perennially inept animated parental authority figure (Tueth, 2003, p. 139).<sup>1</sup>

Yet Tueth insists that throughout manifold stages of the television/sitcom family there has always been a revolutionary impulse discernible. For him this idea of ‘family’ correlates with Bakhtinian discourses of the Carnavalesque and this hints at what is to come more explicitly within Third Wave UK examples. In supplying a momentary counter-model to channel subversive desires via narrative, performance or artistic release, family allows a space for critique in a recognisable setting, before returning to accession (2003, p. 141). For if, as

Biccheri suggests later (2006, p. 38), cultural definitions of norms contain within them in-built dialogues of conformity, then perhaps the accessibility of television exists as a perfect podium from which to challenge them.

### *The Simpsonian family*

Matt Groening's *The Simpsons* absorbed all this history. This family myth's translation to the inherently 'ironic', distant medium of animation is profound here, as a marker of its symbolic power. *The Simpsons* reactivated iconography that had seemingly devolved through over-familiarity. For *The Simpsons* self-consciously allied itself with not only American situation comedy tradition but also implied, through its very make-up, a tacit acknowledgment of the 1950s family as an embedded cultural, social and expedient industrial broadcasting narrative across multiple television genres, from soap-opera to quiz shows to drama. The show also knowingly understood this as a comment and also as a quotation of animation sitcom history itself.

*The Flintstones*' (ABC 1961-1966) refiguring of 1950s suburban America as the Stone Age was a crafty post-modern gesture that allowed commentary and quotation to exist side by side. Indeed *The Simpsons* mirrored that show's self-conscious take on its own process by drawing the viewer through its oft-cited title sequence straight into the television screen itself. This gesture simultaneously articulated and deepened the sense of entrenchment that the

myth of family held within popular discourse at that point by reinforcing normalcy and place. In centralising the family once more, *The Simpsons* nod to this history also permitted programme makers to return to extant codes and proven narratives as well as providing a platform for reaction and subversion. Groening and his creative team utilised the freedoms of the animation medium to open the doors to more location, character and plot possibilities, as well as allowing franker dissections of society, culture and the flaws repeated within a rigid US TV morality. As a result of this process the family unit became, often in surrogate, refigured terms, a constant within the diverse US animated texts that followed immediately in its wake. The flexibility and distancing properties of the medium aided the intensity of TV's love affair, across both US and UK settings, not only with animation but also with the family itself. Shows like *Daria* (MTV 1997-2002), *Duckman* (Paramount 1994-1997), *King of the Hill* (Fox 1997-2009), *South Park* (1997-to date) et al all posited 'family' as a convenient marker to their 'alternative' status of a project and as a clue to their satirical intent.

So we have to consider here not only the effect of *The Simpsons* on the UK TV animation industry but also understand that this show profoundly contributed to a broad UK acceptance of this particular American conception. Thus at this point it appears that ex-*Seinfeld*, *Larry Sanders* and *Caroline in the City* producer Fred Barron's naming of his British primetime live-action sitcom project *My Family* (BBC 2000-to date) appears as a very knowing gesture indeed. *My Family* has been a curious UK live-action comedy success story that complements the progress of its animated counterparts. As a show that has

continually scored consistently high ratings throughout its ten-year run, it had stymied critics and yet had also provided mainstream audiences with a highly self-conscious and generic product. Yet through the foregrounding of the suburban Harper family as an unproblematic fantasy projection of white, middle class life the show suggested both creative stasis and expediency, as a cynical nod by the BBC now recognising the demands of the worldwide syndication market and prioritising this over any attempt to offer a more credible reflection of contemporary British life (Dessau, 2009). As gauche as *My Family* appeared, its escapist pleasures heralded a return and an acceptance of an American impression of television family as myth within a UK setting. In the wake of *The Simpsons* this celebration of the past granted permission for the family to be centralised, once more, within primetime schedules. This also highlighted how far TV animation had provided a vital bridge towards the reassertion of forms that had been discredited in the wake of British Alternative comedy. For here animation was reflecting life, television history and marking out a more traditionalist comic terrain for the coming decade under the guise of innovation.

### ***Comedy at home: Animating normality***

Animation's capacity to literalise or depict an abstract idea, to operate on a symbolic level, means that it can be the perfect canvas by which to express the ambiguities central to any interrogation of normalcy. In both mainstream and avant-garde areas animation has continually encapsulated agreed models of commonality into a visual 'shorthand' that has addressed such fractured and

subjective understandings of the term ‘normalcy’ and its status as a centralising cultural concept. ‘Everyman’ figures have permeated animation history in avant-garde and mainstream arenas, as Wells highlights, often featured in narratives as “universalising concept” rather than simply as direct index (1998, p. 196). However within mainstream TV animation texts there is a tendency to reiterate what has gone before, which means in this context that dialogues on normalcy manifest themselves more as evidence of their place as an essential constituent within the language of network television.

The way ‘family’ is brought to bear here is that it tends to be utilised as a tool to discuss normative behaviour against broader terms, around critiques of society and so forth. This, in itself, also acknowledged the broader, common conception that the somewhat shadowy term of ‘normalcy’ appears within everyday discourse more as a cultural definition, an agreed idea, rather than associated to any hard scientific expression. Drawn from measurements around physicality and behaviour, historically the term has often implied negative issues around conformity. Davis notes that ‘normal’ traditionally means “as constituting, conforming to, not deviating or different from, the common type or standard” (1997, p. 17). He argues that this idea has perennially been justified within middle-class, middle-way ideologies over moral, physical and sociological issues, which prioritised the bourgeoisie as “rationally placed in the mean position of the great order of things” (Davis, 1997, p. 12). This supplements the family myth as an ideal derived from a 1950s US conceptual framework, and one that revolves around dialogues on social regulation, physicality and

deviancy, alongside sub-narratives of reduction, mediocrity, compromise, acceptability and complicity.

Third Wave Animation narratives reiterated Bicchieri's key notion that a norm exists because a sufficient number of people choose to accept it, where "conscious deliberation" comes into play, whereby a norm is negotiated and considered before incorporated or capitulated to (2006, p. 4). The manner by which the majority of Third Wave animated texts discussed norms, implicitly and explicitly, cast this idea as a survival mechanism, allied to issues of obligation and social order, and its usage of the mythic television family highlights normality as a kind of measurement, a barometer. The comedic animations of the period – in particular *Modern Toss*, *Monkey Dust*, *Bromwell High*, *Popetown* etc. – discussed the fluid cultural and temporal nature of norms as well as highlighted the challenging of them as being part of a healthy progressive social impulse. Like much satirical comedy, the fundamental project is often to highlight the gap between what 'is' and what should 'be' and as such these engagements with dialogues on consensual value systems also serve the corrective nature of comedy itself.

O'Neill's observations on the nature of comedy tell us that all of the primary comic structures of superiority, incongruity or relief often relate to a base desire for societal order, and that laughter, certainly when conceived through a Freudian lens, is based on a psychological need to vent aggressive and/or sexual feelings, as well as provide an arena for the dissipation of potentially anti-social

behaviour (1990, pp. 45-47). If discussions of acceptability allow the mapping of borders then comedy's role – and how this then figures within contemporary animation – is profound here. For O'Neill negotiations of the norm are often the place where the laughter of relief occurs. Unlike, say, superiority in humour that is based explicitly around derision and incongruity, relief is a gesture that confirms, through its reaction and engagement, the constitution of boundaries around agreed psychological and social arrangements. He argues that the venting of these deeper desires through laughter are “very much the consequence of a successfully averted disruption of social order” (1990, p. 47). The way that comedy operates implies a judgement of outsiders that is, in itself, a reinforcement of normalcy and is in fact an expression of “the humour of certainty” (O'Neill, 1990, p. 50). These breaches, acknowledgments and moments of societal challenge and affirmation feature across all three of our comic examples featured here.

### ***Third Wave families***

Normality and its place within the family myth are distinctive components within Third Wave Animation, not only in terms of thematic and tonal terrain and through the connection to the American animation form, but also in terms of register. Cawelti confirms that as iconography becomes replayed it becomes exhausted, over-familiar and then inevitably slides into either parody or ironic quotation (2003, pp. 192-201). This features across all three of the examples of the Third Wave animated family that we will look at here. Irony by its nature

may erode “sincerity”, “authenticity” and “immediacy”, but it is the mode of choice not only within animation but also within British TV comedy of the same period, the 1990s (Colebrook, 2004, pp. 1-2). Definitive UK TV comic statements during this period, from *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* (C4 1990-1991) to *The Fast Show* (BBC 1994-1997) and *Father Ted* (C4 1995-1998), all exhibit within their structures aspects of self awareness around their relationships to television comedy customs. This was a gesture of simultaneous reclamation *and* distancing that TV animation of the late 1990s continued. For the ironic sketch show, along with the ironic sitcom, soon became commonplace within live-action TV and what this did was present a post-Alternative Comedy reconnection with – and a reframing of – traditional performance modes and structures. It marked out a comic terrain built on quotation that paid “implicit tribute” to what had gone before yet still maintained just enough of a sardonic stance on the mechanisms of light entertainment to retain credibility (Thompson, 2004, p. 20).

Irony has been a fundamental comic mode that has drifted in and out of fashion. It can be located in Aristotle’s dissections of the nature of citizenship, conducted through a supposedly reduced intellect in both *Ethics* and *Rhetoric*, and it can be found in the deliberate deployment of cliché in Chaucer’s *The Merchant’s Tale* from *The Canterbury Tales* (Colebrook, 2004, p. 10). Irony is a comic mode that revolves around contradiction. Colebrook delineates it as “saying what is contrary to what is meant”, by stating the opposite as a way to juxtapose imagery, language and to reveal comic disparity (2004, p. 1). Irony plays on our knowledge of rules and circumstances. It relies on our expectations

around sincerity of expression. It can only ever really function effectively when the full context of the text or statement is understood.

To fully understand the nature of the animated families within Third Wave Animation we have to factor in the nature of a broader *cultural* irony, commonly linked to postmodern shifts. Ironic quotation is our prime determinant here. The contemporary cultural condition engenders, according to Jameson, a destabilisation of texts which then affects our relationship to them. This fragmentation results in an inevitable sense of detachment from the original subject that is compounded by the multiple histories, parallel presents and constant replaying of modernist cultural forms that dominate postmodern media. Third Wave Animation cites a known quantity. It replays 'family' as a cultural totem of stability from the 1950s, for Jameson this notably being the last popular culture with its own fixed grammar (1991, pp. 279-296). This process is intensified through the family's role on TV, where Hutcheon notes that the very definition of the postmodern televisual text is that it embraces the limitations of its own condition. Family here exists as an idea surrounded by quotation marks. It acknowledges the inherent ambiguities in its formation and the conscious or unconscious, literal or implied relationships to other texts (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 122). This distance, played out through pastiche, is further separated from authenticity through animation's remoteness from live-action TV as a medium.

This deconstructionist assessment of what is, in essence, a 1950s US TV ideal has also to be positioned – ironically – alongside the context of our own shifting socio/political/economic culture. Rosen’s survey of British life between 1950 and 2000 notes that the role and make-up of the family was among several accepted orthodoxies in decline through this period that highlighted breakdowns in the previously fixed nature of social institutions. He sees this as undermined by profound shifts in the balance between working patterns, the shifting boundaries within motherhood roles, the differing emphases offered within class-based social schema, and the decline of investment in the institution of marriage and educational imperatives (Rosen, 2003, pp. 52-56). To complement this picture of ‘family’ within millennial Britain we have to add the bleeding down of a Blairite political consensus into everyday discourse. Britain undoubtedly embraced a free-market impulse, which complemented a prioritisation of the individual over society and that continued an ideological choice initiated during the Margaret Thatcher years.

Measured in contrast to the TV family, the UK ‘real’ family today is now reactive to the affiliations between aspiration, entrepreneurship, gender and class. It is an indicator by which community and class can be seen to be widened, disjointed and splintered. This situation is complicated by a decade of moral hypocrisies, promoted by late-era Thatcherites, and the incomplete, distorted assertions of a shadowy, Victorian conception of ‘family values’ that dominated the tabloid media consensus that prevailed at the turn of the century. This state is further nuanced by the racial fragmentation of British culture since the 1950s and the multiculturalism project of the 1970s. Today British

conceptions of 'family' are much more sinuous. Family can mean more than just blood relative or place.

Yet what emerges when considering this history, and through the three examples provided here, is a curious longing for, and repulsion of, this particular construct. English raises concerns about our contemporary perception of society when he states that today's community "does not refer to particular political options" but more to "a discursive umbrella" (1994, p. 20). He notes that community, traditionally, had been seen as a solution in itself whereas today what now informs discourse on society, and certainly the texts that discuss these areas, is a notion that this is now, somehow, lost. Family is tied into past conceptions of community. It carries with it, as a fixed conceptual block of a term, a failure to account for or adequately reflect the complexity of community as it exists today. Thus the secular, multicultural environment is what much mainstream comedy continually fails to deal with and these ironic families actually articulate what Nancy isolates as "nostalgia for a communal being" (1991, p. 17), where myth around community continues as just that - *myth*.

### ***The return to Suburbia***

Medhurst's book, *A national joke*, places the search for 'Englishness' at the heart of its debate on comedy and national identity and in doing so concludes

that this is an amorphous and in fact unquantifiable, concept. On trying, and in fact failing, to ascertain any concrete summation of ‘Englishness’ across a variety of historical contexts he isolates the need by critics to map out sets of contact points that define this term. He states that “Every Englandologist, it seems, needs an Englandography, a talismanic catalogue of the images, individuals, places, sounds, qualities, events, moments and texts that conjure up and exemplify the version of Englishness each writer seeks to advance or endorse” (Medhurst, 2007, p. 40).

As stated earlier in this chapter this project had been established within 1980s television animation by the likes of the Aardman studios. Formally, *Creature Comforts* (1989), directed by Nick Park, was a self-contained narrative that was part of Channel Four’s *Lip Synch* series. Constructed as supposedly edited segments, it presented animated clay animals talking in monologue about their dissatisfactions with life, transposing their zoo-life experiences against the pre-recorded voices of humans and bemoaning their own *real*-life environments. The emphasis of sound, conversational dialogue and the reiteration of routine and lived experience, all placed into stories which explored the tension between animation and conventions normally associated with live-action narratives, highlighted a very British comic obsession with everyday minutiae. However *Creature Comforts* extended from animations like *Babylon* (1985) and *War Story* (1989) into a much overtly comedic register. This was, notably, a text which spoke of the past through its assemblage of formal tropes. Park parodied and deliberately invoked Post-War British culture’s favouring of Social Realism as a mode and set up a comically incongruous connection to ‘real life’ (in this

highly mediated setting) by positing a quotation of the vox-pop device which seemingly captured various animals bemoaning their existences in a zoo. This gesture was informed more by vague cultural recollections of such ideals rather than any explicit alliance by existing as a set of formal conventions that were ironically arranged to suggest realism. As one of the nods towards the coming Third Wave, this text also functioned as a broad reminder of Bergson's essential purpose of comedy. Whereby he argued that comic situations should ultimately recognise the human experience in its most profound forms and that "Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification" (2007, p. 4). Park's celebration of smaller lives may well have aptly facilitated a discussion of the marginal it also reinforced a nostalgic sensibility that spoke of British formal traditions and framed them within a much more intensely comic setting.

This continuing idea of 'Englishness' and the connotations that this term raises also informed the work of David Fine and Alison Snowden's *Bob and Margaret* (C4/GTN 1998-2001). This was seen through a gauze of nostalgia, for not only the suburban sitcom itself but for a pre-Thatcher, pre-multicultural UK. Indeed *Bob and Margaret* is a foundation text within this Third Wave in that it was comic, narrative/character-driven animation that sought to be a reflective project, rather than the reflexive one it actually was.

The show also expressed the confidence for animated product at Channel Four during the mid-1990s, and it built on an assertion of the everyday as a suitable

comic narrative as established by Sarah Ann Kennedy's earlier *Crapston Villas* (C4 1995-1998) and paralleled in Candy Guard's *Pond Life* (C4 1998-2000). *Bob and Margaret* was extended from Snowden and Fine's celebrated Channel Four 1993 short, *Bob's Birthday*, about the fantasizing of a self-absorbed dentist, Bob Fish, voiced by Andy Hamilton, and the events around his 40th birthday. The animators embedded their own insecurities into the characters, continuing an autobiographical thread extended from the thumbnail portraits found in earlier work like *Second Class Mail* (1984). Notably Snowden herself played Margaret across all four series. The show realised Channel Four Commissioning Editor Claire Kitson's love of "character-based" comedy, and she recognised the potential of seeing "real people in stressful situations who are having trouble coping with life", as a possible primetime success for the channel (2008, p.137).

The show can be seen as a bridge from Second Wave imperatives – see Chapter One – that hinted towards the Third Wave still to come. *Bob and Margaret* was less abrasive than Kennedy's urban grotesques and yet more self-consciously nostalgic than both that and Guard's equally whimsical registers. It was initially broadcast mid-week on British terrestrial TV in the 10.30pm slot, but it failed to secure solid ratings. Despite positive word-of-mouth the show reached a 1.4 million peak, stopping shy of the desired 2 million viewers needed to sustain itself at that channel. This in turn prompted the then-Channel Four head, Michael Jackson, to pull out of financing the show. This was less a commentary on the concept of animated primetime per se and more one directly about the show itself. Jackson had implemented *The Simpsons* for BBC TV schedules

during his tenure there and at this time at Channel Four he had also commissioned a second, longer half-hour series of his preferred choice, *Pond Life* (Kitson, 2008, p. 213). This move left the door open for Canadian co-financiers Nelvana in tandem with US combine Comedy Central to continue support for the show (Mazurkewich, 1999, pp. 104-115).<sup>2</sup> So all but ignored in the UK from this point on, *Bob and Margaret* then gathered momentum in America and Canada as broadcast on Showtime, Comedy Central and on the Paramount Comedy Network channels. From here on it gained increasingly positive reviews, higher ratings and, thus, a guaranteed financial stability. Snowden and Fine even gave in to pressure from the network by series three and moved the characters to Toronto, paralleling the creator's own move to Vancouver in 2002 (Kitson, 2008, p. 141).

*Bob and Margaret* can also be seen as a prediction of the international production convergence culture that had become commonplace by the time of BBC's 2005 *Popetown*. Tonally this struck an interesting chord, as this British/Canadian industrial fusion saw the show evolved into a synthesis of two national identities, informed by the animator's backgrounds at the National Film and Television School in England and through working at the National Film Board of Canada in Montreal before they relocated to London for fifteen years. This was made explicit when Nelvana producer Tom McGillis stated that "*Bob & Margaret's* always been a Canadian show, it's always been told from a particularly Canadian point of view, we thought, even though they were living in Britain" (cited by McKay, 2001, para 3). On one level this perhaps declared a shared comic sensibility of irony, understatement and self-deprecation that

exists between Canadian and British comedy tastes, but in truth this spoke more of cementing a sense of ownership over a show that crystallised a stylised conception of 'Englishness' at its very core.

Although the family unit was comprised of two people here, with dogs as child surrogates, the notion of 'the home' as index of normalcy has roots in a panoply of live-action TV examples from *The Good Life* (BBC 1975-1978) to *Terry and June* (BBC 1979-1987) and *Keeping Up Appearances* (BBC 1990-1995), all of which in themselves declared varying degrees of self-awareness. *Bob and Margaret*'s first two series, in particular, reiterated British TV comedy's obsession with the suburbs as a venue of containment, inactivity and repression. Marc's notes on the suburban sitcom in US terms foregrounds setting as fundamental. This is where "the individually tended but uniformly trimmed lawns of the curving tree-lined streets" and "the values of a homogenous folk community where a common moral will, forged of a shared sense of blood and honor, ensures a peaceful and prosperous destiny" are vital components (1989, p. 43). Yet Medhurst pinpoints a darker undertow in UK variants, that on the one hand reinforces a tradition of "serene suburban idylls which reassured the middle classes of their own social centrality" but also observes that within these comic milieu there is often a more explicit exploration of the "neuroses that underpinned it" (2007, p. 145).

Ideally the opening titles to any television show should be where tone, style and meaning are mapped. This is very much the case here. A buzzing greenfly darts

from Bob Fish's dentist surgery to Margaret's chiropractic job, to the centre of London and to the back door of his and Margaret's home which supplies the geography of the show and adds a counterpoint of movement to the claustrophobia of the social milieu. The swooping simulated point-of-view camerawork – that animation furnishes effortlessly over live-action – details a London defined by clichéd imagery of London Bridge, Buckingham Palace, populated by British 'bobbies' eating pies as it darts through to terraced London suburbs. Sound-tracked against violins and synthesised horns the animation style echoes the highly mobile, sketchy 'squash-and-stretch' approaches of both Canadian animator Cordell Barker and of British animation mainstay, Bob Godfrey. The slightly unfinished, oscillating figurative containment lines, which recede as each series progresses, imply a less meticulous animation approach. By suggesting a rubbery 'halfway' aesthetic, that stops short of an amorphous, bone-less, Fleischerian mode of articulation – think here of the 1930s Betty Boop or Popeye cartoons – and one that refutes a more scrupulous adherence to body shape, then we have here an aesthetic that Furniss describes as impressionistically imparting believability as a halfway point between full figurative and abstract animation (1998, p. 149). The figures themselves are composed of rounded oblong faces and noses with ruddy complexions placed within bright primary, pastel backgrounds. As a result of this colour scheme this contributes to scenes appearing somehow 'over lit', which mimics the formal properties of live-action sitcom. Although the visual grammar throughout the show extends beyond the three-camera schema of studio sitcom by incorporating approximated, by of course being animated, close-ups and more expressive editing when detailing conversations etc., *Bob and Margaret* avoided

any real exploration of the form itself with space, angles and movement retaining a conservatism that fell in line with the overall tone.

Mazurkewich described the central figures in the show as “horribly normal” but also rightly cast the show as a celebration of the mundane conjoined to a very British love of the absurd (1999, p. 115). This was observable through ‘side gags’, asides rather than the central narrative. For example in the second series episode three, ‘The Trouble with Mummy’ (C4 1999), children acrobatically hang from phone lines whilst the central plot is outlined in conversation between Bob and his sister, and there are flashbacks offered which depict pensioners riding a modified stair lift and racing, comically, in wheelchairs. *Bob and Margaret*’s exploits tended to concentrate around an intrusive calamity or an uncomfortable revelation, for the characters the ‘mundane’ was classified as a minefield. The anxieties that manifest in the show revolve around the social faux pas of accidentally hiring a pornographic video for an evening in (Series One, Episode Two, ‘A Night In’), negotiating the temptations an insurance claim offers in ‘The Burglary’ (Series One, Episode Four), managing difficult parents in ‘The Trouble with Mummy’, negotiating automated phone lines in ‘No Trouble’ (Series Two, Episode Two) and the stress of leaving pets behind in seemingly sinister kennels (Series One, Episode Four, ‘Holiday’).

*Bob and Margaret* did its job in offering points of identification but it lacked the sense of impending doom and emphasis on tension featured in the following example, *Stressed Eric*, which mapped a similar terrain. The frozen moral and

societal perspectives of the pair dictated the comedy. The show insisted on reiterating the past and certainly it did little to shake lazy conceptions of Britain abroad. Ambiguities were highlighted but usually left unaddressed. Though hinting at a gentle critique of social hierarchy, any representations of poverty and major social inequalities were all absent and the show chose to settle for whimsical, un-troubling nudges aimed at the middle classes. Snowden and Fine focused more on the minutiae of social interactions. Through this celebration of a highly stylised normalcy they embodied a clichéd set of comic perceptions of Englishness forged around concepts of stasis, repression, timidity, white ethnicity, un-troubling heterosexuality and an inability to assert oneself, all of which rebounds back to an unchallenged acceptance of the status quo.

If norms are tied to conformity then the desire to accede to them here is fundamental. Despite occasional bursts of nudity and four letter words, as well-intentioned as the show was, it hankered after a fantasy projection of 1950s Britain and a reconstructed memory reconstituted through a narrative of security and safety, and that was hardly concerned with any concerted attempt to represent 'the now'. *Bob and Margaret* celebrated cohesion, affirmation and escapism, a missed opportunity when considering Sarah Ann Kennedy's earlier attempts in *Crapston Villas* to present a more nuanced multicultural Britain. It was an example of comedic animation that refuted a challenge of moral, social and – bearing in mind later Third Wave shows' obsession with taboo-busting – tonal boundaries. It was ultimately a reiteration of a myth. Its milieu was so saturated in cultural, filmic, televisual history that it couldn't operate *without* a pre-fix of irony.

### *A man about the house*

*Stressed Eric*'s position in this assessment of British animation's ironic families is also profound, and not without problematic areas to consider. Its arrival on BBC 2 at an accessible 9pm slot – but then later relegated to BBC 3 precursors, BBC Choice and UK Play – also signalled that the concept of British primetime animation was now becoming viable in a UK context. The show highlighted that animation could now be enjoyed not just for its formal pleasures, always a determinant factor for its position within schedules, but more for its points of identification with mainstream audiences who weren't necessarily aficionados of the medium.

*Stressed Eric* was a show which maintained a verisimilitude, the kind noted by Drummond as “synchronizing motifs” (cited by Neale and Krutnik, 1990, p. 235). By this he meant “regularly occurring bits of business, repeated situations and catchphrases and the elaboration of a continual internal ‘mythology’”, all of which are key elements that aid the repetitious mode of sitcom production (cited by Neale and Krutnik, 1990, p. 235). Such ‘bits of business’ can be read through central character Eric Feeble's ongoing familial misery – a situation that was set into a recognisable comedy framework.

*Stressed Eric* was produced in 1998 through Absolutely Productions, the group of primarily Scottish writer/performers responsible for the influential Channel Four sketch show *Absolutely* (C4 1989-1993). It was animated by Los Angeles studios Klasky Csupo who also worked on the first three series of *The Simpsons* as well as shows like *Aaah! Real Monsters* (1991), *Duckman* (1994) and *Rugrats* (1991). The American connection is notable here. The show was the result of Geoffrey Perkins and Colin Rose's commissioning drive to initiate a primetime animation for the BBC as a direct response to *The Simpsons* (Dams, 1999, para 2). By acknowledging Groening's successes, show runner and creator Carl Gorham sought not just to parody a parody, as such, but to instigate a show that operated to a similar template but that could be moulded to fit a contemporary UK understanding.

Gorham had worked in mainly live action comedy with a stint as a writer on Fox's successful mainstream hit, *Married with Children* (Fox 1987-1997). This experience not only led to him attempting to later unsuccessfully translate that show to a British setting but also it supplied him with enough industry weight to initiate his long-gestated animation projects, the 2002-2004 *Meg and Mog* and *Deadsville* (2006), both for Channel Four. This belief in animation as medium that could intersect with mainstream comedy tastes also undoubtedly correlated with the BBC's at this point, who too had been looking to access the critical potential and ratings benefits of a *The Simpsons*-style success, in what was becoming an increasingly aggressively competitive landscape for public service television (as stated earlier).

Gorham was pivotal to *Stressed Eric*, in that he was responsible for overseeing the writing and dialogue in the UK, he developed the animation concepts with Klasky Csupo and he also supervised the animation process out in Korea before *then* returning to the States for post production (“Case Study – Carl Gorham”, 2007, para 4).

*Stressed Eric* was first broadcast on BBC 2 on 4 April 1998 for two seasons of thirteen episodes, before then being recast, (unsuccessfully), for the American market by NBC.<sup>3</sup> The BBC version featured the exploits of forty year old, middle class, Eric Feeble – played by Mark Heap – who after two years is still unable to cope with his divorce. Feeble exists under constant pressure to maintain a London household, where he lives with his two children, six-year-old allergic Claire – clearly a derivation of the precocious Lisa Simpson – and Brian, a nine-year old with learning difficulties who is experiencing difficulty in progressing through secondary school, similarly a silent index for Maggie Simpson. Eric has a range of people using him as a vehicle of support, from his children to his teenage, alcoholic, Portuguese housekeeper, Maria, and his ex-wife, Liz. These constrictive pressures are doubled by the undermining relationship he endures with his upwardly mobile neighbours, the unsubtly-named Perfect family, who provide a model of aspiration seemingly closed off to Eric. This claustrophobic situation is further intensified by the palpable stresses that his office workplace exerts, exacerbated by his incompetent, selfish secretary, Alison Scrapeit, and his unsympathetic, demanding boss, Paul Power,

known as PP. The cumulative stresses on Eric manifested themselves physically at the finale of every episode. This was depicted with a comically exaggerated throbbing temple vein that was stimulated by the accumulation of troublesome events throughout each story. This action then prompted a breakdown, with the vein literalising this stress through its tendency to strangle him at these climatic moments. This repeated gag was one of the few moments where the show extended beyond the boundaries of, actually, a fairly rigorous verisimilitude.

Formally there were correspondences between the pose-to-pose movements presented here and those in *Bob and Margaret*. The characters appeared to be cast from Klasky Csupo's character template of stiff postures, elongated bodies, flailing boneless arms and legs, with now-familiar round white eyes punctuated with pupil dots and elongated, bendable, light bulb-shaped heads that dictate their construct's posture through weight and provide momentum. Rejecting *Bob and Margaret's* vacant head and body shapes, there was more finesse constructed around facial details with wrinkles and bags present on character designs which implied a more intense relationship with performance. Notably this world was set into a more muted colour scheme. Background colour washes connote interiors. Loose perspectives define a world of uneven lines, sketchy for middle distance and thicker set to outline furniture, doors etc., all anchored into a 'reality' by specific deployments of graded greys, browns and subdued yellows and reds. Again the backgrounds hovered between indexical 'realism' and impressionism. Not only did this highlight the figures in the forefront, but this aesthetic appeared completely appropriate when considered in collusion with the more obsessive study of containment fore-grounded within the

narratives. All three examples discussed here accentuated vigorous vocal acting and the animation throughout centralised characters whose dialogue dominated the scene. *Stressed Eric* also continued the penchant for similar fantastical comic asides of errant children and animals conducting in the background, incidental behaviour counterpoint to the main dialogue.

This was an urban, rather than *suburban*, sitcom. The show's locale shift offered a clearer point of identification for the majority of UK viewers and further highlighted the disparity between the 1950s 'then' of "the stable-divorce-free, two-parent household in which father ventures out into the world to hunt down a pay-check while mother stays at home enforcing physical and spiritual cleanliness", and the 1990s 'now' of one-parent families struggling to maintain an equilibrium (Marc, 1989, p. 43). The return to the city supplied danger, ambiguity and seemed fitting with a more claustrophobic sense of British cynicism. Although more class-fixated as a society, gentler British comic dissertations of unassuming, quiet lives, of thwarted aspiration, the desire for social repositioning and the struggles of those lower down the economic ladder have been a constant preoccupation within primetime observations such as *Dad's Army* (BBC 1968-1977), *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC 1956-1960), *Steptoe and Son* (BBC 1962-1974), *The Likely Lads* (BBC 1964-1966), *Auf Weidersehen Pet* (ITV 1983-2004) and through to John Sullivan's work on *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC 1981-2003), among many others. Yet *Stressed Eric* offered an unashamedly hybridised take, combining American and British tonal sensibilities. Like many shows in this Third Wave it extended the sitcom into areas of the reflexive and the fantastical, that US forms have always felt more

comfortable exploring than UK examples, but the links to a recognisably British socio/cultural landscape were maintained.

The focus here on the one-parent family dynamic as contemporary norm was noteworthy. Rosen argues that our cultural relationship with marriage in latter part of the 20th century has profoundly altered. With one divorce now for every two marriages he suggests that “later age at first marriage, an increase in unmarried cohabitation, a greater proportion of children born outside marriage, later age at childbirth, a lower birth rate, and a sharply rising rate of divorce”, along with shifts in available education and employment for women, are all contributing factors that define contemporary interrelations between couples (Rosen, 2003, pp. 53-54). Gorham’s show responded to this, and actualised within the show cultural shifts in perception around an increasingly indistinct middle class, so epitomised by Tony Blair’s signature 1996 observation that “a lot more people are middle class nowadays” (cited by Rosen, 2003, p. 30). These issues also intersected with other vital aspects of British sitcom tradition.

Eric Feeble was a picture of middle class ineffectuality. Nominally in charge of his household he was consistently undermined in his efforts to create a sense of unity, underlining that, in many ways, the television patriarch had always been a figure of reduction. Hamamoto observes that even by the 1950s, in nostalgia-based shows like *Life with Father* (CBS 1953-1955), the ‘paterfamilias’ construct was in fact “vastly at odds with the transformed occupational structure of the new post-war middle class, a class formation mostly dependent on

corporation or government – no longer the family – for employment” (1991, p. 24). In Gorham’s 1990s refraction of this, the lone parent gamely resurrected the conception of the flawed male to reference the kinds of traditional slapstick and farce that extends from Laurel and Hardy to other frustrated social climber-outsiders, from *Fawlty Towers* (BBC 1975-1979) onwards. Feeble, who in name alone exists as a Tex Avery-ian literalization, embodied both tragic *and* comic dimensions. Morreall notes that comedic and tragic heroes have often shared as much in common as they have seemingly diverged. On the one hand, Feeble as comic protagonist may have had difficulty in meeting responsibility head-on, but he shared with his tragic counterpart the task of having to negotiate a world “full of conflict, struggle and danger and [in which] success or failure depends on unknown factors” (Morreall, 1999, p. 15). As a tragic hero, on the other, Feeble existed within a comic continuum of “failure, suffering and death” with no “special force” to protect him, he was tragic in that the “bemoaning of one’s fate” sits in opposition to the comic hero’s customarily more imaginative conduct (1999, p. 15).

This was middle-class male as fool, this cast the abandonment of masculinity as a pathway to failure. Gorham deployed these narratives within an examination of the 1980s/1990s archetype, ‘the New Man’. For Gorham this was a highly conflicted construct. Feeble may well be cast as ‘man as victim’ – perhaps not necessarily impaled by the forces of feminism so much as his own lack of self-assertion – but here he was a compromised and highly flawed conception. ‘The New Man’ was an amalgam not ascribed to one specific moment but rather “the condensation of multiple concerns which were temporarily run together” (Mort,

1996, p. 15). Beynon sums up the peculiar loathing for this short-lived distillation of masculinity as “widely criticised as being middle-class, elitist, ‘western-centric’ and remote from the living experience of ordinary men” (2002, p. 115). The New Man was supposedly emotional, responsible, adaptable, open-minded, self-aware and happy to compromise. It was seen in retrospect as a contradictory figure that appeared entirely bound up by marketplace images, reflective of echoes within contemporary culture and bound by a feminised nurture instinct as well as clashing with a narcissistic impulse borne from a search for a new self-image in 1980s post-industrial societies.

These qualities are seen as endemic as to why Eric is unable to “put his foot down” within his own life (episode 6, ‘Au Pair’, Gorham, 2000). His attempts in that particular episode to navigate the “facts of life” with his son said as much about class repression and male inadequacy in conventional sitcom as it did about contemporary parenting (Gorham, 2000). The character’s fumbling referred back to a conception of national identity once more, especially when this is measured against his lazy, highly-sexualised Russian au pair who exhibits more masculine qualities of power and assertion. The transgressive foreigner re-appeared here, in this post-Alternative Comedy climate, as a comic stereotype that often served differing agendas within Third Wave Animation. To complement this reinforcement of pre-Alternative tradition, women were continually depicted as problematic throughout *Stressed Eric*. Be it the apathetic secretary or Feeble’s disconnected, fantasist, ex-wife – “getting in touch with primordial truth by abandoning language” – or the ditzy ‘dolly-bird’ temporary

secretary, Sherry “big tease” Roberts (Gorham, 2000). This continued with the boss’s harridan of a wife, Mrs PP – “where’s me grouting trowel” – who, like Eric himself, exhibited a seemingly incorrect gender coding in Series Two, Episode Seven, ‘Drool’, and it is on these points of identification where most of the humour resided (Gorham and Hatt, 2000).

Feeble conformed to Morreall’s ideal of the comic hero in that he seeks to diffuse situations through circuitous modes of address. This ‘New Man’ may well be a construct reactive to Second Wave Feminism, a re-evaluation of masculinity and “masculine expectation”, but as presented here it is also a broad comedic stroke that implies critique rather than balanced observation (Di Mattia, 2006, p. 93). *Stressed Eric* was defined by a loss of control, submission, the demarcation of male power to equally flawed women in his life and a reactionary inference that expressed disgust at the denial of any inherent masculine dominance and/or destiny. Feeble suppressed aggression and confrontation and was, at the finale of each instalment, seen to pay the price for this with his own body taking revenge on such weakness. He was continually undermined through his desire to concede. That Eric was tarred by this suggestion of abnormal conduct was a gesture which leads us all the way back to music hall and beyond. Medhurst and Tuck point out that whilst observing homosexuality as cast within sitcom narratives, the alliance of feminine behaviour to the constructed faux-masculinity, of ‘man’ as ‘woman’, speaks of a tired critique conducted from within “the safety of the majority” (1996, p. 115).

### *Surrogacy and culture*

Eaton outlined that across a range of disparate texts the UK sitcom could be defined by circumstances of constriction. Discernible in his model were the categories of “home”, “work” and an occasional clause being neither of the first two but a fluid, all-purpose, “Third Model”, a setting that can contain either *aspects* of the first two or be entirely *separate* (Eaton, 1978, p. 73). If we consider this against Neale and Krutnik’s statement that family in sitcom can infer simply the constituent that provides the stability for situations to revolve around, then we have the set-up in place for our third ironic family found in *I Am Not an Animal* (2004) (1990, p. 240).

This show was first broadcast at 9pm on BBC 2, 10 May 2004. It was written and directed by Peter Baynham, writing and vocal contributor to *Bob and Margaret* and one of British comedy’s most innovative writers through his collaborations with Armando Iannucci and Chris Morris. *I Am Not an Animal*, which ran for one six-episode series only, demonstrated how respected performers were more than happy to invest in the potential of primetime animation, and recognising its rising credibility. This was a show that was tellingly presented as part of the BBC’s ongoing initiatives around television ‘comedy’ rather than ‘animation’. The vocal cast included many of the comedy establishment of that period and the show, from its inception, was a heralded production from Steve Coogan and Henry Normal’s Baby Cow company – an independent set-up established in Manchester in 1999, now twenty-five per cent

owned by BBC Worldwide, and responsible for diverse but centrally placed crossover TV comedy like *Gavin and Stacey* (BBC 2007-2010), *Saxondale* (BBC 2006-2007), *The Mighty Boosh* (BBC 2004-to date) and *Nighty Night* (BBC 2004-2005) (Conlan, 2008).

Upon its broadcast the show met with critical approval and positive commentary from voices within the industry, such as Matt Groening, but contrary to received BBC wisdom about developing new comedy talent or shows it never received a planned second series (Searle cited by Romeo, 2005, para 23). *I Am Not an Animal* focuses on a surrogate family of genetically-enhanced talking, cognisant animals, Batch 4. These creatures lived in a specially-constructed sealed environment that simulated what they thought was ‘reality’, but they were in fact the result of a series of experiments on cognisance conducted by scientist Mike Simmons for the sinister Vivi-Tec corporation. The characters were freed after a botched liberation attempt by animal rights activists from their protective shell, and the animals then travelled across country to search for a mythical conception of London, going on to set up as a family within an abandoned cottage. During their unwitting incarceration they had come to believe that London was a materialist utopia that would allow them each personal expression and fulfilment, albeit defined through the restrictive terms of capitalistic modern life. Not for the first time in UK forms, the family unit here organised itself as a parody of a family structure, defined not by blood relation – they are after all entirely different species – but more by environment, necessity and life-style choices. Adam Barclay and Brian West’s *Pets* (C4 2001-2002) was a puppet show that worked from a similar template, as indeed was Richard

Golezowski's earlier *Rex the Runt* (BBC 1998-2001), but neither of those shows embraced such an overtly satirical register and both were cast from a much less critical position than Baynham's text.

Part soap-opera, road narrative and sitcom, Baynham himself saw the show as "animated satire" and explicitly allied it to the allegorical registers of Orwell's *Animal Farm* ("Animated animals experiment on TV", 2004, para 18). Other antecedents are detectable also, as Wells notes, in the show's nod to a diverse range of British animations from *Plague Dogs* (1982) to *Watership Down* (1978), which overlap on the primary theme of animal testing (2009, p. 195).<sup>4</sup> Like *Monkey Dust* and *Popetown* before and after it, the show also arrived with controversy as a built-in component, as the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection complained to the UK press before broadcast that the show demonstrated an insensitive treatment of the issue of testing on lab animals.<sup>5</sup>

Wells observes that the humour is as much about talking animals placed in incongruous contexts as it is about talking animals interacting with aspects of human consumerist society, which is the drive behind the satirical content (2009, p. 193). Although *I Am Not an Animal* can be assessed using the fundamental humorous mechanism of incongruity – whereby opposing or non-related experiential systems of belief and recognizable elements or signifiers are juxtaposed to comic effect – we can take this here as more a base-line analysis (Davis, 1993, pp. 11-17). This fundamental idea reoccurs throughout most forms of seditious humour as Billig notes that it arises from an inherent desire,

aesthetic or otherwise, for a “sense of order... and a preference for harmony and due proportion” (2005, p. 77). This builds on principles outlined by Hogarth who felt that comic disparity was dependent on the subversion of symmetry, a desirable state which he saw as inspiring a sense of “confidence” within a reader/viewer (2010, p. 165). This sense of incongruity, as a mode, does extend to the animation itself, albeit in actually a relatively familiar animated deployment. The formal style within *I Am Not an Animal* was notably dissimilar to our previous examples. This was due to the ‘photocollage’ aesthetic created specifically for the show. The adoption of this serves industrial, creative *and* thematic purposes by avoiding having the animation farmed out to an outside production company and through this economically viable method also allowing Searle – and a hands-on Baynham – to retain immediate and complete control over comedic timing, performance and expression. This was a technique developed from Searle’s work in advertising that used a desktop system to manipulate and combine crude bitmap, cut-out collages of figures, shapes, faces, limbs etc. Searle maintained that they wanted to continue a relationship with anthropomorphic tradition but also subvert it somehow, in that, “the animals should look very distinct from other talking animals, like Yogi Bear, in terms of standing up and walking around, in that it should look a bit awkward that these animals wanted to be human and have human characteristics” (cited by Romeo, 2005, para 12). Thus the retaining of human, cut-out eyes on each character is of note here. This choice may have generated a distinction from other mainstream anthropomorphic approaches, deemed by Baynham and Searle as too over-familiar to audiences.<sup>6</sup> It is a device that fosters identification as much as it “authenticates human nature, human

normality” (Sandler, 1997, p. 52). In having human eyes set into animal faces there is a locus for connection established, yet simultaneously this achieves a pleasing tension, with each construct recognisably displaying enough half-animal/half-human characteristics to function and yet curiously not really fully inhabiting either species cohesively. This distinctive process also used CGI to ally mimesis with a flavour of the bizarre, by having its paper-thin characters articulate like ‘real’ animals, rather than walking or standing as a hybrid of animal and human. These figures moved across the screen in a two-dimensional, monoplane fashion which then further subverted the kind of “pristine” hybridised “second order” realism designed to emulate cinematography, seen so often within the Pixar films, for example (Darley, 2000, pp. 85-86). Such formal preferences harmonized with the tone entirely, and moved the tale into a dream-like fusion of satire and fable.

Baynham’s main target in *I Am Not an Animal* was the vacuity of the metropolitan middle classes:

It’s a fairly common phenomenon of London life – people having fully developed critiques of books they haven’t read and films they haven’t seen ... If Disney did the story, they might say that if animals developed consciousness they’d teach us something about looking after the planet, or about animal dignity. We decided to go the other way – that they buy into the crap that we buy into: mobile phones, celebrity culture, the internet and all the other crap that seems to be thrown at us these days (Baynham cited by Gilbert, 2004a, paras 6-7).

He mounted this attack by utilising an array of disparate characters. The balance of gender, the inter-play and the insistence on using culture and experience as the primary discourse throughout the show intensified the familial dynamics. For Phillip Masterson-Bowie was a horse with literary pretensions and the unit's sole, highly flawed, patriarchal figure, as voiced by Steve Coogan of *Alan Partridge/The Day Today* fame. Coogan also played Mark Andrews, a sparrow with ambitions to promote himself and his non-existent song-writing skills into a London music business that he had the merest semblance of comprehension of. Here this gesture provided a commentary on the meritocracy myths propagated through both 1980s Thatcherite and 1990s Blairite political narratives. Simon Pegg, of *Shaun of the Dead/Big Train*, voiced an aggressively arrogant, status-conscious cat, Kieron, whose hubris led to his cruel decapitation at the hands of Vivi-Tec scientists in the first episode, 'London Calling'. In luring him into a space demarked as 'London', in effect a surgery room behind a curtain, Kieron was mutilated by his captors and had his brain removed. In doing so this provided a symbolic index of what awaited the Batch 4 unit should they ever finally attain their aspirations (Baynham, 2004).

Julia Davis – from *Nighty Night/Jam/Brass Eye* – voiced one of the two female animals of the group, a hyper-sexualised rat, Clare Franchetti, who repeated, verbatim, women's magazine dictums on body image, sexual behaviour and self-help culture. Winona Matthews, voiced by Amelia Bullmore of *Big Train/Jam/Brass Eye*, was an evidently middle class female bulldog obsessed with celebrity magazine culture, beauty and fashion narratives, a construct that referenced the rich animation tradition of ugliness and aggression commonly

associated with that particular breed of dog – see Hanna and Barbera’s 1941-1956 MGM *Tom and Jerry* series as example. Both were excluded from patriarchal status but they were deployed to highlight the constrictive roles offered within contemporary popular culture as a result. Hugh Grape was voiced by Kevin Eldon and was a monkey with no capacity for rational thought and whose penchant for open masturbation and bodily functions acted as a device by which to explore social propriety, the gap between these so-called ‘civilised’ creatures and our expectations of them as animals. As well as this he added a counterweight to the verbal modes of humour at work throughout the text. There was also a performance contribution from Arthur Matthews, the co-writer of *The Day Today*, *Father Ted* and *Big Train*, as a brain-damaged rabbit who had been forced to work at a call centre, which was a dual commentary on the mind-numbing discourse of consumerism and the demeaning nature of repetitive toil. Notably this was a family unit devoid of a clear matriarch and its fractured sibling dynamic and lack of familial warmth and connection aided the show’s cynical message.

Normality was enforced, and continually mocked by the programme makers, through social ritual. In many ways this unit could be described through the sociological term of the “pseudo-family” (Selling, 1931, p. 247), the phenomenon that occurs in contexts of expediency, such as in institutional situations, where makeshift families form to satisfy the need for warmth, protection and the need for inclusion. United through circumstance, their familial dynamic was heightened when they take refuge and make a home in an abandoned cottage in the third episode, ‘Money’ (2004). They have no real

understanding of the language they use, the context or indeed the potential for it to contain or repress. Each character repeatedly expressed themselves through contemporary post-industrial media mythologies, as in Clare Franchetti's non-sequitous advice on non-existent health/body image issues, "I've got sickle-cell anaemia and classic hips" ('My Fair Mare', Baynham, 2004). Masterson-Bowie's use of the term "sub-Altmanesque", dropped inappropriately into conversation in the first episode, was another of these disconnected statements, in this case suggesting a normative field where the language of criticism itself had become absorbed unthinkingly into middle-class discourse (Baynham, 2004). This was as much a signal towards pretension as it was recognition of a breakdown of castes of knowledge and of a system of communication that refutes perspective.

This disconnection was profound. These characters were not only removed from a vague conception of what 'London' actually was but these choices comprised their very selves as beings. *I Am Not an Animal* was an inversion of Rousseau's notions of the inherent nobility of animals and the show can be thought of in the terms outlined within Giddens's theoretical debate around the composition of our perceived postmodern self. Giddens posits that we quote or present facets of culture to define ourselves in social situations as part of a "disembedding" process that reveals that the way contemporary social relations exist now in this post industrial setting (1990, pp. 21-27). 'Place' is no longer of primary import to us but rather we choose our own identity through a state of disjointed self-reflexivity. Thus identity becomes a condition informed and measured by how we interact or position ourselves against culture (1990, pp. 21-27). 'Batch 4' are

evidence of the self-monitoring that Giddens highlights as endemic to our contemporary experience, actualised in the process where “social practices are constantly examined and reformulated in the light of incoming information about those practices” (1990, pp. 36-38).

However the show reserved a sense of utter disdain for these trappings. The middle-ground setting of prime time animation was deployed here to highlight the isolation inherent within consumer culture as well as chronicle its hypnotic, sedative quality. Searle noted that *Dad's Army* remained a comparison that he and Baynham were happy to invoke in its character contrasts, dialogues on containment, its shared themes of “ignorance and snobbery” and of an ongoing narrative of a shared ‘mission’ that linked the protagonists together (cited by Romeo, 2005, para 25). Yet despite this explicit alliance with comedy past, out of the three categories of ‘family’ here Baynham’s was the most acerbic, the most pointed and is certainly the most radical, politically.

### ***Conclusion***

Any discussion of a norm requires an embarkation point. It is imperative then that recognisable conceptions of work, family, school and inter-personal relationships, located in understandable, perceptual frameworks, not only aid a parodic address but also facilitate a challenge to any supposedly ‘fixed’ values within a community. Notions of family appear entangled within Third Wave

Animation production as not only a recurrent comic component, but as a measurement, as a marker of difference, as an ironic totem to highlight distance *and* identification and its consistent deployment here intensifies the need for quotation marks around such ephemeral and fluid terms.

Television animation's status as a medium of quotation, *par excellence*, provides for us a useful barometer. Third Wave texts serve a number of profound functions in that they report back to us on the cultural significance, resonance and hardiness of certain types of iconography. This is aided by animation's unique properties as the medium's removal from recorded reality allows a pointed critique. The medium revives what appears to be exhausted imagery to reflect upon the contemporary and its formal distance supplies an ironic dialogue, that uses the modes of postmodernity to provide commentary, critique the nature of its own production setting and yet still manage to satirise and facilitate the very process it is claiming to subvert. Third Wave ironic families operate under full recognition of historical conditions, function and deployment.

Yet this postmodern double-bluff reasserts a continuous narrative that has prevailed within UK animation and comedy, in that these are narratives still capable of bearing aspects of "the problem-solving", the reiteration of "folk wisdom and proverbialism" and a discourse on societal consensus as outlined by Medhurst and Tuck (drawn from Dyer and Eaton), in a context of mainstream comedy (1996, p. 112). Thus normalcy, family and irony are managed through

these three distinctive texts: as a nostalgic reverie, as direct commentary and as a satirical mechanism, all of which adequately gauge morality, propriety and acceptability and assess our society's progress from a post-war social framework.

In comic animation terms, today's post-*Simpsons* understandings of television family, (nuclear or otherwise), now seem connoted primarily by stasis and repression, containment and conformity. It appears that this term family now embodies a confusing sense of revulsion *and* reassurance. Although this is part of a traditional mode of comic interrogation, dissections of community often seemingly inevitably appear concerned with questioning "universals", and here this function in a contemporary UK setting appears concerned with replaying fading memories, a "nostalgia for a communal being" (Blanchot cited by English, 1994, p. 21). This raises further questions. For such an address highlights a range of ambiguities within the narratives of the Third Wave Animation texts that we will look at across the next few chapters. This will lead us into a discussion of representation and agency that has to be considered against issues of absences, as much it does matters of inclusion. This in turn suggests that whilst this Third Wave moment may appear concerned with the contemporary, in actuality it seems rather more fixated on the past.

## Endnotes – Chapter Two

1. A less obvious antecedent that *The Simpsons* benefited directly and indirectly from was Hanna and Barbera's nod towards the grittier Norman Lear US sitcoms of the 1970s called *Wait 'til Your Father Gets Home* (NBC 1972-1974). This was an attempt to exploit the ratings success of Lear's stable of shows, but as a stepping stone it is entirely noteworthy through its prioritisation of the suburban narrative over the fantastical.
2. Nelvana were renowned for producing well-regarded production-line children's animation throughout the 1980s. It was extended from the 1960s studio Laff-Arts, and formed in 1971 by Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert, and its success was built on a portfolio of highly commercial TV animated work that didn't conform to a 'house-style' and allowed for more creative practice in television and feature projects (Mazurkewich, 1999, pp. 104-115).
3. The NBC US version re-cast Eric with the voice of *Simpsons* regular Hank Azaria, and the emphasis shifted to an American living in England. The show was pulled off the schedules after only three episodes for failing to connect with audiences (Bermam, 1999, para 3). It is notable that TV animation's costs, especially in this case, often

prohibit a network persevering with a concept that takes a while to establish itself with audiences.

4. Aardman's *Lab Animals* (2002), planned originally for ITV, sought to make an ironic juxtaposition between the mistreatment of animals as material for scientific experiment and the direct commentary from the animals themselves which defines the show but it was quickly assessed as unsuitable for the family slot that it was intended for (Lane, 2003 p. 175).
5. Baynham says: "The BUAV is unhappy because it thinks we're suggesting that all lab animals have soft furnishings, Manolo Blahniks and nice wine, but these animals are unique and very stupid. They're also fictional." (cited by Rampton, 2004, para 15).
6. Using the same software, this process had been initiated on Searle's work on the Comedy Lab pilot, *Rolf's Animal Hairdressers* (C4 2000).

## Chapter Three

### **‘C’mon Mum Monday night is Jihad Night...’: Race and nostalgia in a Third Wave setting.**

#### *Introduction*

We have seen so far that Third Wave Animation uses familiar iconography, such as ‘the family’, to tell stories about contemporary UK life and to set up links with earlier television forms. I now want to ask over the next few chapters how issues of gender, class, race and cultural and societal values are framed throughout this era of production (1997-2010). In this particular chapter I will be focussing on how ethnic minorities are presented, and how this deployment reflects back onto the nature of Third Wave Animation itself. To do this I will concentrate on what is undoubtedly a crucial Third Wave text, BBC 3’s *Monkey Dust* (2003-5). This was an animated sketch show written and produced by Harry Thompson and Shaun Pye that ran over three series from February 2003 through to February 2005. As much as this was a show that embodied the ideological shifts within the BBC, it was also a text that provided an explicit commentary on post-millennial Britain in the wake of New Labour’s reshaping of the UK socio-political landscape. *Monkey Dust* replayed traditional televisual comic structures to organise a critique of social, political and cultural consensus.

This comic animation took account of multicultural Britain in the cultural climate after 9/11. But as I highlighted in the last chapter, Third Wave Animation's inherently ironic nature promoted here a somewhat reflexive, distant stance, and the depictions of ethnic minorities within it are cast with an ambiguous light that deserves further investigation. *Monkey Dust* can be summarized as being all about contemporary British life as defined through media conceptions, yet it also raises a number of issues for discussion that inform all of this Third Wave.

I want to ask whether this show adequately represents the lives of ethnic minorities within a contemporary setting. This factor of course has to be considered against the highly constructed disposition of the medium itself, alongside animation's capacity to approach complex issues using a visual shorthand as, here, informed by a history of television comedy that has too often deployed a blankly stereotypical address. Does the show avoid oversimplification and tired choices around representation that mainstream animation, in particular, has been guilty of in previous years? Is it possible for a show like this to highlight supposedly new models of depiction that accurately reference the social/political climate? Or does the show reveal narrative choices that are less about the expression of a marginal voice in a mainstream comic context and more about their specific forces of agency that drive the piece? Is the show truly acting in recognition of the shifting demographics of post-millennial Britain, or are the stories merely allowing for the creators to prod at

notions of propriety within a mainstream comic context? This is a recurring concern that informs our understanding of what Third Wave texts embody.

If this is the case then to what extent does addressing such narratives around race in such a context inform debates around ‘political correctness’ within mainstream work, and indeed what role does this concept play within comedy of this period? We have to also ask, is ‘political correctness’ a discrete conception or is it simply one that is open to interpretation and, possibly, distortion? And considering these factors, to what extent can *Monkey Dust* be interpreted as an exemplar of the period, as a marker of 21st century comedy consensus?

This leads us to another crucial point. *Monkey Dust* revisited a familiar televisual convention, the sketch-show, which continues my earlier statement that this grouping of television animation narratives exist very as much a sub-genre of British comedy, as much as they embody an evolution of the medium within a mainstream setting. Although it may have taken a more contemporary formal approach by dispensing with the mechanisms of artificiality and narrative stasis that had come to typify the sketch show in a live-action context – by which I mean a ‘laugh track’, a theatrical performance register etc. – nostalgia undoubtedly informs its core. Yet still aspects of the past impacts on *Monkey Dust*’s reliability as a supposed socio/cultural commentary. For this is a show that stressed a mission to highlight contemporary dialogues around race, yet seemed to talk as much about the comedy of the past as it did the societal present.

### *Animating ethnic minorities*

What is apparent when critically assessing *Monkey Dust* is that claims made about any direct approach taken toward societal issues by the programme makers soon evaporates under study. The first series sketch, 'Chat Room Perv', was announced by the BBC as an intended dissection of on-line grooming and a comment on the insidious social nature of paedophilia. As the narratives unspooled, this supposed confrontation of a contemporary tabloid hate figure soon evolved into a comic discourse more about disconnection, aging and the disparities in language and culture between the young and old (Pye & Thompson, 2003). For *Monkey Dust* continually offered a topic as a 'shell', or disguise, by which then to smuggle underneath another concept entirely. This was never more apparent than in their approach to race. Quite rightly, Thompson and Pye realised that any discussion of contemporary Britain would need to take stock of multiculturalism and this is where *Monkey Dust* would appear at its most contentious. Indeed Monk wonders if perhaps one of the main reasons for the BBC's reticence in allowing Series Two and Three to be released as official DVDs could well have been due to contemporary cultural sensitivity over the issues about race that were raised within the show (2007, pp. 338-339). Here I shall focus on how the show manages and discusses racial representation forged from media perceptions. In this case, there are two main sketches that we will focus on where the show consciously attempts to manipulate tabloid-informed, consensual perspectives and where ambiguities

within the show are potentially at their most problematic. I will firstly look at the stories of the immigrant Abu, from the first three episodes of the Series Two, and then, secondly, I will examine in more detail narratives that feature the characters Omar, Shafiq and Abdul, as three would-be Muslim terrorists based in West Bromwich, who appear across Series Two and Three.

There is certainly enough evidence within both stories to support a positive reading of each narrative, in that there is a notable lessening of oversimplification discernible mainly through the sensitivity taken towards the character design, which has been a continual tension within animation. This is a factor that Cohen explicitly acknowledges when highlighting the divisions in perception and opinion on the process of stereotyping, albeit in an American mainstream animation setting reactive to differing cultural conditions.

Historically, the depictions of ethnic minorities in comedic texts have been rendered problematic as Black characters have depicted as having little in common, in terms of shared physical commonality, with Caucasians. Also they have usually been demoted within narratives as mere gateways to taboo areas, as vehicles for parody, as markers of exploration, posited as an inversion of 'white' consensus and used to monitor the boundaries of censorship boundaries, i.e. in shorts such as the 1941 *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat*, or the 1943 *Coal Black and De Sebben Dwarfs*, among many others (1997, pp. 49-75). As Bogle notes, what also proved troubling was that animators created Black characters that repeated design models, along with lazy reiteration of attendant narratives, that were forged from 19th century Jim Crow slave imagery (2002, pp. 10-15). This reliance on imagery forged from reductive Western-defined

cultural tradition has also extended to Japanese and Asian characters, with them also being cast purely through their physicality, their racial difference and their distance from white indexes. As a result animation's tendency towards polarisation and through its alliance to brevity when outlining meaning has often, sometimes unintentionally, promoted negative stereotyping.

As far back as 1922, when concerns of the acceleration of new media prompted Lippman's key response, *Public opinions*, there has been an ongoing commentary about the potential dangers of accepting stereotyped representations within mass entertainment contexts. The all-pervasive, discriminatory and persuasive nature of stereotyping was responsible for determining "what facts we see and in what light we see them" (Lippman cited by Curtis, 1998, p. xviii). This serves the impression of the stereotype as an easily transmissible image that allows the assimilation of information in a mass communication setting and thus aids the delineation of social and moral boundaries. However a negative emphasis appears to be the main issue here. Barker leans on definitions forged by Dyer and Hall around racial models when he notes that stereotypes tend to raise "questions of inclusion and exclusion" with a stress upon "simplistic exaggerated, usually negative characteristics", with objectification, rather than historicising, being the end result (2000, p. 208). The standard line has emerged that, unless checked, stereotypes contain power, and due to their immediacy can strengthen prejudice.

Considering comedy and animation's convergence in this Third Wave context, Medhurst and Tuck offer a more nuanced position on stereotyping in that they see such a practice can actually serve a *necessary* role. In live-action sitcom this practice simultaneously can offer both regressive *and* progressive areas of discourse, which admittedly may reinforce dominant ideologies and stages minorities for their comic value alone, but can also work as a valuable processing space for communities and creates a necessary visibility for marginal presences (1996, pp. 230-233). Certainly this is evident in Britain of the 1970s, when societal anxieties around the first wave of immigrants from the 1950s that had recently settled in Britain were exacerbated by rising unemployment and shifts in urban demographics, and were heightened by contentious statements offered by the political Right. These tensions formed the central discussion within problematic, highly-flawed, but ultimately well-intentioned sitcoms like *Curry and Chips* (ITV 1969), *Mind Your Language* (ITV 1977-1986), *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV 1972-1976) and *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC 1965-1975). These were shows that sought to address these changes in a positive manner, but faltered through the use of unsophisticated and often unintentionally damaging frameworks to get their message of inclusion across. Due to the conditions of Britain conceived by writers as an 'island', too often these comic minorities were often cast as flawed or simply 'foreign'.

As First Wave Animation tended to reflect the mono-cultural environment of the time, correspondingly in 1970s UK mainstream comic animation – perhaps due to the historical sensitivities around design – such contemporary dialogues were often simply ignored, with more politically-minded, liberal progressive

Second Wave animators refusing to follow this particular comedic pathway. It is notable that representations of minorities in this period are generally defined through absence. DaCosta notes this by confirming that ethnic characters per se have been continually missing components within both First *and* Second Wave settings. He sees 1980s animators such as Sproxtton and Lord and Nick Park – for him, among the key culprits – continually referencing a pre-multicultural Britain in their portraits that either severely marginalised, or often totally ignored, ethnic minorities (2010, pp. 10-34).

### ***BBC 3, comedy and Monkey Dust***

To understand how constructions of race can be read in a Third Wave environment, it is very important that we establish a detailed industrial, cultural and creative context for the show under examination. This informs not only our case study but actually will also shed light on what is to come across the following chapters.

*Monkey Dust* was one of the flagship programmes of the emergent digital channel BBC 3, which extended from BBC Choice. The show was broadcast late on Sunday 9 February 2003, being made available to the 25 million viewers who then had access to multi-channel television, and that evening it reached a modest peak of 81,000 viewers (Sherwin, 2003, para 2). Its placement in the schedules says much about the BBC's desire to function competitively in the deregulated market and to compete with Sky One and E4. For, primed with a

£97 million budget, digital channel BBC 3 set out to offer edgier comedy, contemporary drama and news for an audience that the corporation insisted felt alienated from its terrestrial channels (Leonard, 2003, para 3). BBC 3 attracted negative criticism from the press and within the industry itself, almost immediately, focusing on the BBC's role as a public service broadcaster in this new environment. After an assessment completed by the Labour Culture, Media and Sport Secretary Tessa Jowell in the wake of these concerns, it was determined that BBC 3 should serve a public service ethos more effectively by avoiding any reliance on expensive US imports and should concentrate on producing home-grown shows (Sherwin, 2003, para 3; Leonard, 2003, para 4). In retrospect, it appears that the support for *Monkey Dust* by BBC 3 signified a more optimistic time for UK comedy animation. For by the arrival of Danny Cohen in 2007 as overseer, the terrain had shifted so extensively that the station was now relaxed enough to be prioritising US animated cheaply bought in sitcoms, like Seth MacFarlane's *Family Guy* (Fox 1999-to date) and *American Dad* (Fox 2005-to date), to function as all-purpose, late night schedule fillers. By this point this less parochial emphasis was evidence of a resigned, pragmatic accession to the free-market.

*Monkey Dust*, a Talkback Thames independent production broadcast through the BBC, arrived alongside several other notable animated projects.<sup>1</sup> It was, like its less stylistically and tonally cohesive precursor *Aaagh! It's the Mr Hell Show!* (BBC 2001-2002), an animated sketch show. This was a particular durable staple of television comedy, born of expediency and of the demands of the variety show that, alongside the revitalised sitcom, served animation particularly

well. The sketch show itself was built on reiteration, of narrative, image and dialogue. Its fragmented, non-linear nature and its alliance to narrative brevity saw the sketch show accrue a credible comic currency within television once more during the 1990s that suited these more postmodern times. This was, in many ways, an ironic derivation of this template that allowed writers and comedians to reconnect to convention without invoking critical comparisons to, at that point, obsolete Light Entertainment traditions.<sup>2</sup>

*Monkey Dust* was part of a drive to place comedy as central to BBC 3's identity. Partly this was to act as a "nursery slope" for the sister channels BBC 1 and BBC 2, whereby comedy shows could be tried out in an area of relatively low visibility. This is something that more experimental 1970s shows like *Monty Python's Flying Circus* initially benefited from, in debuting away from primetime schedules on BBC 2 (Keighron, 2004, p. 14). Also, what had occurred at Channel Four in the 1990s – the centralising of US comic imports to boost flagging ratings – suggested that a similar, more home-grown perspective on this idea, could be emulated here. This impulse is significant, in that, by accident more than design, BBC 3 became one of the few mainstream networks that openly supported British-produced animation. Indeed the *type* of animation that BBC 3 embraced is noteworthy in this Third Wave context. For when Commissioning Executives Mark Freedland and Lucy Lumsden announced the inclusion of animation as part of their mission to discover "comedy that's relevant to the way this country is now... rather than escaping into American imports", this gesture suggested that debates around the medium as an inferior counterpart to live-action comedy had, in this post-*Simpsons* environment, now

fully receded (cited by Hessling, 2003, para 3). Again seemingly mirroring Channel Four's celebration of animation throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the real implications of BBC 3's potential new dawn was that the emphasis would be on entertainment-based animation over more difficult, less accessible, individualist work. This was an important marker to how network television was now engaging with the medium, in that it was competitively measured against the range of live-action comedy broadcast on other channels, rather than just other animation texts.

What *Monkey Dust* promised was a more overtly *adult* strain of animation. BBC 3 Controller Stuart Murphy glowingly described the show as the epitome of "modern, radical, imaginative and funny" programming (cited by Sherwin, 2003, para 2). Certainly it appeared to conform to the very object desired by Murphy and BBC 3 to attract the 25-34 demographic, as it embodied the sensationalist and abrasive tone that had prompted unfavourable responses to the emergent channel and it also connected with 'the now'.<sup>3</sup> Certainly the show fostered a sense of outrage as an opening strategy by baiting the very sections of the media it sought to satirise. This kind of media management also marked out changed times within the broadcast industry itself. Part of the BBC's promotion campaign for the show foregrounded the provocative sketch, 'Chat Room Perv'. This very knowing gesture was encapsulated in the telling comment offered by a BBC spokesperson in January 2003 that "we are expecting complaints to come flooding in", which entirely signalled the corporation's now more complete understanding of the tabloid publicity process (Nathan, 2003, para 3). This appeared particularly arch when set alongside BBC 3 Controller Murphy's

parallel acknowledgement, that his desired demographic were currently “harder to shock”, which immediately implied another agenda entirely (cited by Leonard, 2003, para 4). An unconvincing defence was proffered that the show was somehow performing a public duty when the BBC later added that “*Monkey Dust* is trying to get over that the Internet is not policed and that children can get a false impression of who they are talking to” (cited by Nathan, 2003, para 2). Though it is apparent that before the show was broadcast concerns *were* registered within the press about its subject matter, in the end the press notably refused to take the bait offered by the BBC.<sup>4</sup>

Although allying itself to a radicalised conception of youth-orientated comedy that the channel was courting, the show itself actually sprang from a more seasoned creative culture. The first batch of BBC 3 ‘new comedy’ shows, such as *Little Britain* (2003-to date), *Swiss Toni* (2003), *I’m Dom Jolly* (2003), *3 Non-Blondes* (2003) and *15 Storeys High* (2003-4), were all created by mature performers who had already established a track record within the industry. Matt Lucas and David Walliams, Charlie Higson, Julian Barrett, Noel Fielding and Sean Lock were all writers with degrees of success already within TV, stand-up performance and radio. The “compulsory” BBC 3 buzz words of “relevant”, “multi-cultural” and “modern” appeared, ironically, somewhat fractured here (Leonard, 2003, para 3). In truth, not only did *Monkey Dust*’s comedy appeal more to the higher end of the demographic, but also it spoke less from a radical position and more from an Oxbridge-educated, white, male, middle-aged voice, albeit submerged behind a contemporarized aesthetic.

Harry Thompson, producer/writer of *Monkey Dust*, was a key figure within the development of mainstream comedy on BBC TV, as a writer on BBC 2's *Not the Nine O'clock News* in 1982, a producer of radio comedy including *The News Quiz* (BBC 1977-to date) and *The Mary Whitehouse Experience* (BBC 1990-1992), and as a TV producer of some note for Hat Trick's news-based comedy panel show, *Have I Got News For You* (in 1990). He was also behind the revitalisation of the mainstream sketch show comedy with *The Harry Enfield Television Programme* (1990-92) and latterly *The Fast Show* (1994-2001) (Slater, 2006; Brown, Fincham and Baddiel, 2005; "Obituary of Harry Thompson Television producer whose iconoclastic wit informed *Have I Got News For You*", 2005). Thompson's presence here cements links between animation and mainstream comedy and it also provided him and Pye with a chance to infiltrate narrative comedy writing, an ambition they both held.

He initially conceived the show in 1989, in conjunction with writer/comedians Stewart Lee and Richard Herring, but the idea was rejected by the BBC partly due to financial concerns and also on the grounds that animation was deemed at that point by the corporation to be out of vogue ("Obituary of Harry Thompson Television producer whose iconoclastic wit informed *Have I Got News For You*", 2005). The long-term, blanket success of *The Simpsons* had not yet happened to act as a potential guide, at this point. Writers Peter Baynham, Rob Newman and Johnny Daukes worked on an incarnation of the show until the final 2003 version took shape incorporating a larger number of writing co-contributions, from the likes of Knife and Packer, Bert Tyler-Moore, Conor Lennon, James Bobin, Will Smith and Marcus Berkman. Latterly Sharon

Horgan and Dennis Kelly joined for successive series alongside Dan Hine, Chris Sussman and a returning Baynham (“Obituary of Harry Thompson Television producer whose iconoclastic wit informed *Have I Got News For You*”, 2005). However it is Thompson and Pye who oversaw and edited the bulk of the material and they emerge as the overriding organisational/authorial voices on the show. It was Thompson’s untimely death, through cancer, that brought the show to a halt in 2006 (McElroy, 2006, para 3).

Alongside the industrial setting, *Monkey Dust* constituted an important innovation in TV animation of this period, and is evidence that qualitatively different product was being released after 2003. Its limited, static formal schema of graphics and cut-up/collage simulations, placed alongside computerised approximations of traditional celluloid animation forms, was achieved through assigning different animation houses – such as Slinky Pictures, Nexus Productions, Sherbet and Picasso Pictures – to individual ongoing stories. This boutique approach maximised each house’s distinctive formal signature and usefully supplied each narrative with an individual identity.

The rejection of fluidity in – here television – animation can, as Wells and Furniss both state, act as a marker of a text’s ‘alternative’ status to consciously set it apart from the fluid, opulent aesthetic that defines a mainstream sensibility (1998, pp. 35-67; 1998, pp. 137-151). But limited articulation can also suggest an inadequacy, as US animator Chuck Jones’s famously dismissive remark suggests, when he stated that television animation too often functions as little more than “illustrated radio” (cited by Lewell, 1982, p. 17). A by-product of the

separation between the audio and visual elements, that Jones alludes to, is that such a schism can actually confer a signature onto a show. This is something also noted by TV critic Victor Lewis-Smith, who saw that “Given his radio background, animation seems to be a perfect TV medium for Thompson's bleaker vision... the sketch-based format gave the programme a freedom of imagination that usually only radio can provide” (2003, para 5). Thompson and Pye openly acknowledged this when they stated that the show's aesthetic evolved from their own ignorance over writing specifically for animation. In the Series One DVD commentary they concur that the first season of the show is not unlike, “a Radio Four satire on utter human misery” (Pye & Thompson, 2004). Add to this Gilbert's point that “It's the first British cartoon TV series to really reflect what has been going on in animated comics for the past 20 years”, and it is clear that, formally and tonally, *Monkey Dust* is as much beholden to graphic novel/comic traditions as it is a lineage of television animation (2004b, para 3). Its formal incompleteness essays a convergence of media and is another indicator of its status as a Third Wave, postmodern artefact.

*Monkey Dust* did appear, though, as a logical extension of Thompson's earlier work. Its provocative agenda can be explicitly aligned with “the kind of morbidly amusing slacker comics that have dominated the West Coast and Midwest of America since the 1960s, from *Fat Freddy* to *The Onion*” (Armstrong, 2003, para 3). But a deeper indicator of the writers' intent came through their stated rejection of what they saw as ‘political correctness’ and it is this drive that dictated the subject matter of nearly all of their sketches. For Thompson's quip that “You'll never see anything PC or right-on in my shows”,

said much here (“Obituary of Harry Thompson Television producer whose iconoclastic wit informed *Have I Got News For You*”, 2005, para 5), as *Monkey Dust* undoubtedly explored a post-PC comic landscape through the permission granted by the medium itself and it was conducted from a very loaded perspective.

### ***Post-politically-correct comedy***

That the term ‘political correctness’ is of course in itself highly problematic appears obvious. In comedic terms this idea particularly relates to a conscious effort taken to assess labels, language, emphasis and context. *Monkey Dust* was a comic animation that seemed to at once react in a definite sense to the existence of politically correct comedy and it also embodied a thorough rejection of it as a concept. The commonly-conceived understanding of what political correctness is emerged, as Cameron notes, within the UK of the late 1970s and into the 1980s, as a cultural/societal response to feminism and multiculturalism and which forced an examination of the segregationist “institutional” weight afforded to labels (1995, p. 120). Though the shifts that came through this period were not unified as policy or promoted under one specific political voice, what these vaguely liberal modifications challenged was the idea of “a neutral language” across various settings (Cameron, 1995, p. 120). Thus, the outcome of this nebulous, indistinct project was that racist, sexist and discriminatory terminology should be reduced, excluded and excised from daily cultural/social life. Comedy’s role as a commentary on societal values meant that such movements were inevitably incorporated into the UK broadcast and

performance culture, albeit in a very limited, awkward and often uneven fashion. It was the Alternative Comedy movement of the 1980s/early 1990s which became most commonly associated with this particular shift.

In television comedy, this faction was united through a questioning of seemingly fixed modes of humour around gender, sexuality and race that appeared centrally placed within light entertainment narratives. In fact this was a highly disparate group of comedy writers and performers who were informed by the rise of Thatcherite free-market conservatism and the depressed economic climate, who, embracing the energy and anarchy propagated by the punk/new wave music scene of the period, incorporated both multiculturalism and feminist ideals to challenge an old comic order. This realignment crossed class lines. For not only did the establishment itself come into question, but also working class comedy's insistence of foregrounding fixed hierarchical and reductive positions through subject matter and address also came under attack. Diverse comedians like Benny Hill, Bernard Manning and Jimmy Tarbuck soon came to represent a philosophical and televisual old order that adhered to outmoded sexist and racist dialogues. Thus newer, younger comic voices like Alexei Sayle, Jim Barclay, Pauline Melville, Andy DeLaTour, Keith Allen, Tony Allen, Ben Elton etc. superseded them with a more acerbic, challenging, politicised agenda, across a range of performative situations from stand-up comedy, film and radio, and notably through the immediacy of television, in shows such as *The Young Ones* (BBC 1982-1984), *Girls on Top* (ITV 1985-1986) and *The Comic Strip Presents...* (C4 1982-to date), among many others (Cook, 2001, pp. 38-81).

Much contemporary television – and animated millennial comedy – implicitly accepts this moment as a year zero and assumes that the myths that have grown in retrospect are somehow fixed. Among these prevailing narratives is the notion that the incorporation of political correctness into comedy was an all-encompassing moment within British television. This idea has grown as a response from those under attack and in fact this doesn't fully account for the fragmented and broadly recalcitrant stance taken by most mainstream comedians. The model of label reassessment highlighted by Cameron in truth bled through a highly resistant culture. Another 'certainty' propagated after the 1980s is that whilst Alternative Comedy undoubtedly challenged reductionist narratives within mainstream comedy the term 'political correctness' was actually ascribed to this movement retrospectively. Cook states that although "non-racism and non-sexism became common consent" among the eighties comics, the irony was that at the time many of these performers resolutely rejected any unified manifesto and were amalgamated more through deployments of slapstick, farce, pantomime, absurdism and other traditional forms that had become marginalised in recent years (2001, p. 53). The Alternative comedians were painfully aware of any potentially rigid, revisionist framework and were continually mocking any attempt within their own ranks to enforce one.

*Monkey Dust*, and many of the Third Wave animated shows that followed, implicitly paid heed to, and was filtered through, this rather simplistic, theoretical cultural polarisation. Indeed the show's transgressive nature can be seen as a highly self-aware reassertion of pre-Alternative Comedy values. This

represents a phenomenon observed by Cameron happening on a broader cultural level whereby knee-jerk condemnations from more reactionary, Right-leaning commentators stated that political correctness was an idea that too often contained, rather than opened up, debate. Many of today's comedy creatives firmly reject political correctness for its supposedly restrictive nature and any mention of it tends to ignore the more progressive elements to this idea, condemning PC as an inflexible, "self-righteousness ... humourlessness" inclination (Cameron, 1995, p. 127). Along with this, *Monkey Dust*'s very deliberate tonal approach also traded on a decade or so of 1990s ironic, postmodern address that defined both live-action and animated comedy. This is where a slippage in intent can be difficult to assess. The ambiguity of the ironic comic statement means that any criticism directed towards the speaker when addressing sensitive areas of racist or sexist labelling, terminology or representation can be flattened out, with the end result being that those who propagate reductive comedy are free to do so, protected behind a shield of self-deprecation. This creates a less certain terrain where values are often difficult to ascertain. As a result, post-politically correct comic narratives embodied ambivalence as much as they did a rejection of a 1980s comedy consensus. *Monkey Dust* certainly traded on these factors.

Comparisons can be drawn with other live-action comedy provocateurs such as Chris Morris. Shows like *Jam* (C4 2000) and *Brass Eye* (C4 1997-2001) traded on interrogations of propriety, not just within comedy, but also in areas of general social and moral acceptability. Morris' agenda differed notably from the likes of Thompson and Pye however in that, as encapsulated in his infamous

*Brass Eye: Drugs* (C4 1997), the arguments presented are more concerned with media constructions and the distortion of morality within the tabloid press. Morris works from a similar privileged class base as Thompson, i.e. male, white and public-school educated. But the statements that Morris' callous TV anchorman persona expressed in that show about an innate superiority "builders or blacks" when discussing his own normalised middle-class drug use, can be seen as a deliberately provocative device by which to highlight political correctness as a reactive, rather than a progressive, mechanism (Morris, 1997). What separates Morris from Thompson and Pye is the moralistic emphasis within his work which takes the repressive nature of institutions directly to task across all seven episodes of *Brass Eye*. *Monkey Dust* is just as intent on discussing tabloid obsessions as Morris, but it seems far more fascinated by its own novelty as an animated, rather than live-action, sketch show and correspondingly appears to be drawn to areas of representation and humour that have become explicitly embroiled within politically correct humour, such as gender, race and stereotyping.

Also comedians like Ricky Gervais, in both his stand-up and in his sitcom *The Office* (BBC 2001-2003), have made much out of exhibiting a highly detailed awareness of boundaries and propriety and how to negotiate and interrogate potentially offensive humour that builds on a supposition around the concrete existence of political correctness. However much permission this self-knowledge grants, there resides in such a comedic approach an uncomfortable residue at times, one that inevitably reinforces the ideals of those dominant within production institutions – usually middle class, white, male – and the

inevitable sublimation of those less equipped to express a voice. Excavating and replaying mythologies about women, body shapes, disability and racial stereotypes in comedy under the provision of an ironic, self-mocking agenda is one matter, but the issues of context, reception and agency are another one entirely. Using language that causes offence to supposedly highlight ignorance can too often be used as way to reassert old traditions, under an often opaque, protective shell. *Monkey Dust* continued in the deployment of this curiously post-1990s impenetrable form of irony. That political correctness within millennial comedy is cast as a tyrannical, rather than a progressive, impulse undoubtedly raises concerns about agency. Yet this rejection appears to be embedded within British television culture of the early 21st century and, as a more cynical stance on labelling alone, this moment is a useful indicator of the larger consensual shifts occurring within Britain of this time.

*Monkey Dust*'s primary agenda was to query a culture and a philosophy of political correctness that both Thompson and Pye felt had become institutionalised at this point. After hearing that their projected Channel Five 2005 sitcom about prostitution, *Respectable*, hadn't been commissioned, Pye wrote in *The Daily Mail* in 2006 that "With our Oxford backgrounds very much out of fashion, I once joked that we should get a black lesbian to pitch a sitcom on our behalf." (para 4) Thompson's proudly stated outlook of "an unreconstructed *Private Eye* reader... it was as if he had formed his world view at an early age and was damned if he was going to make any revisions", also suggests a particular position here (Brown, Fincham and Baddiel, 2005, para 5). This slant is compounded by *Monkey Dust*'s somewhat hectoring tone,

described by Thompson himself as “like *The Daily Mail* with indie music” (Pye & Thompson, 2004), and it was further compounded by a lack of empathy demonstrated towards the show’s own characters, and an admitted “misogynist” slant, semi-jokingly revealed on the Series One, Episode Five DVD commentary (Thompson & Pye, 2004). This conservative bent was never more apparent than when a secondary school student in Series Two, Episode Three is admonished for not taking “academic matters seriously”, through his interest in researching history over “Hip-Hop Studies” (Pye & Thompson, 2004).

Alongside this reactionary elitism, the residing tenor remains, throughout all three series, that females and anyone who *isn't* white, male and middle aged did appear to suffer their most potent wrath. The humour throughout was detailed from a resolutely prescribed male voice and this did lend the show a regressive tone and one that perfectly complemented the period.

### *Narratives on ethnicity one: Immigrant tales*

Bearing this shift in mind, in truth it would appear that we have in effect returned to Cohen’s earlier point about ethnic representation within mainstream animation as being posited as a gateway to the unacceptable. Non-White characters, it seems, had become once more simply a vehicle to discuss contentious issues. They functioned within Third Wave narratives primarily as a construct deployed to explore the boundaries of taste. They were here more as commentary, usually on areas that did not just evaluate common experience of

day to day life in contemporary Britain for minorities, but existed more as a signal towards transgression.

The neo-noir city-space where *Monkey Dust* was set acted as a symbolic indicator of Thompson and Pye's tabloid-defined, increasingly de-politicised British culture. This was actualised by the descending snowflake, drifting past the raft of failing amenities, flickering signals and signs and decrepit environs, melting into the ground in the opening of Series Two. The metaphor here suggested the dissolving of aspiration, a punning literalization of a snowball in hell (Pye & Thompson, 2004). This was reinforced by the complicit nature of each protagonist within the sketches, locked in the confines of their own fractured narratives and blocked by a contemporary existence that was defined by apathy, about which more in Chapter Four.

This discourse of despair is unambiguously highlighted over the 'Clive the Liar' sketches in Series One (Pye & Thompson, 2003). Each sketch was opened by a soundtrack of cut-up speeches from then-Prime Minister, Tony Blair, looped and saturated in a ghostly reverb, harmonised with the procession of hoardings and dilapidated shops that backdropped the entire show and highlighted a profound sense of disconnection. This millennial UK urban experience can be encapsulated through disillusionment. That the show's very title alludes to the drug phencyclidine or PCP (Caravati, 2003, p. 1107), which is renowned for inducing hallucinations, mania, delirium and disorientation, does suggest that inevitable associations can be drawn with Britain's palpable 'come-down' from

the euphoria of the late 1990s socio/political/cultural phenomenon of ‘Cool Britannia’. This cultural dialogue was associated with the optimistic arrival of New Labour. This was a political shift defined by Savage and Atkinson, that “Like its Conservative predecessor” had placed considerable emphasis on traditional notions “such as duty, responsibility and obligation” (2001, p. 10). Tony Blair’s sidestepping of the then-unfashionable ideology of Socialism here also underpin this bleak depiction of a decaying community. The Blairite desire for a partnership between public and private sectors too is filtered, literalised and projected through this ironic, linking motif of the cityscape that undermines the myth of globalisation-as-salvation across all three series.

Davis says of satire that it is primarily all about exposing the contradictions between the “perfect ideal world and the imperfect actual world” (1993, p. 102). *Monkey Dust* was continually concerned with this fundamental preoccupation, the exploration of the gap between political rhetoric and the world that exists outside it. Of course this raises an obvious question over what is termed ‘ideal’, who is making such an observation and to what end. Thompson and Pye’s sneering at “Blair’s supposedly shiny society” offers the most direct political comment within the show (cited by White and Hattersley, 2004, para 2). Although this incarnation of the show was conceived almost two years before broadcast, this fact suggests that an innate suspicion of the entire New Labour project was built into its DNA.

The Abu stories were a perfect exemplar of this schism between what ‘is’ and what ‘should be’. These narratives charted the inevitability of a post-

Thatcherite, globalised free market. As animated by Rotter's Dog studios and Kevin Baldwin, using a similar 'naturalist' design to both white *and* black characters, albeit with darker skin colour as only marker of difference, 'Abu' centred on an asylum seeker from an unspecified Third World country who hoped to find a "land of hope and glory" in his new home of England (Pye & Thompson, 2004). What this innocent found, detailed through his highly subjective first person narrative, was a corrupt and hostile environment where he was ruthlessly exploited in menial positions. Through this Pye and Thompson highlighted the slavery strata in society that underpinned the millennial UK job market and the salvation promised through entrepreneurship.

Abu worked twenty two hour shifts in appalling conditions. In his letter home he described himself as "an executive trainee" but was in fact working as a literal and metaphorical human doormat outside Hindustan Fabrics Co. – "We all have to start somewhere..." (Pye & Thompson, 2004). Mr Raja, his boss, regularly subjected him to the humiliation of being first a human ashtray then promoted him, "by the afternoon", to a "curtain". Abu's trials continued as he was subsequently then hung from a hook along with seven other immigrants as a human drape. For this position he was here forced to pay his employers weekly – "Friday is payday" – to ensure that they did not inform the immigration authorities of his exact whereabouts. The conclusions to each story usually found Abu expressing a delusional gratitude, through his letters home, by insisting that "This really is the land of milk and honey" (Pye & Thompson, 2004).

This perspective granted a viewpoint from the ‘other side’. In many ways this countered any rejection of political correctness that the shows professed by offering a sense of balance. Abu’s romanticised narrative presented an ironic disjunction between spoken word and on-screen action, alongside a perceptual gulf between his own wish projection and the view he detailed home to his family. Crushed by pride and a reticence to disappoint and raise concern to those at home, the sketch was all about disparity, aspiration and passivity. The first episode itself offered a not-so-oblique commentary with the image of a van full of eyes, peering out of the darkness owned by the un-named Essex man, who latterly processes these illegal entrants on their arrival on unspecified shores. This was one of the show’s more overtly progressive narratives which presented a very different ‘reality’ to the one posited by reactionary tabloid arguments of the period, stories that tended to demonise the profligate immigrant worker. Tellingly, in Series Two, episodes Five and Six respectively, this point is actualised as side notes, through a couple shown reading right-wing paper *The Daily Mail*, emblazoned with a compendium of tabloid outrage – “Paedo-Asylum Seekers Swamp Britain” – and with a furious man rendered left of the central action, incandescent with rage, engrossed over headlines of “Tide of Asians Unstoppable – Whites to Die Out Like Red Squirrels” (Pye & Thompson, 2004).

Thompson confirmed that the show’s characters “are mostly victims” and that much of the show is about the implementation of systems which contain people and also about the apathetic response these frameworks generate (cited by White and Hattersley, 2004, para 3). The role “played by sensationalising

newspapers” is exemplified by the reflexive cutaway in Series Two, Episode Six (Clark, 2004, para 4). This reveals *The Daily Mail’s* editor to be literally a conical tower of fresh excrement, which draws a comment from his stymied interviewee aimed towards the fourth wall audience: “I see! That explains *everything!*” (Pye & Thompson, 2004).

TV critic Phil Norman correctly established that in terms of UK comedy and animation *Monkey Dust* existed as a crucial illustration of a discernible tonal shift from ‘light’ to ‘dark’, notable around the turn of the 20th century into the 21st century. Highlighting the influence of comedians such as Chris Morris and animations such as *South Park*, he notes in a UK context the 2001 Canadian and British co-production, *Aaagh! It's the Mr Hell Show!* as an important turning point, which “allowed for a canvas now capable of withstanding a darker and more intense register” (2003, para 4). It was a notable shift within television animation and comedy. As Winston sees, “Black humour frequently depicts horrible events, unhappy people, anarchy and chaos”, and this is a mode that doesn’t merely “reproduce that disorder” but, in mocking it, allows us to thereby “structure it”, make sense of it (1978, p. 38). This mode certainly informed this and other shows through this period. Black humour assists a confrontation of prejudice and the hierarchies that support it. ‘Abu’ outlined a very recognisable UK, though one devoid of humanity and shaped by the brutal egalitarianism of the free market and the inevitability of the Thatcherite/Blairite impulse that propels people trafficking. Here, race was deployed as a worthy conduit, as a shell to discuss globalisation. But as earnest as the sketch appeared, very typical ambiguities prevailed, for too often easy laughs were drawn from the tired,

over-familiar construct of the ‘funny foreigner’. This was readily apparent in the first sketch, when in trying to assimilate into a resolutely unwelcoming Britain Abu is rejected at every turn. His disjunctive narration tells us “the time has come to take a wife... the rules in this country are very different... she has the right to say no...”. Thus humiliated in his local bar he then goes on to misread the advances of local prostitutes in a lap dancing club as a part of social custom (Pye & Thompson, 2004). Such obvious naiveté within the character, detailed from a white perspective, has to be also contextualised against the tasteless parody of the BBC 4 mock-ident presented mid-way within Series Two of *Monkey Dust*, which features a Muslim woman being stoned to death. Here the programme-maker’s adolescent drive to shock fell flat and their overall intent then subsequently became muddled (Pye & Thompson, 2004).

### *Narratives on ethnicity two: The enemy within*

This ambivalence also dominated the second narrative, which concentrated on three Muslim would-be terrorists, Omar, Shafiq and Abdul. These were characters, based in West Bromwich, who each week planned to bring Western civilisation to its knees by carrying out suicide bombings in the name of Allah. However they were continually interrupted by mundane social and cultural rituals or simply thwarted by their own ineptitude. This sketch attempted to address the tabloid demonization of Muslim culture, as a convenient symbol of otherness and threat in the post 9/11 Western climate. It also saw the writers very consciously flirt with controversy in a particularly sensitive atmosphere

and play with notions of taste by going towards areas deemed as politically and socially problematic in comic terms.

The characters here drew parallels with the factual detention of three British terror suspects who were detained for two years at the US facility of Camp X-Ray, in Guantánamo Bay in Cuba. Here, three young friends, Dudley and Bromwich-born Shafiq Rasul, Rahaul Ahmed and Asif Iqbal, were wrongfully captured whilst travelling and were, in the wake of post-9/11 US investigations, treated as unlawful combatants, subsequently tortured into making a false confession and then named by the World Press as ‘The Tipton Three’ (Allen, 2010, paras 1-7; Verkaik, 2011, paras 1-48). Certainly the name of one of the protagonists corresponds to support this correlation and their home town’s direct quotation is important here. Despite this link to the contemporary this sketch is also where Thompson and Pye’s connections to the past also became most apparent.

In the first sketch the central themes that ran throughout Series Two and Three were laid out. The fundamentalist voice of the trio, Omar Mahmud, voiced by white British actor Enn Reitel, is intent on “unleashing a reign of terror the like of which the world has only dreamed about in its foulest nightmares” (Pye & Thompson, 2004). This is immediately deferred by Abdul, one of the younger men, who insists that: “I told you I can’t do Wednesday, its West Bromwich Vs Aston Villa on Pay-Per-View... do you reckon we could, like, put the jihad off ‘til after the game?” Characteristically his counterpart, Shafiq, too is adamant

that “Jihad night” should be moved to Monday because of the important home tie in “Grimsby this Wednesday”. Both characters are voiced by Simon Greenhall. (Pye & Thompson, 2004). From here the celebration of an evening meal of fast food – “Crispy Pancakes and McCain Microchips!” – work commitments – Abdul has to “lock up at 8pm and that bastard Mr Pullen always stands there to make sure I finish... I’ll never get back and changed by eight” – and the ritual of television – “it’s the final of *Stars in Their Eyes*” – meant that these plans rarely extended beyond their bedroom and thus remained within Omar’s imagination (Pye & Thompson, 2004). Here the notions of faith as ‘hobby’ as an arbitrary aspect of contemporary identity appeared as potent comic mechanisms.

There was a broader comedic tone exhibited here than within the ‘Abu’ sketches, and this was complemented by animator Fizzy Eye’s designs, sub-contracted through Nexus Productions, of plain, ungraded body shapes, thick lines and the casting of blocked shadows and colour to simulate light . All of the character’s smiles were depicted as grimaces, with mouths full of teeth set into rounded chins and pear-shaped heads. Omar was notably detailed in the sketches as the most overtly ‘Muslim’ character, with a turban and beard in place. From the first story in series two he is set up as a fanatical Islamist and a member of a self-created terrorist organization he calls “The International Revolutionary Jihad for the Liberation of the Islamic Republic of Great Britain” (Pye & Thompson, 2004). His two co-members were younger and impressionable men, happy to capitulate in a blank accepting fashion. Each week would see them both cheerily repeat his rhetoric with little apparent

conception of the gravity of his intent. Shafiq, in the first sketch, was shown on the left side of the frame as wide-eyed, whilst Abdul was positioned on the right of the frame with a fringe covering his eyes, as part of a simulated two-shot posited against Omar. Fizzy Eye ally only dark hair and a slightly perceptible thicker dark eye line as any signifier of race here. An interior insanity is ascribed to Omar, as he was detailed with uneven eye design on the glasses as a design gesture that implies disconnection. This continued a personality animation tradition that extends from the 1950s US work of Chuck Jones, where irregularity posited in tandem with limited movement often signalled inner distress or conversely a 'lack', the implication of an unfinished inner self (Barrier, 1999, pp. 486-487). The visual grammar was completed through a succession of unremarkable and otherwise linear, medium, head and shoulder and long shots. The primary element throughout was the voice work and the emphasis on dialogue.

Among the comedy conceits that framed the entire two-series narrative is that this would-be murderous 'cell' was based in the Midlands of the UK. The first level of comic incongruity that can be ascertained is that despite the alliance to a cause that declares a war on contemporary Britain, the three lads displayed aspects of 'white' behaviour and appeared Caucasian in all but barely notable skin tone. They also explicitly allied themselves to essentially a non-Caucasian identity. In broad strokes they operated as an uneasy expression of a sharply bisected trans-national identity. This was representative of the fluid and often unexpressed state of being halfway between cultures that Beck isolates, quoting Van Gennep and Turner, a liminal state that encapsulates the contemporary

urban identity. The “doffing of masks, the stripping of statuses, the renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures” are all evident here within the fractured nature of the protagonists’ make-up (Turner cited by Beck, 1996, p. 244).

Of course ‘white-ness’ doesn’t necessarily have to equal ‘British-ness’, and a necessary distance and cultural awareness are vital here. Refining this process even further, Modood adds to liminality the term “hyphenation”, whereby hybridised constructs of the regional, the national and the religious all come together in one place (2005, p. 209). Modood’s notion of hyphenation encompasses a spectrum of social concerns and religious identities. For him the concept of the White-British-Asian holds purchase here. As in fragmented, postmodern times tired, fixed notions of British-ness, (even within Caucasian communities) appear inappropriate, tied as they are to uncomfortable notions of “complexity, ambivalence, implicit superiority and nationalism” (2005, p. 198).

As the series progressed, we drew a clearer understanding of the dynamic between the three main characters, and the yet-to-be discussed fourth construct that appears in this narrative. It became apparent that the Muslim characters in many ways could – in typical *Monkey Dust* style – be any ethnic minority at all. For race was not the primary issue under discussion here. This narrative appeared less about the nuances of multiculturalism but, like ‘Abu’, more about the disposition of popular culture in general. Omar, Abdul and Shafiq are entirely an expression of Giddens’s theoretical debate on personal reactions to the post industrial, postmodern condition. Giddens offers that we are all now

part of a fragmented society where “local contexts of interactions” hold no purchase and that in place of a localised identity what is left is a state of disjointed reflexivity, a condition that is informed and measured by how we interact or place ourselves against culture (1990, pp. 21-27). This is a state that can be seen as intensified by the diasporic shifts between Western-Eastern cultures as mapped out within Hesmondhalgh’s work (2002, pp.270-307).

The narrative was also reactive to the shifts in British Muslim population demographics, registered by Poole’s study, when she states that the British Muslim community – inclusive of white and black in this context – is now dominated more by a younger, rather than older, demographic, with 60 per cent of the population in the UK under 25 as opposed to 32 per cent of the white population (2002, p. 20). But the two younger components of this terrorist cell were shown as English youths, defined more through an immersion in television/celebrity trivia, a worship of *Stars in their Eyes* (ITV 1990-2006) and *Pop Idol*, (ITV 2001-2003), and, via their obsession and endless enthusiasm, not with traditional Muslim dishes but with a diet of processed Western junk foods.

The three embodied the process of self-monitoring, where “social practices are constantly examined and reformulated in the light of incoming information”, that Giddens highlights as part of our contemporary experience and that he sees as fundamental in the way that we construct our own social identity (1990, p. 37). They expressed themselves through a grammar of trivia posited alongside a highly self-conscious alliance to the terrorist narratives relayed within popular

culture and media. This facet of Muslim identity as mediated conception is measured against social and cultural institutions, operating reflexively in this all-pervasive consumer/media-formed sphere of influence. For if, as Tomlinson asserts in his more contemporary reading of Giddens, “cultural signification and interpretation constantly orientates people, individually and collectively towards particular actions... they are undertaken within the ‘context’ of a broader cultural understanding”, it would seem that the totems of a particular version of Muslim identity appears to be one endemic to post-9/11 narratives (1999, p. 24). Thus, “slimming, religion, fasting, hunger strikes, the decision to eat or starve is a cultural decision”, and here extends to choices of action and statements of faith (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 24). The crux of this sketch is that culture is the prime factor in self-definition now, over religion, community and family. It could be argued here that Thompson and Pye are outlining a new model of belonging, or what indigenous actually means, within a Third Wave Animation context.

Fundamentalism was not located within any specific type of Islamic practice in both series. This was mainly to serve comic purposes as much as pre-empt any potential criticisms around reduction. Through their passion and misguided fanaticism the three were still set apart, though, as ‘other’, but the sublimation of faith and ethnicity to popular culture was set in place to highlight a deeper ennui. The ongoing erosion of the larger metanarratives by the postmodern condition, as outlined by Lyotard, arguably also confers to a reduction in conceptions of faith, fundamentalism, British-ness and youth identity too. Terrorism here was conducted at the level of a subcultural activity. This uneasy

declaration of a bisected trans-national identity, halfway between cultures and with any residue of rebellion diffused, posits terrorism as a transitory phase. The three merely used this act, this identity as a marker of expression in the same passing fashion as 1960s or 1970s youths adhered to Mod, Punk or Rocker socialising narratives to pass from youth to adulthood (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 23-28; Cohen, 1972, pp. 9-12). Ethnicity was posited here as merely a shell to underline what the writers really felt was the prime issue clouding the minds of contemporary youth, across *all* boundaries, the more general ennui of popular, consumerist culture.

This deployment of racial typing suggested several points that need to be considered. Brown observes from a sociological perspective that stereotypes are often constructed by referring to some sense of actuality, however distorted:

By this is not meant that any particular stereotype of an outgroup is in some way objectively 'true' in the sense of accurately describing that group's actual characteristics. Rather, the suggestion is that a group's culturally distinctive behaviour patterns of the particular socio/economic circumstances in which it finds itself could provide the seed-bed in which certain stereotypical perceptions could readily flourish. This is sometimes known as 'the grain of truth' theory of the origin of stereotypes (1995, pp. 84-85).

As Gombrich saw that an abbreviated image or idea is never passively received but that it is "conditioned by our expectations", then the action of stereotyping itself, the construct's connection to social experience and the need by those who deploy stereotypes to qualify a sense of reportage, all inform our understanding

here (1968, p. 148). Gray's model of "hyper-stereotyping" – where he cites Scottish caretaker, Groundskeeper Willie, and the Indian shopkeeper, Apu, in *The Simpsons* as examples – adds to this by offering a commentary on the very nature of the typing process itself (2006, p. 64). For if accepted/reviled cultural attributes are so highly self-consciously ascribed to an animated character then, as Gray argues, in doing this the narrative is actually acknowledging and thus diffusing the very process of reduction itself by creating an ironic commentary. This idea only really functions adequately within animation, but as a well-intentioned response to political correctness this strategy can backfire through an un-nuanced reading, or simply be over-ridden by the offence caused when weighed against the cultural history of a particularly tired construct.

Deliberately placing Muslim characters in a narrative on terrorism not only referenced this concept but the ambivalent register also protected the writers from criticisms around the nature of propriety and it allowed them to negotiate boundaries of bad taste.

This sketch may well have embodied the writers' desire to undermine politically correct animated representation in favour of something that they saw as more honest and nuanced. But what made the narrative so compelling and potentially so very problematic was its relationship to the contemporary. Preceding Chris Morris's similar *Four Lions* (2010) by some six years, this sketch responded to contemporary media dialogues that terrorist ' sleeper cells ' were alleged to have gained significant footholds within British society. There is an acknowledgement here that UK cultural conceptions around Muslim fundamentalism and community have become far more fraught, complex and

loaded and have settled into stereotypical dialogues surprisingly rapidly. Poole sees that contemporary media, and the press in particular, has become fixated on conjoining the Muslim community with criminality and extremism and this has contributed to a more complex re-conceptualisation of racism in 21st century British society. These configurations of what terrorism embodies have, she argues, shifted the nature of debates around difference from ethnicity to that of a more cultural definition. This negativity has constructed what she refers to as an “Islamophobia”, which is evidence of a concentrated reinforcement by the media towards the construction of folk demons, “significant social actors in the process of reinforcing boundaries by amplifying the danger” (Poole, 2002, p. 11). The sketch mocked this notion of fundamentalism as “the threat within”, with Britain cast as “a safe haven, a base for terrorism” (Poole, 2002, p. 7). The simplicity of these tabloid narratives offers a millennial continuation of Said’s hypothesis, in that Western cultural contexts perennially posit Muslims as an “acceptable enemy” (1997, p. 50).

In truth Thompson and Pye actually used the subject of terrorism as a cloak to examine fundamental comedic themes dialogues on manipulation, cowardice and hypocrisy. Really at the heart of the sketch there was a dialogue being formed on class, and this provided a bridge to its true meaning. That most Muslims drawn into jihadist activities were often more likely to be students, graduates or professionals, added a further precision to the comedy (Modood, 2005, p. 200). Omar was fuelled not by any faith-driven rage but in fact by enduring the indignity of having to accept Bristol University as a “second university choice” and being denied a place in the under fourteens chess team

which underpins his denial of a place within the “Capitalist Society” he appeared to want to destroy (Pye & Thompson, 2004). Omar’s motivations were defined by power, greed and inadequacy and, depicted here as a middle-class man, he viewed his two assistants as expendable elements. This was made explicit when Shafiq stated that Omar comes from “Tipton – they take it dead serious up there” (Pye & Thompson, 2004). Not only does this reference the origins of the sketch but also the other boundaries that hint at the true separation Pye and Thompson are really considering.

### ***Third Wave nostalgia***

Elementary comedy imperatives such as the ineptitude of authority and the vagaries of miscommunication, alongside a continual missed opportunity for us to take effective control of our own lives, lay beneath this particular shell. Agency, ethnicity, ambivalence, stereotyping and nostalgia *all* converged within the make-up of the fourth semi-regular character in this narrative, Mrs Khan, voiced by Frances Barber. Here is where the intent is fully revealed. For Mrs Khan is the mother of Shafiq who supplies them with the meal that contributes to the interruption of their plans in the first sketch and which is then used as an excuse to jettison their mission. Her observation that a Wednesday suicide bombing would impact upon her son’s enjoyment of the semi-final of *Stars in Their Eyes* in turn prompts a re-prioritisation by Abdul too. From there he is then led to confess that he needs to see the show as he “really fancies that bird that does Natalie Imbruglia” (Pye & Thompson, 2004). Mrs Khan appeared

throughout the run as seemingly untroubled by the nature of their jihad and her simplistic world-view continually provided – an inadvertent? – comedic commentary on their ideas.

Mrs Khan was a feminine construct assembled from well-defined rules of music hall, radio and sitcom performance. Medhurst's summation of comedian Victoria Wood's purposeful adherence to a Northern working class address, a "cheery, slightly naff downmarket" persona, is all but identical (2007, p. 78). She appears as a maternal figure carrying bags, with a headscarf in place, green cardigan, darker green skirt, using a broad West-Midlands accent to emphasise her own, notably anglicised character and to maximise comic effect. This particular lineage of female comedy performance classifies itself through a very specific register of blankness, disconnection and removal and through this it serves the larger narrative by reinforcing a discourse on the constrictive nature of the mundane. The referral back to 'the everyday' cast as a routine of boundaries is a prevalent dialogue within British TV comedy. Mrs Khan's very typical reply to important information offered by Omar comes through a vacant non-sequitur and perfectly demonstrates this in operation – "that's nice – mind you they did say it was going to rain by the end of next week" – and when commenting upon Omar after he leaves the meeting: "What a nice lad... he does take his jihad seriously, though, doesn't he?" (Pye & Thompson, 2004). Mrs Khan often acknowledged the dimensions of their plans, but her responses were a register of character dynamic. She unquestioningly addresses Abdul with "I thought you'd be in Camp X-Ray by now... didn't you go to fight in Iraq?", to which the boy guilty replies that he was diverted back home after travelling

along the M1 after reading a five star television review within *Heat* magazine review of the show *Room 101* (BBC 1994-2007) for that evening, that had featured minor celebrity David Dickinson (Pye & Thompson, 2004). This suggests, possibly, that deeply submerged there was a knowing, manipulative aspect to her interference, but in turn this underlined gestures defined through a particular kind of pantomimic ignorance and a compliance to social ritual.

Nominally this sketch would appear to be the perfect opportunity to present a progressive representation within animation/comedy discourses. Certainly Eastern middle-aged matriarchs have surfaced on mainstream channels in recent years and been featured within live-action comic situations. The likes of Meerya Sayal and Nina Wadja in radio and television incarnations of *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC 1996-2001) and spoof chat show *The Kumars at No. 42* (BBC 2001-2006) have centralised such characters as comments on the nature of familial responsibility and gender-defined hierarchy within Eastern/Asian communities, and to highlight the clashes and disparities between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘contemporary’. In animation settings – and consider for a moment the sheer *volume* of children’s texts that feature a maternal presence – the concept of the matriarch has been predominantly Western-centric and, curiously, both ubiquitous *and* absent in any meaningful narrative sense – mirroring their live-action counterparts’ reiteration of ‘traditional’ female roles.

However this character self-consciously alluded to the past and refuted an ethnic emphasis, hyphenated or otherwise. For in terms of voice, demeanour and tone

she appeared as a quotation of not only elements of comic actress Julie Walters's Mrs Overall character from *Victoria Wood As Seen on TV* (BBC 1985-87), but also as a conscious reframing of Dorothy Summer's popular Mrs Mopp character from the radio sketch show, *ITMA* (BBC 1938-1949), who first appeared in 1942 and moved into the spin-off show, *The Private Life of Mrs Mopp* (1946). The 'Corporation Cleaner' was defined by a Cockney regional emphasis and her set of catchphrases "transcended" the show to find a life of their own within wartime Britain (Kavanagh, 1974, p. 37). The overtly recognisable codes that typify female underachievement and entrapment here seem to be an inevitable set of recurrent components. This is a desexualised, purely maternal figure that extends from a masculinised viewpoint. If it is the case that, as Andrews citing Goodman states, "women have so often been the butt of jokes in western culture... Principally it reveals that the jokers have been men", then the removal of a sexual dynamic here, inferred as much by age as appearance, aids the dissolving of any confrontational aspect of the character (1998, p. 52). Mrs Khan's design in terms of body posture and shape played down traditionally accentuated attributes of hips, breasts and lips associated with any potential objectification or sexual identity, which demarcated her as a purely domestic object removed from any gaze. She may not have been as aggressive as Porter's definition of the female comic 'grotesque', but certainly Mrs Khan still very much conformed to that definition (1998, p. 84).

The past featured centrally here. For Porter argues that a pedigree of feminine performance has prevailed through the 20th century which is concerned with a masculine casting of women defined by sexual difference (1998, pp. 71-72).

These recurrent brandings of femininity revolve around conceptions of the “mother-in-law”, the “lone-surviving matriarch having outlived her spouse to become, in a male-defined comic universe, a frustrated old battle axe”, which contains women when they stray from being younger, attractive models of passivity and malleability (Porter, 1998, p. 86). Aspects of the harridan are replicated within Mrs Khan, although by removing the stresses on physicality and retaining a dialogue of household servitude, as carer and as drudge, the categorisation still applies here. Her complicit nature and her maternal status – the absence of Mr Kahn was never explained – and her blank scepticism about the nature of Omar’s plans may have implied a degree of power but it was contained with her role as a satellite to the main characters, to provide feed lines in the *ITMA* tradition.

In such a formally static show, accent and delivery take priority when assessing meaning. The fact that the inflections were so set within such a specific Midlands register reinforced the point that these were not naturalised foreign Muslims but British citizens. Omar’s overtly ‘foreign’, villainous delivery was contrasted from the family here for deliberately comedic and problematic effect. But the regional emphasis bore as much meaning here as the feminine. For Thompson and Pye the provincial connoted naivety and under-ambition, as reinforced through the over-familiar metres and rhythms of accent here and rendered explicit in the pay-off line offered by Mrs Khan: “I’d love to go to Bristol – I’ve never seen the world” (2005).

Mrs Khan was a nostalgic creation. She was little more than an animated quote valorising the comedy of the past. Sprengler notes that across history, politics, psychology, philosophy, medicine and art, nostalgia tends to signify a regression. Its appearance can often signify a sense of defeat or loss (2009, pp. 22-24). Jameson's understanding of this condition was that this was a mode that relieved the longing for modernist meta-narratives and texts, now perceived as missing or undermined within our fractured contemporary culture. In replaying aspects of lost modernism this gesture of "nostalgic pathos" acts as a balm to alleviate disconnection and disassociation (Jameson, 1991, p. 156). Nostalgia is a mood, a theme or a flavour that appears as a coping mechanism to deal with changes and shifts that seem overwhelming and insurmountable. Calling on a host of commentators, Sprengler's comments on the phenomenon as a kind of "homesickness" ring true here (2009, p. 12). It can provide a place of sanctuary as it casts the past as an idyll or a utopia. Certainly what is of interest to us here is the cultural definitions of that term and its relationship to the embedding of visual culture into our lives. Nostalgia is, (as Sprengler summates), now a narrative entirely in service to commerce and it carries within it the ironies of cynicism commonly associated with late modernity and capitalism. That it underpins and in fact dominates many Third Wave Animation texts reinforces this production moment's connection to postmodern culture.

However critics such as Cook have recently sought to retrieve nostalgia in regard to a more positive reading. She insists that nostalgia can act as a reminder of our emotional, active, subjective connections to history, can function as a way of making sense of the past and allows us to share this with

others (2005, pp. 1-18). Yet in the context of *Monkey Dust* the relationship with nostalgia infers demise. This is a Jamesonian acknowledgment that conceptions of the past have now irrevocably shifted away from modernist notions of order and totality. The certainties offered through such nostalgic quotations supply to the audience/reader an ideal – one defined by linearity that is at once reactionary as it is seemingly irreverent and which gives us a momentary glimpse of more certain times. Nostalgia is a way of alleviating disconnection and disassociation. Such a retreat into reverie highlights once more the conservative impulse that resides at the very core of the show.

Mrs Khan was an amalgam of distant, cross-cultural ‘memories’. On one level this text could be seen as a quotation of and intersection with the likes of Victoria Wood and Alan Bennett, a manifestation of their obsessions with the “minutiae of social difference” (Medhurst, 2007, p. 160). However, as presented here, this comes across more as a burlesquing of the “performativity of everyday life, the codes that demarcate conventions, the way that the English say things” that Medhurst dictates is endemic to that particular strand of humour (2007, p. 165). There is perhaps a case to be made here that this sketch addresses an irony that extends from that particular tradition, as both Wood and Bennett have continually faced criticisms of incorporating an exclusionary, “blinkered parochialism” through their adherence to uses of inert language and in their wilful ignorance of “multi-cultural realities”, which here could be argued have been turned on their head (2007, p. 160). Many critics circumnavigated the core of darkness located in Bennett’s and Wood’s humour and that resided beneath their shell of whimsy. However the overriding cultural impression remains still

very much that this mode was a “comedy without sneers” and that it was more concerned with celebration, acceptance and warmth (Medhurst, 2007, p. 161). Yet the regionalised feminine was forged through a melancholic lens of domesticity and ritual and that was not submerged here, it was not latterly revealed to be a tonal twist or threaded as subtext. This was a grammar of the past dictated from a middle-class male comedy establishment. Bleakness was the entry level of the sketch itself and what lay beneath was little more than a nihilistic impulse. Here this “comedy of the overlooked and the unfashionable” was taken at the level of a citation to ascertain a more savage register, twisted to a crueller inversion (Medhurst, 2007, p. 161).

### ***Conclusion***

This sketch functioned as synecdoche. *Monkey Dust*, seemingly, could only deal with multicultural Britain from a position of retreat into older comedy forms. Paolucci rightly asserts “Comedy is historically a negative force”, and perhaps *Monkey Dust* is an explicit revelation of comedy’s innate conservatism, as a form that mocks, reduces and often refutes any clear transformation (1978, p. 93). Ambivalence may well afford the show room to manoeuvre but there can’t help be a residual disappointment that a sketch offered so much yet ended up settling for Orientalist tropes over the unpacking of real social issues.

Also we were presented with a pre-1980s conceptualisation of the passive nature of the working classes, when confronted with the assimilation of popular

culture. And whilst Thompson and Pye assert that the *real* winner in any multicultural system will always be consumerism that unifies all, through this glib reiteration we not only were presented with another model of superiority smuggled under the guise of satirical humour but one that sadly reinforced a still dominant social order. *Monkey Dust* may have continually trivialised its subject and avoided confronting the issues it claimed to address by meandering around the real shifts in the gender/class/race spectrum embedded within 21st century Britain. As it did so, as a Third Wave Animation text, it reiterated the rules of a television culture it would have us believe it was undermining.

But that is not to say that there was no value here, actually far from it. *Monkey Dust*, conversely, very cunningly offered responses that were nuanced, layered and certainly chose to at least challenge reductive typologies through inversion and juxtaposition. Even further in its defence, especially considering other Third Wave Animation, it at least constructed a narrative of political dissatisfaction, however muddled and ultimately un-reconciled. In rejecting the New Labour project *Monkey Dust* was one of the few shows to express a direct dissatisfaction with a political system and that marked it out as a unique project in a time of conformity.

For the next chapter, it is gender that continues to assert problems of definition within Third Wave Animation. From here I will build on how the post-politically correct comic landscape offers more ambiguities and I will explore how narratives that construct conceptions of class and gender can be seen from

a different perspective. How these factors converge also reveals how any Second Wave impulse that might have appeared to remain somehow intact had now receded for good, as the Third Wave of Animation formalised.

## Endnotes – Chapter Three

1. Alongside *Monkey Dust*, the animation short was momentarily resurrected in the form of *Angry Kid* (2003), which was a sporadic series of post-watershed, extremely violent clay-motion sketches from Aardman's Darren Walsh that detailed an archetypal 'teenage brat'. To further complement the BBC's revitalised interest in animation during this time, which included *I Am Not an Animal* (2004) – covered in Chapter Two – and *Popetown* (2005) – covered in Chapter Five, sister channel BBC 4 commissioned several archival narratives in the form of the three-part documentary series on UK animation, *Animation Nation*, in 2005.
2. The British sketch show has traversed a rich and varied lineage from *ITMA* (1939-1948) through to *The Dick Emery Show* (BBC 1963-1981) and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC 1969-1973), and it has maintained a steady line through the Alternative Comedy of 1980s, with shows like *Friday/Saturday Live* (C4 1985-87) and *Absolutely* (C4 1989-1993), before undergoing a postmodern, post-Alternative Comedy mainstream reclamation in Harry Enfield, Paul Whitehouse and Charlie Higson's *The Harry Enfield Television Programme* (BBC 1990-92) and latterly *The Fast Show* (BBC 1994-2001). Today the form thrives in multi-strand, narrative-based shows like BBC 3's *Tittybangbang* (2005-to date) and BBC 2's impersonation vehicle, *The Peter Serafanowicz Show* (2007).

3. It is really only the creator of *Two Pints of Lager...*, Susan Nickson that could be described as young untried talent at work during this time at BBC 3. By 2007, the likes of *Adam and Shelley* (2007) and *Gavin and Stacey* (2007-to date) had shown how the channel later more explicitly prioritised a more youthful emphasis.
  
4. Thompson insisted that the progress of the show was continually monitored and then obstructed by nervous management, as he stated that, “very senior people started coming out of the woodwork, most of whom I'd never heard of. One actually said: ‘this is not the view of British society the BBC should be seeking to depict’” (cited by Armstrong, 2003, para 3). But he felt what had ultimately undermined *Monkey Dust* was a basic misunderstanding about its place within the BBC itself.

## Chapter Four

### **‘Unpack that...’: Animating the male in a Third Wave context.**

#### *Introduction*

As we have seen so far, the nature of what I have termed Third Wave Animation was intensified by the successes of *The Simpsons* and the American animated shows that followed, along with industrial shifts within the post-millennial broadcasting landscape. These factors resulted in the prioritisation of mainstream narratives over avant-garde, experimental work. Third Wave Animation texts also displayed a tendency towards nostalgia. As we have seen so far, they also exhibited a nihilistic quality and a conscious and unconscious reaction to political correctness, which was reactive to the mainstream UK comedy culture, and this revealed an inherently conservative tone.

To further examine what cultural tasks the animation produced during this period undertook, I will be focusing on the Channel Four show *Modern Toss* (2005-2008). This was a show created by Jon Link and Mick Bunnage and it was a prime example of comic animation that typified many characteristics of

this particular broadcasting moment. From here, I will be discussing the cultural environment the show was reacting to, the culture it is commenting on and its deployment of a particular aesthetic strategy. Such a broad contextualisation and analysis is imperative here, as *Modern Toss* said as much about the nature of live-action mainstream broadcast comedy as it did animation. As I will further intensify the links between contemporary live-action and animated comedy in this chapter I will also assess how the unique formal properties of the show indicate another aspect of the cultural condition through its very specific deployment of figurative animation, which complemented the ethos of *Modern Toss* itself. What I want to ask here is whether these developments in animated forms can be accounted for by conventional historical explanations about abstraction and the avant-garde and does postmodern culture necessitate a revision and re-conceptualisation of our explanatory models so far?

Having already discussed the totem of the family and looked at how race was portrayed in previous chapters, it is entirely appropriate that we should focus now on gender as another foundation narrative within contemporary mainstream comedy and the society that it sought to depict. From this point I will ask questions about the nature of the humour. *Modern Toss* claimed to be an accurate picture of 21st century Britain and the prevailing cultural attitudes that dominated the consensus of the time. The show discussed conceptions of apathy and responsibility, whilst framing these through familiar models of comic idiocy and seditious humour. Although the focus of this gesture appeared to be a dissection of class, it certainly appears that much of the comedy talked exclusively about patterns of male behaviour. This then raises questions about

matters of representation and gender. Does a text like *Modern Toss* reveal a gender bias that is any way problematic? This debate will open up two issues: how gender is handled as a narrative, a preoccupation and as a category in this series in particular, and how this feature impacts on our understanding of Third Wave Animation in general. What this chapter will do is ask a number of pertinent questions that are not only specific to this assessment but will also speak to the rest of the thesis on issues of agency emphasis and pitch.

### *A new terrain*

*Modern Toss* was a key show produced during the period under study here. The show debuted on television on 10 May 2005 as pilot episode 60, in Series Seven of *Comedy Lab* (C4 1998-to date). It was brought to Channel Four by Jane Harrison, a producer for the independent Channel X productions and it was championed within the institution by Commissioning Editor Shane Allen, who had been a fan of Link and Bunnage's printed collections and their web incarnation. Certainly the status of *Modern Toss* as a cult artefact, as an insider's joke within London media circles, undoubtedly enhanced its relatively smooth progress from the Internet to television.<sup>1</sup> *Modern Toss* was also a marker of the kind of show being commissioned at Channel Four through this period. Although as much a sketch show satire on contemporary life as BBC 3's *Monkey Dust*, tonally and thematically *Toss* certainly bore little relation to the kinds of shows Claire Kitson was commissioning throughout the 1990s at the station.

The show arrived as support for solely animated shows there had fallen into a fallow period. It was notable that when programmes like *The Adam and Joe Show* (C4 1996-2001) drew on animation (around the time the conditions for Third Wave Animation began to solidify), they used deliberately primitive stop-motion and puppet-based contexts to fetishize childhood pop cultural moments in the spirit of regression rather than progression.

Yet *Modern Toss*' commissioning reminded viewers of the channel's highly regarded connections with its animation past but also usefully accessed a fresh multi-media phenomenon that appeared to chime with contemporary attitudes. Like, *Monkey Dust* and many other Third Wave shows, much of *Modern Toss*' appeal rested on its faithful construction of 'everydayness' in the choices of language, speech emphasis and not so much in any simple reflection but more through a reading, a highlighting and an interpretation of interaction and attitudes. Notably if the early 1990s animation at Channel Four symbolized the tail end of Second Wave production, where support was offered to both male *and* female authorship in an atmosphere of progression, inclusion and experimentation, then *Modern Toss* also exemplified a marked pulling-back of those particular impulses.

In many ways *Modern Toss* arrived at Channel Four almost fully formed. The pilot episode was primarily comprised of refashioned aspects of the original comic strips, along with one or two newer concepts created specifically for the television incarnation. Ben Wheatley, who had worked on viral advertisements

and would provide computer imagery-based sketches for Armando Iannucci's 2006 BBC *Time Trumpet* and would later direct live action features such as *Kill List* (2011), was retained from the pilot to act as series director and editor and also to maintain a sense of visual continuity. His own on-line cartoons had shared a similar visual aesthetic and nihilistic bent with *Modern Toss*. Link stated of Wheatley that "Ben is really important in the *Toss* process, he's very experienced at making amazing things happen on small budgets and under extreme pressure" (personal communication, November 18, 2006) (Appendix B). He referred here not only to Wheatley's range of production tasks as a way of keeping production costs down but also to his industry experience across animation, computer imaging, film editing and live-action settings (J. Link, personal communication, November 18, 2006). Pilot animator Dominik Binegger also insisted that the brief given to Wheatley was not to expand, alter or lose any of *Modern Toss*'s unique sensibility, thus his role was more as facilitator than embellisher of Link and Bunnage's ideas (personal communication, November 15, 2006) (Appendix B).

Although the exact details of Link and Bunnage's collaborative nature remains deliberately sketchy, it appears that Link, as a designer for *Jack* magazine and art director of *Content* for *Taschen*, controls the aesthetics for the concept, whilst Bunnage, an ex-musician, journalist and album cover designer who met Link in his *loaded* magazine days, appears to be more a contributor of ideas. Now as a respected comedy writing duo, they have contributed cartoons to a broad range of publications including *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror*, and gags and ideas towards Armando Iannucci's end-of-year satirical programme,

2004: *The Stupid Version* for the BBC (“Modern Toss”, 2006, paras 2-3). The acknowledged prototype for *Toss* was the cartoon strip *Office Pest* in *loaded* magazine between 1997 and 2002, which featured a similar embrace of “swearing” and minimal dialogue and that focused on a “man using experimental violence in the workplace”, detailed through a distinctly DIY aesthetic that utilised extant clip art and collage (J. Link, personal communication, November 19, 2006).

What also made the show so attractive to Channel Four was that textually and contextually it was very much a product of its time. *Modern Toss* emerged from a series of “un-publishable” doodles made between 2000 and 2002 (Holden, 2004, para 2). Under the *shitflap.com* banner, the five uploaded cartoons expanded into a back catalogue of ideas that was circulated via e-mail, then through subscription, then into hard-copy publishing, cards etc. (Holden, 2004, para 3). Link and Bunnage had recognised that “a lot of people were passing them around so we thought it might be a good idea to print all the stuff that we had stored up on the website”, and as such we can observe an interesting phenomenon unfold (J. Link, personal communication, November 19, 2006). *Modern Toss*’s inception also revealed how the Internet now played a more commonly-understood role here, as an inexpensive, easily-accessible platform for the transmission and development of comic ideas and narratives.

Traditionally, and certainly in public service contexts, radio had been the accepted space to engineer and perfect comedy ideas, but the web now fulfils this function. This practice allows talent to demonstrate concepts and provide a stage for executives and producers to observe them in operation, before

committing to scheduling and budgets. In doing so this then assists the show's passage to a broader, mainstream audience. This was especially useful with *Modern Toss* which had no traditional 'live' show or visible 'real-world' performance context. Here there was a marked difference from comedy shows like *The Mighty Boosh* (BBC 2004-2007), *Little Britain* (BBC 2003-2006) and *15 Storeys High* (BBC 2002- 2004), which all could refer back towards an understandable, extant stand-up or theatrical situation. Although the medium of the web itself undoubtedly restricts some animated concepts, or the promotion of them, through its technical and reception limitations it does at least permit the creator to present the unedited idea in its purity. The web can function as a space to hone an idea, as a conduit and as an advertising platform, and its arrival offers a diverse culture of creative and consumer possibilities.

Jenkins noted this setting broke down traditional "monolithic" strategies (2006, p. 98). This new climate assisted the promotion from one medium to another and, as such, it inferred that more traditional linear business models were soon becoming obsolete. Although taking a somewhat utopian line on this state, he saw that inflexible corporate marketing frameworks were increasingly becoming redefined through more active, rather than passive, models of consumption, that, for him, the "more different locations ... the more different communities ... the more different experiences [it provides] the better" (2006, p. 98).

### ***Ownership, connection and agenda***

Certainly a very large aspect of *Modern Toss*'s continuing success today rests on its very definable sense of identity. Yet, in its role as part of this Third Wave of animation its television manifestation also displays a typically postmodern ambivalence. This operates on a number of levels and which we will examine further throughout the chapter. The concept itself appears to reject corporatization yet promotes an adherence to brands, slogans and catchphrases that can be read and experienced across a range of settings. *Modern Toss*'s adherence to formal brevity makes it ideal to repackage into different media, and it works equally efficiently as a statement of identity as it does a provider of narrative pleasure.

This knowingness extends even to *Modern Toss*'s very title, which posts its self-conscious, anti-consensual humorous agenda to the consumer. There is a conjoining of the vulgar masturbatory colloquialism of *Toss* with an adherence to, and yet inherent criticism of, the contemporary. *Modern Toss*, as a very statement, can be seen as transmitting, before a single image or idea is presented, a self-deprecatory nod towards not only the show's perception of its *own* status and content but also as an ironic double-bluff in pointing out the banality and transience of modern-day culture on which it claims to report. Yet all the while, the show knowingly remains a defiant component *of* that process.

The show's multimedia origins undoubtedly informed its television life and this was acknowledged in its original launch campaign. A series of thirty-second 'viral' ads, featuring their flagship character Monsieur Tourettes, were

circulated weeks before the broadcast of the pilot show (“Interview with Modern Toss Creators Mick Bunnage and Jon Link”, 2006). As well as creating a sense of event, this also promoted a sense of connection and fostered notions of ownership from the outset that have consistently been a feature of the concept. *Modern Toss* is founded on a principle of accessibility and it was self-consciously constructed as a ‘cult’ narrative that consumers are able to interact with, albeit in a limited fashion. This is apparent through pre-orders of books via the website, whereby fans who order the book in advance are guaranteed status as a ‘Friend of *Modern Toss*’ and are then listed in the back of that edition. This intensifies the relationship between creators and readership and, as a result, ascribes a sense of custody and personal connection to the franchise (Link and Bunnage, 2010, p. 67).

*Modern Toss* trades on humour that appears to exist outside of a perceived moral or political consensus. This is a prominent and attractive facet of its make-up, which means that consumers can then characterize themselves as simultaneously both insiders and outsiders and much of the show’s enjoyment derives from being ‘in’ on a particular conceit, shared by the few. Alongside this implication of union and possession, desirable components within any ‘cult’ artefact, are the promotion of a coherent worldview and/or a recurrent set of aesthetics, both which are on offer. Eco sees that cult narratives must come to us as a “completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the private sectarian world” (1986, p. 198). Although a cult “by design”, that very knowing, pre-meditated component would, in itself, mark *Modern Toss* out as entirely the kind of text that would

earn Eco's disdain (1986, p. 197), yet the show's self-contained, fractured mini-narratives, set within a larger ethos, present a conformity to his ideas, as *Modern Toss* is not "one central idea but many... as a disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visual icebergs" (1986, p. 198).

The show's ethos is forged from a blankly oppositional stance and this message is further intensified through its unique formal signature. *Modern Toss*'s highly abbreviated style drew attention upon its first transmission from TV critic Christopher Howse, when he observed that, "Instead of sketches, it has endless single-frame cartoons with the captions read out" (2006, p. 18). As well as marking out tone and terrain, this minimalist animation aesthetic also highlighted the show's lineage, for like *Monkey Dust* its limitations actually infer its antecedents. Animation director Tom Mortimer's brief was simply to "make this art move!", and this statement reinforces how mindful the show is of its web-based origins, for *Toss* appears exactly as the original strips but devoid of the word balloons (personal communication, January 8, 2007) (Appendix B). *Modern Toss*'s shift into movement and spatial considerations distinguishes itself from the static book and web-based forms purely to meet the demands of narrative television. It uses an aesthetic so self-consciously beholden to its original source that movement and content appear determined still more by download speeds, bandwidths and storage capacities. For as Thorburn and Jenkins, drawing from Gunning, reiterate, as cinema was an evolution of theatrical and literary traditions fused and developed alongside the thrills of the amusement park, so here then does *Modern Toss* offer a similar

convergence, that services the fundamental project of animation itself (2004, p. 11).

### ***Form and theme***

Arguably the show's highly abstracted characters were as much a product of the computer animation software package, Flash, as they were a replication of Link and Bunnage's own visual style, one admittedly constructed with reproduction in mind, which they see as "cartoons" that are "more like diagrams than drawings" ("Modern Toss", 2006, para 8). This choice, as Furniss notes when discussing how abstracted figurative designs operate within commercial television animation today, is often affiliated to ambiguous countercultural statements. These are usually an intentional commentary on the dominance of Disney/Pixar-style hyper-realistic modes of animation which are commonly seen as markers of the middle ground (1998, pp. 5-6). Eco's view that the authenticity of a cult text often rests on imperfection and the rejection of formal totality also comes into play here (1986, p. 198). *Modern Toss's* sketchy, child-like impressionism, the strange conflation of smooth computer-generated fluidity alongside self-consciously static figures, cast into blunt, repetitious jokes, all appeared as entirely appropriate in this setting. These elements converged to serve the show's bleak philosophical subtext. Norman Klein said of the 1950s UPA animations, such as *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (1950) for example, that "flat graphics became story; the plot required characters who looked like color fields and moved mechanically inside a world that was practically empty, a sad, ironic, absurdist world; or a child's view of the adult

madhouse ” (1993, p. 230). He could equally have been talking of *Modern Toss*'s stable of dysfunctional characters when he highlights that this deployment of an “omniversal void” (1993, p. 237) to depict a world hints at a similar impairment, impediment and “sensory denial” that so typified the UPA characters (p. 239). The abstracted figurative characters who were set into *Modern Toss*'s world of pastel-shaded colour washes, not only highlighted the slippery, subjective, evasive nature of human representation itself, but they also provided a unique illustration of distinctiveness that fulfils the agenda of any credible animation.

*Modern Toss*'s adherence to a consistent, undiluted worldview undoubtedly drew comparisons with many other texts that have enjoyed a long and diverse cultural life. Gary Larson's *The Far Side* (1980-1995), subsequently animated in 1994, shares with *Modern Toss* a sense of inter-production an inter-media cohesion (Higdon, 1994, p. 49). Carrier notes that Larson's self-contained cartoons, across animation, newspaper incarnations, greetings cards etc., act as easily assimilated and interpreted images whereby a discernible stance emerges through accretion (2000, p. 19). Link and Bunnage, like Larson, denied any direct political position and their narratives also expressed a similar scepticism about technological progress along with a suspicion over systems of authority. They too presented fatalistic characters who refuted personal and social responsibility, as *Toss* also continued Larson's basic assumptions about people being at root “haplessly, hopelessly incompetent” (Carrier, 2000, p. 22).

The show also appeared very much as a Home Counties derivation of the UK, North-East based magazine, *Viz* (1979-to date). The McDonald brothers' *Viz* shares with *Toss* a similar emphasis on inter-media convergence along with a deliberately objectionable, very notably masculinised low-brow ethos (Higdon, 1994, p. 49). Certainly when Huxley states that the original comic's appeal rests on enjoying profanities "partially because of the offence they might cause to others", he could have easily been describing any of the *Modern Toss* sub-narratives (1998, p. 283).<sup>2</sup> Like *Toss*, *Viz* magazine made its reputation with "no pretensions, no respect for anything serious, and its drawing styles and production values were basic to the point of ineptitude", and it extends from their remit which deployed the print format to prod social taboos and revisit stereotypes within contemporary Britain (Huxley, 1998, p. 273).

Less overtly slavish in its popular cultural indexing than *Viz*, *Modern Toss* reacted less to late 1980s concerns and more to a rapidly changing pre-millennial British society. Its comic modes appeared as an expression of the uncensored, abrasive modes of humour that emerged through the rapidly expanding communication culture of Internet blogs, message boards and e-mails. It embodied an inner-city register, expressing a London-centric, ironic, cynical voice that expressed a free language of trivia, ephemera, cynicism and nihilism. Its relationship to both *Shoreditch Twats* and *Popbitch*, both primarily Internet phenomena, are worthy of note here - as they are parallel narratives which worked in a similar register and equally provided a window into how humour was becoming managed in this new arena.

*Popbitch* (2000-to date) became a phenomenon through its marshalling of the ‘un-sayable’ on a widely-accessible message board, in an idiom hitherto previously relegated to e-mails and private social spaces, and pitched at the level of what editor Camilla Wright called “democratizing gossip” (cited by Aitkenhead, 2006, para 4). *Popbitch* was as much about extending beyond the boundaries of propriety as it was about releasing anti-social expression using contentious language. It was also an indicator of the consensual shifts located within publicly-expressed humour. Also it is important to make note of *Shoreditch Twats* (C4 2002), which was too a cross-media production organised by Neil Boorman that gained its own Channel Four *Comedy Lab* pilot (episode 45, broadcast on 31 October 2002), which promoted a London-focused narrative that centred on the delusion, pretension and self absorption of modern media types, later also mocked by Chris Morris and Charlie Brooker in their 2005 Channel Four sitcom, *Nathan Barley*. Similar in tone to *Modern Toss*, the live-action example of the concept appeared limited due to its geographical fixity – exclusively based in Hoxton, London – which hampered its chances of a translation from website/fanzine status to quite the same degree as *Modern Toss* (Hujic, 2006, para 4). It was undoubtedly a spiritual predecessor, though Link and Bunnage’s advantage here lay in their desire to present a somewhat deeper satirical commentary.

*Modern Toss* engaged with larger concepts. Primarily the show’s main concerns were over societal dislocation, the loss of empathy and the prioritisation of

individual concerns over social ones. Each of the signature narratives within *Modern Toss* indicated that through the abandonment of social responsibility and connection a prevailing sense of contemporary cultural apathy appeared somehow as inevitable. Jacoby's pessimistic assertion that we exist in a post-ideological age, an epoch defined through its postmodern cynicism around meta-narratives, offers a valuable establishing point here, for he insists that as in the desertion of idealism – which is manifest in our individual, subjective desires for a utopia – the subsequent result is a state of ennui. He states that the cynicism arising from a refutation of modernist conceptions of reason and optimism, the breakdowns in politics, history, morality and order, leave us in a culture that no longer believes in itself. This negation of hope leads to stasis and stagnation, with the rejection of any aspiration towards utopia, however one conceives of that state, cast as the inevitable victim of late 20th century intellectual scepticism, pragmatism and elitism. Jacoby cites Bloch to sum up this idea: “there *is* something missing. The light has gone out. A world stripped of anticipation turns cold and grey” (1999, p. 181). Such a position raises questions about emphasis here, for *Modern Toss* presents a view of society crippled by a lack of idealism and it uses a notably masculine-defined dissatisfaction to articulate this. This gesture then problematises the notion of *Modern Toss* as countercultural statement itself, by hinting at an exclusionary dimension, as the vision of the show is allied to a very male perspective on concerns of stability, boundaries and, notably, the retrieval of territory. Link and Bunnage's insistence on the conjoining of those ideas is undoubtedly evidence of an ideological ambivalence that says much about *Modern Toss* and indeed Third Wave Animation itself.

### *Looking for clues*

The disconnection and unravelling that Jacoby highlights could be seen at its most potent within the anti-social behaviour of the character featured in the sketch entitled, 'The Drive-By Abuser'. This featured an animated man set into a live-action landscape that drove around different settings on a small moped. Each narrative began with him surveying his surroundings and, once he spotted something that annoyed him/intrigued him/caught his eye, such as his psychological make-up that he then disappeared to return with the primary tool of his trade, a megaphone. From here on in the character drove backwards and forwards past the live-action object of his attention, shouting comic abuse and derisory comments. Once he had exhausted his tirade he sped off out of the frame. Often he would choose to attack not just people, who often were either not actually in the shot, who often ignored him or simply were unable to really hear him, but also, tellingly, he would berate the inanimate as well as the animate. Animals, passive subjects, abstract objects, concepts such as flower beds, a statue and indeed a clichéd conception of the entire nation of France rebuked from a cliff top, were all deemed as appropriate subjects for mockery. Like many other *Modern Toss* models, the Drive-By Abuser's past history, social standing and circumstances were missing, thus the animation required us to project onto it our own visions of dissolution. The blankness of the character, compounded by the pointlessness of his actions, deepened the comedy and intensified this as a response to apathy and dislocation.

The design of the character itself aided this reading, as TDBA was a skewed, child-like, scratched-out, male stick figure ascribed no physical depth, weight or dimension, with limbs rendered as irregular lines and cast in crude proportions. His incompleteness spoke volumes, as he was rendered with a dot for an eye and a thick smudged outline to delineate. The absence of a neck dictated no discernible separation between head and body. There was little more present than a head/torso amalgam. There were no recognisable facial attributes, other than the smudge that suggested a smile. His limbs were rendered as lines. He was a flat, two-dimensional image crudely placed onto a three dimensional, filmed, live-action moped that he used as a vehicle by which to ply his trade. Animated movement in the sketches was self-consciously restricted to very sharp left-to-right swaps with no in-between drawings to highlight the fluid passage between poses, nor indeed was there any suggestion of correlative mass or physical effect as the character passed 'live' filmed objects. This animation didn't celebrate or explore the comic potential in 'extreme' poses that characterized the limited animation work of, say, John Kricfalusi's *Ren and Stimpy* (MTV 1991). His gender was determined more through voice, sound and action than physicality or direct index. He broadly *suggested* a male human construct. Following on from debates in the last chapter on racial depictions within animation, issues of gender here followed a similar path in that the medium's history of stereotyping through over-familiar design tropes had become circumnavigated in favour of other concerns.

Sound and the actions perpetrated themselves took priority here over design, and the emphasis of these factors deepens the absurdities located at the very core of the concept. The pleasures drawn from the text thus revolved around watching unfounded, unreasonable aggression forced into a strained (anti)-social interaction. It was the acts themselves, and their particular emphasis also, that again led us back to meaning. This sketch was ultimately all about very male concerns of negotiations of terrain and control.

The megaphone that the character used was a key to understanding the character's psychology. This device tends to be associated with situations of order and power and that it was deployed here to detail information of such little weight intensified the comic conceit. It was a comically flawed phallic extension here marshalled to seize authority. Bringing in Freud may not be so left-field here. The primary linkage between the psychology of various – notably male – cartoon characters and the driving force behind anarchy within many animated narratives is that they are often driven purely by their immediate child-like needs. Indulging “the pleasure principle... the wholly subjective drive to satiate physical, emotional and psychological appetites”, TDBA jettisons any sense of super-ego, which in Freudian terms rewards social or conformist behaviour, as revealed through the lack of provocation which set each of the acts in motion (Wells, 1998, pp. 154-155). As he pursued his own internal desires unchecked and uncensored, he wittily inverted a common trope located within the horror film. For in that particular setting, psychological distortion is manifest in the obtaining of knives and weapons which are cast as extensions of the body, articles prompted by a “‘dynamism’ directly from the primary

physical instinct's destructive nature" (Kaminsky cited by Dadoun, 1989, p. 103). In the context of TDBA, this fetishization of the megaphone acted as an ironic safety net for this psychologically and figuratively incomplete male. Authority, or indeed the lack of it, alongside a thwarted sense of masculinity and a broader societal impotence appeared here as embedded concerns. The very sound of the megaphone, with its overtones of exaggeration and distortion, amplified the sheer irrelevance of this exercise. The use of feedback, the tone and the rasping sound itself all supplemented the accent and the delivery. For the megaphone was a literalization of the character's inadequacies, a comic inversion of the quiet voice and an appropriate apparatus for a creature so socially, culturally and emotionally impotent. It permitted distance yet still allowed him to belittle his victims in comfort and to promote his interior thoughts (Harrison, Bunnage & Link, 2005-2008).

As expressive personality animation was entirely absent, speech and intonation have to also be accounted for here. Wheatley confirmed that this working class, Essex dialect is an essential part of the *Modern Toss* linguistic design, as specifically outlined by Link and Bunnage, and with little deviation offered from the voice cast (B. Wheatley, personal communication, December 12, 2006) (Appendix B). As a signature 'tic' within the show it appeared across a range of sketches, as it was submerged within actor Simon Greenhall's blend of 'Français' and class-based colloquialisms in Monsieur Tourette, and literalised through its accompanying subtitles, in the address offered by the lazy teenager in 'Work' and in the manner by which the two flies conversed in 'Fly Talk', all of which are voiced by MacKenzie Crook and Paul Kaye. TDBA was voiced by

actor David Schall, who also stressed this Essex dialect, and his address was also consistently embellished using an upward inflection at the end of each of his sentences.

What is termed as ‘up-talk’ has emerged through a number of disparate media sources, as observed by Gustafson-Capková, as an affectation that has slipped into contemporary life and is ubiquitous across class borders (2001, paras 3-7). Morris adds to this that this particular vocal tic is not linked to standard emotional responses, such as tenderness or happiness, but in execution can often indicate a sense of incompleteness and uncertainty in the subject’s thought processes (1998, paras 4-6). This intonation diminishes declarative statements, shifting them more into a question-like register and reveals an inner hesitancy and indecision. Morris argues that the standard use of upward inflection at the end of a sentence is deployed to intentionally ask a question or imply doubt. As a defence mechanism in contemporary social interaction, there is a compromise present that undermines the forcefulness of speech, for a downward modulation at the end of a sentence expresses conviction and suggests finality to the thought offered and actualises a mental break in the listener’s interior dialogue. The openness of this particular emphasis, pertinent here, renders statements offered as a command in a passive manner, which in turn connotes a desire for control, and expresses a defiance. This refracted mode of upward declaration refutes rules of etiquette and social dynamics in exchange for TDBA’s desire for an unattainable authority.

This determination to replicate contemporary speech idioms with some accuracy was also a knowing gesture that tied this animation back into larger comedy trends of the time. Television comedy of the late 1990s was dominated by an emphasis on naturalistic speech patterns that were brought in line with the formal and performance shifts located within a range of influential shows, such as Chris Morris's *Jam* (C4 2000), Aherne, Normal and Cash's *The Royle Family* (BBC 1999- to date), Linehan and Matthews's *Big Train* (BBC 1998-2002), Bain and Armstrong's *Peep Show* (C4 2003- to date) and Gervais and Merchant's *The Office* (BBC 2001-2003). A renewed engagement with specific speech rhythms offered a way to undermine the theatrical artifice that had been deemed as endemic within British sitcom performance and style (Medhurst and Tuck, 1996, p. 113). Understatement, phatic dialogue, pauses, uncomfortable silences and inarticulate proclamations all came to complement form and supported the exploration of darker subject matter with greater flexibility, and rendered explicit an existential thread, often submerged within television comedy. This new naturalism also helped to exacerbate layers of comic discomfort in social situations and this aided a fuller examination of the inappropriate, the socially unacceptable and dialogues on failure. *Modern Toss* continued this by having its animated characters mimic the broken sentence construction, mis-timing and emphases associated with everyday speech. This is of course a relational trend, dependent on contemporary cultural and social imperatives, and although this embrace supposedly allowed the text to slip between comedy and tragedy with greater ease, of course through its constant employment it eventually established an artifice entirely of its own.

*Modern Toss* presented humour that was derived from working/lower/under class social ritual, played out to absurdity in confrontations with a perceived authority relevant to each situation. Speech and action told us about the power relationships featured here, fore-grounded as a drive to subvert rejection and dislocation within a fragmented, apathetic society. These gestures returned us to the masculine emphasis, once more, as this mode was also a comic continuation of the dual mocking and celebration of masculine interaction – often from a protected position of class superiority – that can be seen featured within Peter Cook and Dudley Moore’s improvised two handed sketches for the BBC’s *Not Only...But Also* (1965-70), *The Two Ronnies* (1971-1999) and through to the *Alas Smith and Jones* show (BBC, 1982-88) with Mel Smith and Griff Rhys Jones. Once more Third Wave Animation sought to quote rather than innovate. The derisory nature of address and the repetition of speech idioms posited how working class males retreated into a register of inarticulacy and ignorance primarily as a defence mechanism, as a signal, when placed in situations beyond their control. *Modern Toss*’s flawed males routinely handed over power in the absence of a higher moral path, a credible, guiding light or even a sense of empathy. They were depicted as the product of a society that had effectively given up hope.

Critical dialogues focused on exclusively masculine behaviour have rarely appeared within previous UK animation narratives. Certainly men have been presented in negative terms in the past, as the passive working class grotesques who counterpart the distorted predatory feminine sexuality of Channel Four/*Viz*’s *The Fat Slags* (C4 1992) demonstrated. However a notable precursor

can be located within Richard Goleszowski's phallicized stop-motion figures that populated his Second Wave 1989 Aardman short, *Ident*. These were types, coded as masculine, who expressed themselves through whoops and hollers to convey a précis of urban male language posited as ritualistic nonsense. For Goleszowski the meaning of the words was irrelevant, it was the gestures that mattered. But it is in late 1990s television animation where a critique of masculinity became normative and where animated men were cast more through their actions and qualities than their physicality.

### *The flawed male*

Mainstream animation has rarely shied from positing males as delusional fools, infatuated with pointless conflicts, posturing and retreats into an infantile state. Animation has continually presented characters that deploy unreasonable methods to achieve long-forgotten aims, to delineate human drives for appeasement, acceptance or gratification or to satiate internal desires (Wells, 1998, p. 154). From UPA's Mr Magoo to Warner's Daffy Duck, male characters have habitually expressed anger, lust, frustration and hostility, often to the point of illogicality and in line with expectations around the cartoon narrative. In this post-*Simpsons* television setting, narratives of tarnished masculinity had become revitalised with some alacrity. Matt Groening's Homer Simpson construct was informed by a history of masculine failures, from Hanna Barbera's 1961 Fred Flintstone, an animated response to CBS's 1955-1956 *The Honeymooners* and the monstrous Ralph Kramden, onwards. This was undoubtedly revelatory of

late 20th century US mainstream animation's proximity to the live-action sitcom tradition. As extreme as *Modern Toss* appeared to be, certainly formally, this trend towards casting men as failures continued when moving away from that particular televisual lineage. It persisted when divorced from the socialising construct of family, where so often that narrative appeared as a conventional feature within that particular idiom. 1990s live-action and TV comedy discussions of masculinity appeared inspired by the gains of feminism, which had in turn intensified the conjoining of male-ness with disappointment and stupidity. This notion of the flawed male had been reactivated too within British live-action television comedy, albeit from a slightly broader perspective. From the 1990s onwards, dissections of male behaviour that responded to the 'New Lad' phenomenon, like *Men Behaving Badly* (ITV 1992, BBC 1992-1998), led, in turn, to more concentrated dissertations, such as Ricky Gervais's David Brent (*The Office* BBC 2001-2003), Steve Coogan's Alan Partridge (*Knowing Me, Knowing You* BBC 1994) and Sean Lock's Vince in *15 Storeys High* (BBC 2002-2004), that all absorbed these shifts and also returned the male fool to an historical lineage of comic constructs that referred back to *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC 1956-1960) and *Fawlty Towers* (BBC 1975-1979), among many others.

Although these more recent comedies and animations may have set out to investigate the boundaries of social acceptability, usually framed against understandings of political correctness within an everyday setting, primarily they were all about characters defined by a lack of power within their own lives. These were potent archetypes, as males who refuted the expectations of power

and self-knowledge commonly ascribed to masculine behaviour and who were regularly thwarted by family, inter-personal relationships and/or societal institutions and aspiration. *Modern Toss* can be seen as part of this constant within the late 1990s that presented male ineptitude as a useful model by which to address issues of acceptability. So the subject of masculinity itself could also function as a handy portal by which to explore the absurd, especially when conjoined to a satirical dialogue. *Modern Toss*'s obsession with stupidity as a reaction to the breakdown of authority and responsibility in incongruous social settings certainly seemed happy to suggest that "Nonsense seems to fill those conditions" (Corte-Real, 1987, para 3).

### *Animating the comic male*

In the animation medium, although undoubtedly protected by a larger patriarchal umbrella of ideology that sits central to mainstream Western culture, it is feasible that men, along with women, can be the victim of simplistic representations. The boiling down of gender to a set of impressions, as manifest in the Fleischer Brothers' 1930s Paramount Popeye and Betty Boop series, as examples, is evidence of this. Delgaudio asserts that too often female – and male – characters are contained within a lexicon of formal and performative mannerisms or clichés within mainstream animation (cited by Wells, 1998, p. 204). Law adds a cogent point here, when she states that the dominant visual grammar of the mainstream can also be read as 'masculine', due to its associations with patriarchal industrial concerns and the adherence to what she

sees as male-defined formal tenets, such as naturalism and personality animation, the latter being a model of movement and expression that extends from, notably masculine, silent and vaudeville performance (1995, p. 22-23). This doesn't take full account of the industrial demands placed on the production of animation, formally, for television, which has traditionally favoured 'limited', as opposed to 'full', animation for obvious fiscal advantages. But the manner by which recent mainstream television animation has been conjoined to television comedy structures and expectations does suggest some continuation of this issue.

What *Modern Toss*'s figurative freedom achieved was an undermining of the prevailing discourse, originally highlighted by Wells, on the conjoining of abstraction within animation to the expression and representation of gender. His point that abstracted figurative designs, exemplified by independent animators like Caroline Leaf and Candy Guard, have been historically and culturally coded somehow as a "feminine aesthetic", in their riposte to the male-defined Disney lexicon, was here now finally rendered as obsolete (1998, p. 188). Context, of course, was all here, but abstraction's incorporation into the mainstream, weighed against the postmodern breakdown of the avant-garde, signalled a very different aesthetic terrain, one where the political emphasis has receded in favour of a consumerist, individualist one (Jameson, 1991, pp. 4-16). Our responses to TDBA are arguably forged more through our cultural experiences of masculinity than a history of post-Classical Hollywood rejections of representational precision. In place of muscles, curves and posture as clichéd signifiers of gender, *Modern Toss*'s animation referred back to a graphic lineage

of abbreviation that extended from Thurber to Capp, and at the same time evoked contemporary artists like David Shrigley who traded on notions of dislocation and distance.<sup>3</sup>

Gombrich notes that readers engage with impressionistic figurative constructs through “the experience of a generation of artists with the effects of pictures” conjoined with “the willingness of the public to accept the grotesque and simplified”, because the “lack of elaboration guarantees the absence of contradictory clues” (1968, p. 284). This means that impressionistic figures can essay the very essence of caricature itself: the summation and encapsulation, through distortion, of attitudes and values. The abolition of facial expressions and changes in posture, which are a necessary part of animated performance and which supply us with necessary information to highlight the interior psychology of a character, means that we are then required to complete the picture ourselves. Instead of relying on familiar visual tropes we complete the implications presented by the animation with our own experiences.

Bearing all of the above in mind, *Modern Toss* was fixated on inarticulacy, miniature acts of pointless rebellion that were conjoined to ignorance and belligerence and that appeared as a response to the social displacement apparent within our contemporary climate. However much one could read this as a critique on male behaviour it was inescapable that not only were women excluded from the narratives but these acts were primarily male-defined conflicts and responses.

There was a suggestion that the critique is more cultural, rather than gender-specific. 'TDBA' was a mocking of the cultural icon of the lone gunman, the drive-by shooting and perhaps thus indeed a commentary on the nature of violent action itself. 'TDBA' undermined the mythologies of this pre-meditated male American criminal activity by transposing them to Home Counties Britain, as the acts of abuse were downgraded from physical penetration to verbal assault and became reframed as a comic dialogue about impotence, ineptitude and under-ambition. As harassment, this poorly staged gesture of barking low-level, disconnected verbal insults at innocent targets posed a disparity, one which highlighted the gulf of class experience between US and UK class cultures yet still fore-grounded traditional male narratives of revenge and machismo, although reducing them in favour of British humorous fixations on dysfunctionality. Certainly the nature of TDBA's attacks mirrored the strategies deployed by young males when negotiating hierarchy and the terrain of masculinity itself. Quoting from Daly and Wilson's study (1987), Beynon notes that confrontation is a totemistic response, a common tool used to save face, as a solution to solve an argument and, tellingly in this context, to assert status (2002, p. 287). These mannerisms were replicated throughout most of the *Modern Toss* sketches. Also citing Stanko's 1994 studies on the manner by which young males conduct themselves in pre-conflict/confrontation situations, Beynon observes that a pre-meditation often takes place within common tropes of self-aggrandisement (2002, p. 82). Katz notes a similar phenomenon when he sees that such actions are constructed to retrieve honour and are relayed through gestures of "strategic calculation, militaristic delight, symbolic representation of

enemies and melodramatic self-absorption” (1988, p. 112), again, terms which were replayed within the narratives of ‘TDBA’.

This offers another reading that anchors the sketch even further into a discourse on masculine behaviour. Beynon sees that cultural narratives around masculinity from the 1990s into the turn of the 21st century are often determined through terms like “damage” and “pessimism”, and this adds another dimension (2002, p. 142). Moving into a more nuanced reading of the undoubtedly problematic notion of ‘crisis’ here, isolation and aggression appear peculiar to the conceit of the ‘Millennial man’ – a construct that responds to a range of contemporary socialising factors (Beynon, 2002, p. 142). Coward sees that the rise in divorce rates, the advent of women as counterparts within the workplace, the transformation in family dynamics, underachievement in education and shifting job patterns, along with the changing role and reduction of the father as family figurehead, have all contributed to the performative role of men being rendered more complex and have all contributed to a more segmented and conflicted male view of the self (1999, p. 52). These factors are also further problematized when evaluated against the prescribed heterosexual values ascribed to conventional masculinity – outlined by Newell and cited by Beynon – of “manly traditions... chivalry, gentlemanliness, wisdom and statesmanship, a strong sense of familial duty and responsibility, nobility and heroism” (2002, p. 142). TDBA’s own distance from such higher moral values, admittedly founded within 18th century narratives, undoubtedly heightens a further sense of removal and augments this isolation (Beynon, 2002, pp. 33-34). Coward too notes that, mirroring a counter-response to the confusion of definition offered

within third wave feminism today, “Masculinity no longer implies an automatic superiority, but almost its opposite – difficulties, problems, inferiority” (1999, p. 88) – perhaps as much a postmodern response as a gendered one?

*Modern Toss* was a response to this fragmentation. Beynon sees Millennial Man as defined against “the loss of what had been accepted as masculine ‘rights’”, with no clear oppressor and a modern media that plays a role in this process of dislocation and this had become a feature of contemporary texts like *The Full Monty* (1999) etc. (2002, p. 83). The desire to fight back, to reassert, through men’s movements and activities of reclamation, becomes conjoined with a more fractured working class dynamic, which intensifies this confusion. To avoid being “air-brushed out of the picture” identity is retrieved through acts of assertion (Beynon, 2002, pp. 150-151). For if, as Davis points out, society idealises, “self-coherence and self-continuity” and the presentation of “inharmonious characteristics of dissonant selves”, then the act of clowning, or undermining, took on a new significance (1993, p. 282). As TDBA insulted and belittled from a safe distance he, and the rest of the animated squiggles in the *Modern Toss* stable, did this as a way of managing “discordance” (Davis, 1993, p. 279). That these disruptions and rejections of order were managed in such a fashion within the narratives suggested males reasserting themselves, through the tools to hand, who refused to be reasoned with or confronted in any intelligent fashion.

*Modern Toss*’s foregrounding of characters that perpetrated violence as critique still left unanswered questions, about a larger imbalance and the absence of

women within the texts themselves that mirrored larger inequalities elsewhere in the industry and within contemporary culture. Pilling asserts that women have retained key positions throughout animation history, not only as creative personnel behind the scenes, but also as ‘visible’ talent, as voice-over artists etc., that have helped define the cultural landscape of popular animation. The likes of Joy Batchelor, Faith Hubley, Lotte Reiniger and Mary Ellen Bute have all contributed greatly to the profession, albeit marginalised simply by the sheer weight of numbers of male contributors and set into relief by the dominant frameworks of ownership (Pilling, 1992a, p. 5). However, reinforcing the hegemonic nature of male power blocs in mainstream terms, industrially, creatively, formally, thematically and historically, there is much evidence to support a recently intensified male emphasis in terms of text *and* context.

Kitson notes, in an interview with the author, that there is undoubtedly a discernible masculinist address which prevails, and in fact dominates, production within the period of Third Wave Animation also. The ex-Commissioning Editor for Channel Four stated that she had noticed women’s roles within the industry itself had recently become much more marginal and – referring to an unfinished independent empirical study made by animator Sarah Ann Kennedy – she felt this had resulted in a somewhat masculinised culture informing the production and creation of TV animation (C. Kitson, personal communication, July 12, 2010) (Appendix A). Inevitably, and despite the presence of female independent producers like Jane Harrison at Channel X, in the example under discussion here, and people such as Jana Bennet installed in higher positions at the BBC, as Director of Vision, for instance, this would then

suggest that a subsequent male bias would inform the narratives produced in this climate.

This is also an issue enforced by the networks themselves, as Kitson cited this tendency as a factor in Channel Four's withdrawal of support for shows like *Bob and Margaret*, *Pond Life* – singled out in particular by Channel Four head, Michael Jackson, for its feminine emphasis – and *Crapston Villas*. These shows presented stories that were accessible to both male *and* female audiences but were all sacrificed in the early 1990s by Channel Four's desire to appeal to a primarily masculine, 18-34 demographic (Kitson, 2008, p. 212). This shift was a pragmatic evolution and was prompted by the massive success of shows like *South Park* in particular, which prioritised a male tenor in authorship, subject, tone and emphasis and which soon became the low-budget broadcast template for transgressive, industrially-produced animated humour. So, as in the last chapter, if DaCosta observes that mainstream animation can be defined through absences of ethnic minorities, then perhaps this highlights mainstream animation's path towards a less progressive impulse, in the manner by which women appear in reduced circumstances within Third Wave stories (2010). This reasserts the notion of industry control as an index of patriarchy and, as such, then leads us to a necessary engagement with the "questioning of cartoon conventions", as Wells highlights, which returns us to the idea that we have to account for gender within mainstream animation as displayed "through the obvious action of agency" (1998, p. 193).

Many shows during this Third Wave of Animation, from *Monkey Dust* to *Popetown*, were pre-sold on this notion of radicalism, and *Modern Toss* certainly continued this notion (Nathan, 2003, para 2). If anything, this particular phenomenon is defined by a *lack* of radicalism. This term, in reality, usually meant that this kind of television was deemed as ‘adult’ animation and thus consistently addressed taboo areas, through a particular embrace of form away from mainstream conceptions. Although this manifestation of post-politically correct comedy animation existed as tied to less of an obvious agenda, (a la *Monkey Dust*), that it emerged several years after that show revealed that discussions of superiority and emphasis, especially around class and gender, no longer appeared to be necessary.

That Third Wave Animation failed to provide a counterpart along the same lines to post-*Simpsons* American shows like MTV’s *Daria* (1996-2002) – spun out from Mike Judge’s *Beavis and Butthead* (MTV 1993-1997) – for example, which focused on the experiences and perspective of an intelligent teenage girl, is significant. As Second Wave experimentation and authorship gives way to industry capitulation, women’s roles within British TV animation texts, as we saw in the last chapter with *Monkey Dust*, often are reduced to ironic quotation. Be it as harridans, mothers or adjuncts to male characters, they are continually rendered problematic, marginalised, superfluous and/or distant.

Third Wave Animation implicitly, explicitly and inevitably reveals the culture around it, and certainly the recession of Second Wave Feminism in the early

part of the 21st century into a more fragmented, ambiguous post-feminist identity has to be acknowledged here (Faludi, 1999, pp. 3-47). British culture during the pre-millennial period filtered gender roles through a 1960s-style nostalgic euphoria which undermined many of the progressive shifts gained in the 1980s. These were narratives that dominated the media-centric UK cultural climate through the tabloid press and were endemic to popular magazines such as *Loaded*, *FHM*, *Later*, *Mondo*, *Front*, *Deluxe*, *Maxim*, *Men's Health*, and TV shows like *TFI Friday* (C4 1996-2000), *They Think It's All Over* (BBC 1995-2008) and *Fantasy Football League* (BBC 1994-2004). Central to this cultural mood was the consolidation of masculinity into a 'New Lad' persona, a construct that capitalised on postmodern irony, crossed class boundaries as working class behaviour became incorporated into the middle classes, and colluded with a supportive tabloid culture to refine and retrieve unreconstructed male attitudes (Crewe, 2003, p. 96). Although, notably, the responsibilities of masculinity had receded in the embrace of this sardonic hedonistic impulse, any connection to emotional competence or acknowledgement of the previous decade's enlightened, post-feminist narratives had now all but dissipated. As was offered in shows such as *Stressed Eric* – see Chapter Two – this shift returned men and their activities centre stage once more, however flawed, and this action undoubtedly contributed to the erosion of the shifts engendered by Second Wave Feminism and began the re-casting of that as an outmoded ideology (Crewe, 2003, p. 100).

Third Wave Animation was a barometer of contemporary middle-ground values. With the centralisation of masculinity we also saw a recession of more overtly

politicised animations broadcast – i.e. texts like Joanna Quinn’s 1987 essay on objectification, *Girl’s Night Out* – that featured women as central to the creative process. Animation that explicitly addressed the thorny subject of agency had notably receded on TV screens by the late 1990s. Gains implemented in the cinema mainstream marketplace may have suggested a trend towards more nuanced, culturally and racially specific constructs, from *The Little Mermaid* (Disney 1989) to *Pocahontas* (Disney 1995) onwards. But as much as this acknowledged that animation had never been an exclusively a male pleasure, in truth these models were ruthlessly researched strategies placed to access the broadest of demographics possible, to present “appeal” and to subvert critiques of reductionism (Griffin, 1994, pp. 64-65).

### ***Gendered humour***

As this period of British animation was determined by its proximity to mainstream television comedy then the registers of humour at work here undoubtedly have to be considered further. Link and Bunnage’s critique focused not on one social group per se, but more on a general societal ignorance, and it deployed the language of working class males to make their points. The centralising of comic acts of social and physical violence within the show emerged not just as preoccupations but as obsessions that in effect consolidated the forces of patriarchy at work. As inarticulate, lazy, boorish, hapless, intolerant, inattentive and apathetic males that refuted institutional activity, these conform to the kinds of familiar constructs Walker describes as ideal male

types within humorous narratives. These were models that were defined by “the kind of border warfare between two cultures, vernacular and refined” that often are featured centrally within comic narratives, each of them could be encapsulated across different sketches as a “lazy, unregenerate man who defied cultural norms” (Walker, 1988, p. 43). The *Modern Toss* character Alan expressed insurgence against class hypocrisy through garden appliances, strategically-placed ropes, cars, even a bouncy castle and the rigging of various power tools. He notably chose a variety of masculine symbols of control to do this and to facilitate a reclamation over his social situation (Harrison, Bunnage & Link, 2005-2008). TDBA’s low status, and notably feminised moped as a mode of transport, said much about the gendered position of the sketches also. The very nature of the pointless, non-redemptive aggression that continually and pathologically violates etiquette highlighted the *Modern Toss* universe as one dominated by male children. TDBA, Barney, the flies in ‘Fly Talk’, the astronauts in ‘Space Argument’, ‘Monsieur Tourettes: The Sign Builder’, the neighbours in ‘Peace and Quiet’ and the self-absorbed characters who populate ‘Help Desk’ and ‘Work’ all expressed a selfishness, and were cries for attention at the expense of the rules of social and gender conformity.

Certainly masculine comedic traditions have been traditionally informed by such fundamental topics as “the incompatibility of the vulgar and the genteel viewpoints within a single society”, or with “balloon-pricking” (Walker, 1988, p. 42). Although discussing an American context, such concepts can easily be read as universals. Both of those factors can certainly be located, at an atomic level, within our case study of TDBA. However, in *Modern Toss* it was the

‘vulgar’ who dominated the narratives and it was the ‘genteel’ who were a disappearing society. As Walker argues, the pervasive nature of male power networks and associations, in defining the role of women within humour, has become fixed through accretion and these have resulted in what are perceived to be “innate characteristics” within general comedy narratives, that have rendered males as custodians of humour, allowed to “claim the freedom to be the opposite: the joking ‘bad boy’ who rebelled against official social norms” (1988, p. 43). The construction of humour is of course cultural, it is dependent on social conditions, experience and position and its choice of subject and its mode and targets can say much about those who assemble it. The permission granted to be the ones to joke, to question and to expose hypocrisy, is supported by history, especially when one notes that the satirical tradition is often governed by a male voice.

If *Modern Toss* epitomised male humour, then it is important to delineate what we understand *female* humour to embody through several distinct areas as contrast. Feminised humour is often located through choices of subject matter, i.e. the focus on issues of “the domestic” measured alongside markers of space, as posited against the physical freedoms men are afforded, often elements of social connection, cohesion and togetherness are stressed, alongside narratives around women’s experiences and rights (Walker, 1988, p. 44-45). Women’s humour often expresses, through implication, isolation from the dominant culture and is detailed through a “delicacy of language”, refuting vulgarity or the “tall-tale” and details accounts of a “persona” struggling to meet the demands placed on her to enforce identification (Walker, 1988, p. 48). This does

not mean that gendered humour cannot be enjoyed exclusively only by the targeted gender and neither does this suggest that elements of male and female humour cannot overlap.

Those elements were absent throughout *Modern Toss*, for the humorous exploration of male posturing instead referenced submerged anxieties as an unconscious reaction to a shifting socio/cultural landscape that, to those lacking self-awareness, excluded more than it included. This reading is further intensified by the exclusion of women characters within the show itself. *The Day Today* and *Smack the Pony* actress/writer Doon Mackichan was the sole female voice-over artist on the show and didn't contribute to a featured character. Camilla Corbett and Gabriele Fritz appeared merely as situation comedy quotations, as balance to the socially autistic Alan across Series One in the sketches of the same name (Harrison, Bunnage & Link 2006). Other females throughout were relegated to faceless, nameless operatives who controlled the desk in 'Help Desk'/'Accident and Emergency' and were presented as reacting passively to the litany of abuse and self-deluded - mainly male - individuals seeking help (Harrison, Bunnage & Link, 2005-2008). Notably they were live-action figures and were refused the kinds of priority given to animated characters. Mackichan was denied any central dialogue, other than introducing the setting, and was often given little more to do than either sigh in exasperation or offer a mocking acknowledgement to male figures. However *conversely* it could be seen that it was a woman who holds the exalted role as the position of authority, as Mackichan also not only read out the titles to most of the sketches

but acted as series narrator/overseer and was a prominent aspect of the show's promotional identity.

She was also a continuity presence that announces the idents, articulates the words spelled out at the end of the sketch 'Bad Alphabet' and reiterated the show's signifying statement, "Modern Toss – the stink of excellence in a world gone tits up", across each series (2005-2008). Her voice was used to convey a specifically constructed feminine tone that embodies conviction, control and distance, and yet at the same time conveying blankness and banality. This studied, disconnected reading acted also as a juxtapositional device to maximise the way swearing and vulgarity featured throughout the show. This tied into Walker's assertion that within humorous structures traditionally women were often berated for a lack of imagination, a slavish adherence to stoicism and practicality, which is in place to then direct our sympathies towards the expressive dreamers, the downtrodden husbands or males that comically refute responsibility (1988, pp. 44-48). Thus, Mackichan's ambiguous position has to be considered against the overwhelming polarisation of passivity and aggression within *Modern Toss*'s narratives, as much it does against any delineation of the acceptable role for women within men's comic texts.

Morreall cites Schopenhauer when he observes that a fundamental aspect of humour is the pleasure taken from misunderstandings, from discrepancy between concepts and perceptions and breakdown in propriety, watching "that strict, untiring, troublesome governess, [the] reason" unravelling (1983, p. 21).

Layer this observation, then, with Walker's assertion that self-deprecation within humour operates as a masculine protectionist device – to observe the discrepancy one must be gifted with a sense of authority. Self-mocking ensures that the male is still centre-stage, but through such a position provides a critic-proof defence against “snobbery” (Walker, 1988, p. 39). The ambivalent, ironic stance taken in the presentation of such anti-social contemporary attitudes once more acts as a shield against culpability and masks agency, and it allows for a postmodern, post-politically correct comedy to function untrammelled once more.

### ***Conclusion***

The anonymous *Red Eye*, ‘the socialist TV critic’ of *The Morning Star*, appeared to nail *Modern Toss* succinctly when they said that “for all its scatological surrealism [*Modern Toss*] accurately echoes the nightmarish incivility of post-Thatch Britain [sic]” (“Feature - Red Eye; Britain's only socialist TV critic. TV Review: Red Eye tunes in for the new animation-based comedy sketch show *Modern Toss*”, 2006, para 5). Certainly the show conformed to Billig's conditions for seditious humour in fulfilling a “social demand” with male dysfunctional behaviour used as vehicle to discuss the apathy that Link and Bunnage saw as underpinning contemporary Britain itself (2005, p. 213).

*Toss*'s legacy will be as a show that embodied a genuinely original formal fusion that highlighted the emergence of the Internet within comedy, animation and the media in general and, particularly, as a moment that captured a cultural mood within the early part of the 21st century. It was a statement that also reflected upon the status of comedy and animation in this first decade of the new millennium. It was also a signal that the inclusiveness that extended from Second Wave principles of inclusion and that told stories from male, female and pan-sexual perspectives, found in the work of Candy Guard or Sarah Ann Kennedy, had now all but evaporated. Texts such as this contributed to the mounting evidence that the overriding, notably critical voice within Third Wave Animation tended to come from a male perspective. Although violence, frustration and retreat into a child-like terrain can mark this as much a class response as a male one, the recurrence of this register across all kinds of settings, from *Angry Kid* (BBC 2003) to *Popetown* (BBC 2005) onwards, however, suggested greater gender continuity. As per the last chapter, we have to consider once more Third Wave Animation's pronounced resistance towards political correctness within comedic narratives. This allows for a greater intensity in terms of humour and address but it can also be understood through the choices of subject matter as much it can the tone or emphasis. These are texts which consciously *and* unconsciously resist the advantages made by feminism in the 1980s and seek to undermine more progressive dialogues, which by this point appeared conjoined to an earlier, less flexible time.

Where *Modern Toss* succeeded most effectively, though, is in its painfully accurate actualisation of an isolationist mentality that pervades contemporary

social experience, albeit one cast from a highly subjective viewpoint. The show could be seen as embodying a rather glib superiority, as the very notion of apathy, when cast against abnegations of personal and social responsibility and then ascribed to class-bound characters, does imply there is a slightly reactionary concern at work. This once more leads us back to the assertion made within the previous chapter's conclusion that comedy, ultimately, expresses a conservative viewpoint. Comic idiocy, male or otherwise, may well be the perfect foil by which to dissect social/political authority but, as Billig argues, via Zijderveld, questioning modes actually do very little to remove or undermine authority but in fact through their application simply *reinforce* power. *Modern Toss* followed this as it did not call for change or illustrate a potential new order, it in fact played into the "conservative and disciplinary functions" of humour and in its own small way reinforced the "serious world" of ultimately male "power" (2005, p. 212).

Once we push past the startlingly minimal nature of its formal construction this emerges as another example of nihilistic animation that nostalgically longed for a non-specific world no longer in existence, all whilst balancing the requirements necessary to negotiate the mainstream television landscape. As in *Monkey Dust*, rebellion is expressed through scepticism about systems, but any promise of the radical is contained within the formal, as per any postmodern text. The role of structure is reinforced through the deviant nature of the characters and, despite their defiance, through their eventual ultimate compliance in that process. In showing us the unacceptable we are constantly supplied with a clear picture of the acceptable, from whatever gendered position

that may assume. Continuing this discussion of how foundation concepts within society are discussed within mainstream animation, for the final chapter I will return to the sitcom once more and look at an overarching narrative that details how 'authority' is dealt with within UK comedy animation.

## Endnotes – Chapter Four

1. Allen commissioned *Modern Toss* after viewing the fifteen-minute show reel supplied by animation company 12foot6. This led directly to the half-hour pilot and then to the first series of six episodes, broadcast the following summer on 11 July, 2005 at an 11pm slot (T. Mortimer, personal communication, January 8, 2007).
2. *Viz*'s animation output included three short-lived animated series shown on Channel Four at the height of its popularity. *Billy the Fish* was released in 1990 (directed by Steve Roberts) and *Roger Mellie – The Man on the Telly* (directed by Tony Barnes) and *The Fat Slags* (directed by Gary Kachelhoffer and Martin Pullen), both for Wizard Animation in 1991. Their lack of ratings prominence saw them demoted to the sell-through VHS market almost immediately.
3. Shrigley's work was animated in a one-off specially commissioned *Animate!* short called *Who I Am and What I Want* (2005), that highlighted similarities between his work and *Modern Toss*. Shrigley also uses a multi-media platform to promote his work and appears to address similar themes to Link and Bunnage, yet comes more from an artistic sphere and appears to be have been classed by critics accordingly (Gatti, 2009, paras 12-20).

## Chapter Five

### **‘Touching cloth...’: Nostalgic satire and the Third Wave.**

#### *Introduction*

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the developments within mainstream British television animation at the turn of this century can be illustrated by several characteristics. These animations were a collection of mainstream broadcast works that were narrative-driven comedies, reactive to the postmodern cultural condition and that used the animation medium to construct a portrait of British attitudes. These were works which demonstrated a particular set of emphases that British TV animation embodied at the turn of the century, that responded to the network successes of *The Simpsons* and *South Park* and which demonstrated mainstream animation’s elevation to the status of credible comedy programming.

Third Wave Animation was humorous animation that benefited from the medium’s promotion from the sidelines towards a middle-ground acceptability. But in this alliance with confrontation, as a device, Third Wave Animation, in

truth, exhibited a strangely contradictory impulse at its core. Evidently in thrall to US shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, which had shown what could be achieved in this medium in terms of ratings and cultural importance, these UK TV shows functioned within a marketplace appreciably altered by deregulation which overtly courted the mainstream. So despite these texts' supposedly challenging nature, these were narratives that were actually constructed with an eye towards accessibility and with an aim to achieve a more centralised position within network schedules.

In further response to the massive influence of US animated comedies, broadly speaking these animations were satirical in intent. *Modern Toss* (C4 2005-2008) and *Monkey Dust* (BBC 2003-2005) were key examples here of shows that were concerned with societal attitudes that comedically assessed the gap between aspiration and reality, 'what is' and 'what should be'. This embrace of satire arguably also extended even to the gentler registers of televisual and on-line advertising shorts, *Creature Discomforts* (2007-2008), which even their abbreviated nature and in a gentle, compressed and generally positivist narrative, highlighted "the moral distinction between the ideal and the real... the contrast between reality and the ideal... the real as imperfection is opposed to the ideal, considered as the highest reality" (Davis, 1993, p. 101). As this is a thesis that foregrounds comedy's role within this development within British animation, it is important at this point to assess the (re)emergence of satire as a mode within mainstream television in the UK *and* the US. If anything satire is the glue, the primary comic mode that dominates this entire moment. Satire's ubiquity here not only tells us about our surrounding culture but also our

relationship to it. In its placement within mainstream animation and live-action TV comedy, satire reveals attitudes towards politics, the environment, social interaction, history and indeed appears as a useful dialogue through which to critique authority itself. At its heart, satire is usually an assessment of the failures of power structures, socially and morally. What is of interest here is the deployment and conjoining of satire, animation and comedy. For the registers of satire at work here are also revelatory of a postmodern impulse that drives this particular moment within television culture, and in this chapter I will highlight how this phenomenon ties into foundation ideas within the thesis itself.

So far I have focused on sociological and representational discourse, but here I will be shifting the debate to address a more over-arching narrative and will be focusing on how Third Wave Animation dealt with social institutions. We have touched briefly on the notion of faith as a defining aspect of identity construction within Chapter Three, but here, and by using the Catholic Church as an example, I will examine how comedy and animation's approach to organised religion served as a barometer for broader cultural attitudes towards tradition, hierarchy and authority. A prime illustration of how this occurs can be located within the BBC TV animated show, *Popetown* (2005). This is a very useful vehicle to measure just how writers, performers and animators managed comic archetypes, set within very self-conscious narrative registers and against specific industrial requirements.

*Popetown* indicated some of the complexities that encapsulated what Third Wave Animation became by the middle of the first decade of the 21st century. Notably also it is an animated, satirical text that has become defined in retrospect mainly through narratives of failure. For not only did the show never adequately exploit the freedoms afforded to its form as a political commentary, its lack of critical, financial and ratings success meant that *Popetown* has since become significant through its role in effectively drawing to a close a period of institutional support for animation within British mainstream television. In truth, the show's £2 million budget concluded a run of poorly-rated, expensive, high-profile animation investments for the BBC and Channel Four (Bates, 2005, para 5). High-profile animations like *Monkey Dust*, which peaked on BBC 3's opening night and rarely extended beyond 73,000 viewers after that, and *I Am Not an Animal* (2005), also failing to connect with large audiences despite its confident placement in a 10pm Monday night BBC 2 slot, promised much but delivered very little ("Little Britain is a big hit for BBC3", 2004, para 1). The likes of *Bromwell High* (2005) and *Modern Toss*, both for Channel Four, also suffered from poor ratings and then latterly, as a result of this, a lack of institutional support. Although animation requires the same kind of network support that is often extended to live-action comedy, institutional patience can be surrendered due to the comparably higher labour costs per episode. *Popetown*'s inability, once released in the European markets, to reach even moderate ratings success subsequently called into question the BBC's public service funding policies. This issue suggested larger implications as the show's costs inadvertently played a role in the mid-decade revision of the beleaguered BBC 3 channel.<sup>1</sup>

All of this makes *Popetown* exactly the kind of text worthy of study here. This moment provides a logical boundary point for the thesis itself, as *Popetown* is a show that historically bookends an era that began in 1997 with shows like *Bob and Margaret*, *Pond Life* and *Crapston Villas*. It symbolises the ending of a time of great, arguably unrealised, potential for the UK TV medium but it also embodies the very essence of Third Wave Animation itself, as deliberately contentious, expedient and ultimately nostalgic work. It is these particular issues that I will be exploring in the chapter here. But before I analyse *Popetown* in depth, I will dissect the interplay between American and British comic television animation that profoundly informs the show itself. I will also reveal the show's self-conscious links to not only satirical, but also broader comedic live-action and animated religious traditions, and also how the replaying of these said much about the way social critique itself was managed within the narrative. It is imperative to highlight the inventory of influences on *Popetown* here, as it brought together a mass of cultural texts that undoubtedly informed its very constitution. I will also be considering how and why nostalgia is reframed here as a primary determinant within animation and comedy.

### ***The sum of its parts***

*Popetown* traded on commonly held views of the Catholic Church as circulated within the global media. This meant reiterating collective cultural narratives that revolved around Catholicism being cast as among the last of all the major

religious systems to adapt to modernity and, in its many forms, being shaped as among the most seemingly oppressive faith systems functioning within Western society. Media perceptions around the Roman Catholic Church's views on same-sex marriage, abortion, on monasticism and gender had, through accretion, taken on a folkloric dimension and in effect had begun to usurp lay perceptions of the Church. These types of cultural stories have prioritised a view of Catholicism which had also been compounded by a continuous drip-feed of press stories that focused on dialogues of exclusion, power abuse and corruption. All of this undermining of the Church's doctrine of direct communion with God has reinforced an uncomfortable image of a system bound to the divine yet endemically in service of earthly – male – desires and foibles. The Catholic Church's engagements with popular morality and culture have been further exacerbated, in recent years, by the appointment of a more politically fundamentalist Pope, Benedict XVI, in 2005 as a gesture of consolidation towards the hierarchies of the Church itself (Bruni & Burkett, 2002, pp.18-65). *Popetown* traded on this high profile reassertion of the doctrines of Papal infallibility and it also registered an institution that, in media and lay terms, appeared to have been destabilised by liberalism and criticism from outside forces.

As a comic incarnation of these cultural perceptions, the fictional city of Popetown itself operated within the show as a secure, self-governing haven that inevitably suggested obvious parallels with Rome. However the narratives explicitly insisted from the beginning that Popetown existed in an unspecified country. Throughout all ten of the episodes it was made evident, continually,

that this place was not Italy *or* Britain. It was detailed as a fiscally self-sufficient city devoted to organised religion that had an airport, a hospital, a shopping centre, parks, libraries and its own media network. Ultimately Popetown was a metaphorical space. It could allude to a religious citadel as equally as it could be a symbolic referent for everyday contemporary society. This was notably a place where debates around religious pluralism were never explicitly addressed, since Popetown curiously and contradictorily never referred to itself as being a specifically *Catholic* environment. Instead, the show made full use of Catholicism's familiar cultural totems, i.e. the structures, the recognisable hierarchies associated with the religion and the uniforms of the figureheads, priests, bishops and nuns, which were all recognizable as undeniably Catholic, or at the very least, Christian. This meant that, along with the obvious citation of the title itself, this variety of images was now embedded within the media and was the kind of iconography defined by Hoover as a "symbolic inventory of archetypes" (2006, p. 66). However the show ignored more ambiguous, yet still vital and openly practised rituals such as confession or transubstantiation to incorporate more outmoded ones like exorcism. This choice was made merely to reinforce the repressive nature of the regime, something confirmed in the show's fifth episode, 'Possessed' (Fuhrer and Dubernet, 2005), which featured that very idea as a vehicle to discuss issues of containment, and it says much about the manner in which the show used images from Catholicism. An explicit affiliation to Catholicism is only revealed through comparison in the finale of Episode Three, 'Trapped' (Bachman, 2005), where the denomination of Popetown is revealed, due to the political machinations of its authority figures,

to be a laughing stock within the opposing media outlets, “Muslim TV” and “Buddhism TV”.

This inconsistent approach undoubtedly informed the show’s failure to connect with global audiences. Catholicism was here deployed as an easily-assimilated narrative, but the lack of intensity within the distant, fragmented critique itself did suggest problems. This was a religious system now functioning more as an all-purpose symbol of repressive hierarchy rather a specific attack on a contemporary issue of the time related to Catholicism per se.

*Popetown*’s position within a more expansive production climate played a part here. Back in 1999 Dan Maddicott, Controller of United Productions, had insisted that a shift towards international creative and industrial partnerships – and thus broader, less culturally-specific narratives – would inevitably be the future of television animation (“Animation - Toon planning”, 1999, para 2). Certainly at the turn of the century, a brace of European/American/Canadian joint productions aimed more at international markets, such as United, PBS, Teletoon and Nelvana’s fantasy series *Redwall* (1999) and Itel and Cosgrove’s co-production of *Kid Clones in Space* (1999) for France’s TF1, emerged, which all spoke of a desire to access lucrative markets, syndication possibilities and franchise potential. Earlier titled *Popeman* in the 2001 preliminary casting sessions, it was funded by the BBC for an originally projected 26 episodes, as a joint BBC 3/Channel X/Moi J’aime production. Initially its publicity traded on the reputations of a spread of international UK entertainment names like Bob

Mortimer and Matt Lucas, alongside US ex-pats Ruby Wax and Jerry Hall.

*Popetown* appeared as a logical extension of this culture entirely (Poole, 2000, para 2).

This sense of internationalism extended to the creative team. The show was conceived and executive produced by American Phil Ox, with Heather Hampson, an ex-journalist and in collusion with two French writers from comedy sitcom traditions, Eric Fuhrer and Isabelle Dubernet. They had previously collaborated on the live-action Nickelodeon sitcom, *Genie in the House*, an enterprise which manifested Ox's desire to tap into the American market and to serve the international marketplace ("Channel X Moves into Toons", 2000, para 2; Bates, 2005, paras 5-6). All three writers were conversant in the demands of not only network television but also in the ways to pitch comedic, mainstream narratives and negotiate global tastes. As a result of this intent *Popetown* offers a hybrid of national flavours, one further muddled, in an attempt to sharpen the writing up for UK audiences, by the input from British script editors and voice actors Kevin Eldon and McKenzie Crook. The end result of this arrangement was that the show's adherence to broad stereotypes and non-culturally specific storylines saw the pitch of the narratives slip between an uneasy blend of British, French and American comic traditions. This in turn eventually led to the collapse of the show's undoubted ambitions. Once the then-Controller of BBC 3, Stuart Murphy, confirmed in the press that *Popetown* would not be broadcast on editorial grounds for the planned September 2004 schedule, and neither would it be released on DVD in the UK, with any consolidation of revenue to be gained from overseas and European

DVD sales alone, then *Popetown* soon became defined as a failure. Although BBC 3 courted negative publicity from the show's inception, its withdrawal was widely believed not so much to do with wishing to cause offence but more to do with concerns about the quality of what had actually been produced.

The show had been subject to some 6,000 complaints, despite not one frame of the show having ever actually been broadcast in the UK, which subsequently prompted Murphy to announce that:

After a lot of consideration... and balancing the creative risk with the potential offence to some parts of the audience, we have decided not to transmit the programme. Despite all of the creative energy that has gone into this project and the best efforts of everyone involved, the comic impact of the delivered series does not outweigh the potential offence it will cause. It has been an extremely difficult and complex decision to make. There is a fine judgement line in comedy between the scurrilously funny and the offensive (cited in "BBC Pulls Controversial Popetown", 2004, para 3).

A chastened Alan Marke, Managing Director of Channel X, admitted that the political climate did not suit the show but also tellingly acknowledged that it was conceived, from its earliest days, to be highly contentious ("BBC Pulls Controversial Popetown", 2004, para 5).<sup>2</sup> Murphy himself provided perhaps the most disingenuous line here, when he added that "I knew when we developed the series that there was risk involved but unfortunately, once we saw the finished series, it became clear that the programme fell on the wrong side of that line" ("BBC Pulls Controversial Popetown", 2004, para 4). *Popetown's* failure

was compounded even more after troubled broadcasts in Lithuania, Germany and New Zealand, with complaints from religious groups decrying the show's lack of respect for the Catholic Church. In settling for an uneasy middle ground, the show's desire to be accepted as a universally recognisable satire actually resulted in it failing to strike a profound note of recognition in *any* market.

Certainly if satire's function is, as Stott notes, to "expose folly and vice and urge ethical and political reform through the subjection of ideas to humorous analysis... [taking] subject matter from the heart of political life or cultural anxiety, re-framing issues at an ironic distance that enables us to visit fundamental questions that have been obscured by rhetoric, personal interests, or realpolitik", then *Popetown*'s blandness and non-specificity ultimately hindered its effectiveness (2005, p. 109). Gray, Jones and Thompson contend that satire actually works at its best when it resonates with a particular time and condition (2009, p. 25). If it is at its most potent when the reader/audience shares a clear conception of what a civilised world is, then arguably the conception of that world has to be clear and recognisable enough to begin with. When, as with *Popetown*, the metaphor was not as distinct as it could have been and when the critique was diluted to appeal to the broadest possible range of disparate cultures then the resulting message inevitably could not help be compromised as a result.

### ***Religious imagery***

*Popetown* was granted a sense of permission through the advances made by shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. In terms of pitch, tone, lineage and intent, there was certainly a solid enough clue within its pre-broadcast sales hook, where the show's makers described *Popetown* as “*Father Ted* meets *South Park*” (Taylor, 2009, para 11). In this statement alone it was now readily apparent that by 2005 the distinctions between animation and live-action, as credible mainstream entertainments, had eroded considerably. *Popetown*'s conception and promotion are evidence that any hierarchies of taste relating to the lowly cultural position of animated texts over live-action comic shows had now all but receded. This in itself identifies the show as a postmodern text, not just in its status as an artefact but also through its desire to access a compendium of religious comedy and animation iconography and traditions. Hall says of the postmodern condition that “it doesn't mean deserting the terrain but rather, using it as one's reference point”, with this acknowledgement of contemporary culture not being so much cast as a break from the past but more as a continuation and an acceleration of it (1986, pp. 58-59).

The citation of Hat Trick's *Father Ted* (1995-1998), which was broadcast on Channel Four, is of great importance as this show functions as a vital point of reference within this thesis and in British TV comedy. This was a live-action sitcom that worked from an Irish creative block, that discussed the Catholic Church from a more absurdist position and worked on the assumption that repression was open knowledge within Irish culture.<sup>3</sup> But this was merely one

small part of a massive inventory of influences. For along with animated history, *Popetown* cited both popular live-action film and television comedy in its evocation of a long history of misguided clerics, manipulators and ecclesiastical hypocrites. *Popetown*'s hapless Father Nicholas, voiced by comedian Bob Mortimer, traded on a history of the comedy clergyman. That this construct was revived so knowingly in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) was unsurprising – that film also looked back to a rich cultural history of satellite clerical figures. Certainly within television the comic priest had enjoyed a visibility within the likes of *Dad's Army* (BBC 1968-1979), to the sketch shows of Dave Allen (BBC 1964-1990) and *The Dick Emery Show* (BBC 1963-1981), and in primetime vehicles like *All Gas and Gaiters* (BBC 1966-1971) and its spin-off, *Oh Brother* (BBC 1968-1970), through to *The Vicar of Dibley* (BBC 1994-2007). In those latter shows the workings of the church/monastery/vicarage were often comedically posited as a microcosm for the struggles of everyday life, and they were essentially deferential views of the Church of England which negotiated the socio/cultural/political shifts of the 1960s and offered a more humanising picture of the clergy. For these shows cast their clerical protagonists as ultimately wrestling with many of the same aims as us, and – notably apart from Irish stand-up comic Allen – rarely did they set about identifying any dialogues of repression, sublimation or indeed critique its role as institution.

*Popetown* built on an ancestry of not only comedy archetypes but also a chequered animation history that has featured organised religion. In mainstream

terms, and bearing in mind the fractured production/authorship nature of the UK animation industry, up to this point engagements with religious imagery had been fairly limited. Yet narratives on race, as an indicator of the shifts in recent years in terms of demographics, multicultural concerns etc., appear curiously less ubiquitous than religion. The representations of the clergy and religious structures that *have* emerged in British animation have tended to fit into two distinct categories: ‘adaptation’ and ‘comedy and critique’. Animated clerical figures and stories about organised faith throughout the 20th century have predominantly been featured within propaganda or educational narratives that are often tied to an adaptation or an established literary source, and these are inclined to favour an historical bias. As the most prevalent sub-section which conjoins animation and religious narratives, this is also the most difficult to unpick, as information film and adaptation can often converge – existing narratives can be deployed to detail information rather than just function as entertainments – and tone and intent is varied across quite a massive range of examples.

However the most prominent examples of this typology can be found in texts like Halas and Batchelor’s US-funded 1957 film for the Lutheran Church, *The Candlemaker*, the Norman Stone live action/animation *Support Your Local Poet* (1975) and *Creation*, the “chronological view of the story of The Creation” made by children in 1976 at Whitby Secondary School (Gifford, 1987, p. 264). We can add here shorts like Bob Godfrey’s *Screen Test* five cartoon series, from 1978, the *Spare a Thought* (1979) cycle by animator Ray Bruce for Oxfam,

Christian Aid and Concord Films, and Rashad Alim's *Basics* (1983), which outlined Muslim chants correlating with hand/eye symbolism (Gifford, 1987, pp. 275, 283, 311). Lancelot Speed/E. P. Kinsella's *Old Father William* (1918), which was based on a Lewis Carroll poem, funded by the Government to promote the National War Savings Committee and was one of Paul Ward's "national interest" films, was another solid example of adaptation in this context (2003, p. 70). Other examples were the 1945 stop motion/puppet film by Sidney Gausden for E. H. W. Productions for Biblical Films, *The Good Samaritan* ("The Good Samaritan (1945)", 2008), Halas and Batchelor's 1953 version of Edward Lear's *The Owl and the Pussycat*, Edward and Elizabeth Odling's limited animation take on Robert Burns's 1785 poem *Holy Willie's Prayer* (1961), and Sue Tee's *The Vision* (1981), which reworked Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* into a modern framework for the Church Army (Gifford, 1987, pp. 611, 694, 1137). These narratives all presented either vicars, clerics or a religious/spiritual emphasis that extended from established sources.

My second typology of animation is where *Popetown* resides: 'Comedy and Critique'. Arguably the early Anson Dyer parodies, *Romeo and Juliette*, *Ophelia* and *Amlet*, based on Shakespeare texts between 1919 and 1920 for Hepworth Productions, fit into this category, and this impulse is continued as part of Terry Gilliam's cut-up animations throughout his *Monty Python's Flying Circus* television and film career (Gifford, 1987, pp. 203, 205, 204). Gilliam's penchant for airborne cardinals and nun figures placed into incongruous contexts culminated in the manifestation of an on-screen grumpy God figure, animated for the 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, although to a

lesser degree within the 1979 release, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. After this moment the questioning of religious authority extended into more bitter registers within UK independent animation and away from the mainstream, located in the work of directors such as Phil Mulloy, in his 1994-1996 *Ten Commandments* series.

But it was through the re-emergence of the comedy vicar construct within Nick Park's feature-length *Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (2005) that a tacit sense of critique about the fallibility of authority appeared as a culturally embedded component within this figure. It was in this animated context where we were also reminded, once more, of this totem's status as a perennial across British culture. American animator David Hand certainly recognised the capital of the foolish cleric as an essentially British icon when he cast this folk figure, in this case the politically compromised Vicar of Bray, in his *Musical Paintbox* series for British Gaumont in 1948. Hand knowingly placed him alongside the Henley Regatta and the playing fields of Eton in a bid to create a definitive picture of Southern England (Gifford, 1987, p. 142). Certainly links between religion, spirituality and irreverence have, as Berger notes, flourished continually within Western comedic texts. He sees this as a necessary, healthy component for any civilised engagement with all matters spiritual and as a vital part of any search for freedom, wisdom and self-knowledge. Berger argues that the "debunking of all pretensions of grandeur", conjoined with narratives of folly and absurdity, symbolised humanity's coming to terms with the nature of its own weaknesses and inability to conceive of, and attain, divinity (1997, p. 43).

In British comedy terms, which *Popetown* self-consciously quoted and continued, critique has often focused more on the structures of religion rather than faith itself. This was a factor encapsulated by the devious monk morphing into a devil, a central figure within Halas and Batchelor's condemnation of the conjoining of commerce, technology and entertainment in *The History of Cinema* (1956). This comment on the individual's expedient relationship to the structures of authority appears later on in *Popetown* and it is here also allied to a Swiftian satirical discourse of greed and fallibility. Moreover, as Mullan notes, although "ludicrous clergymen" (2005, paras 5-19) have thrived from the Simon Martext character in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1623) onwards, this comic type has mainly operated as a response to orthodoxies. Yet the flawed vicar was perhaps most potently shaped within Swift's *A Tale of Tub* (1704), and *Popetown*'s mediation on the frailties of authority and the Church's lack of connection with society shared a Swiftian emphasis, one that drew its clergymen as pragmatists, vulgarists and equally driven by selfish needs held in check by propriety (Bywaters, 1996, p. 580), and suggested that the "shell of the pulpit" provided sanctuary and protection along with containment (Korkowski, 1975, p. 395).

*Popetown*'s central character conformed to this trope. Father Nicholas was, like Swift's figure, lazy, ineffectual and self-serving. However his ambition lacked dynamism and an aim. His lack of competence and discipline undermined him from week to week. This construct highlights the central comedy mechanism of

repressed need, a component that provokes a fundamental response of superiority. Freud argues: “A person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones” (1973, p. 195). Certainly the cleric figure essays similar negative aspects of our own behaviour in what can also be seen as an extension of the comic fool tradition. Charney reinforces that delusional characters are deemed as an essential for comedy. He sees that pretence is to be rewarded with humiliation and exposure in that “comedy tends to be deflationary, as the various pretenders are assessed at their true value and put in their place” (1978, p. 62). Add such a construct to the structures of power, authority and influence and the comedy thus deepens. Through focusing on professionals who share “a preoccupation with jargon and technicalities of a profession to the exclusion of its substance”, Charney concludes that “The comic rule is: the more abstract, the more mummified, the better” (p. 66).

The Cardinals, Father Nicholas, Sister Marie and the dysfunctional Pope figure himself were part of a history of comic images un-tethered from original contexts, combined, reconstituted and replayed in narratives which have dispensed with modernist conceptions of linearity. *Popetown*'s relationship to nostalgia, which backgrounds all of the texts that can be defined as Third Wave Animations, is no less intense a dialogue, as it appeared here, but this has to be slightly refined. This was another animated comedy that used the freedoms of the contemporary condition to speak more of the past.

As stated in Chapter Three, Jameson saw nostalgia as a cultural mood, as an inevitable constituent element of the postmodern condition. Casting nostalgia from a regressive position, he stated that it performed the function of a remedy for our contemporary cultural confusion. This demonstrates itself through what he refers to as a “nostalgic pathos” for lost modernist narratives (1991, p. 156). As conceptions and cultural responses to the past have now shifted irrevocably away from modernist notions of order and totality, it would seem that nostalgia points to our own sense of loss and disconnection. Regarding *Popetown*, this appeared an entirely apposite definition. It is a show that allies itself to pastiche and parody, the very symptoms of Jameson’s descriptive appropriation from Lacan of the term “schizophrenia” (1991, p. 26). Such texts, Jameson sees, are unable to fully reproduce the past or indeed account for our own lives with any meaning in a culture defined by temporal incompleteness and non-specificity. Certainly *Popetown* was constructed more through vague cultural impressions, rather than through the adherence to any precise geographical, political and temporal location. Along with the unique formal removal that animation supplies this approach was further compounded by a sense of postmodern disconnection and quotation.

Sprengler sees that nostalgia has also become embedded within the lexicon of the market place, and certainly narratives of “acquisition, consumption and possession” are writ large within *Popetown*’s industrial, creative and formal make-up (2009, p. 34). Nostalgia’s role within commerce does not mean that a critical dimension to “better understand the nature, function and uses of a collective past” is entirely absent within postmodern texts, but the surface

manner by which animation and comedy history are posited here alongside the manner by which satire is deployed reflects on the veracity of the commentary (Sprengler, 2009, p. 33). The regressive nature of nostalgia reflected back onto, and highlighted, *Popetown*'s own innate conservatism. Its desire for more certain times played out not just in its use of iconography but, as we'll see later, within the engagement with its key themes. Despite its international base, the writing, performance and design emphasis ensures that *Popetown* was an amalgam of British comedy, modes and memories and it replayed and repeated, in a very Jamesonian sense, these cultural images and narratives in a fashion that stripped away depth and meaning, yet still it inferred that this was a specifically satirical, rather than critical, cultural comment on social institutions.

### *Animated satire*

Satire itself, as a mode, figures equally in this flattening-out process.

*Popetown*'s pre-release publicity implied that it was to be an acerbic commentary on the Catholic Church, but in execution the show settled for broadsides that were less aimed against any specific institution and were more a commentary on the corrupt nature of organisations and on hierarchies as an anathema to the individual. This exemplified a contemporary degradation of the term satire itself that, in actuality, spoke of a more individualist reaction to authority. Like common conceptions around formal schools of art practice such as Surrealism and Expressionism, satire's incorporation into mainstream comedy and animation has, through familiarity and ubiquity, become a

somewhat corrupted term. This was reinforced in a cogent point made by *Monkey Dust* producer/writer Harry Thompson when he stated that, quite simply, within the UK TV landscape, “Satire is now an industry” (cited by Carpenter, 2000, p. 331). This is confirmed by *TW3* writer John Bird’s point that “Satire’s... success or failure is determined by the market. Everything is a branch of comedy now. Everybody is a comedian. Everything is subversive”, pointing towards the ironic media-saturated culture it now functions within (cited by Carpenter, 2000, p. 332). Certainly satire’s shift from its high-brow literary origins to being central within mass entertainment suggests a concurrence with the breakdowns of hierarchies that typifies postmodern culture. The cultural condition’s coterminous relationship with commerce has ensured a re-shaping of its make-up.

Ward notes that British animation has maintained an ongoing dalliance with satire. He isolates its pivotal role within early 20th century UK propaganda shorts that fore-grounded comic messages promoting “Nation” and “Patriotism” (2003, p. 65). In mainstream UK television terms, animated satire extended into the public consciousness most notably with Fluck and Law’s puppet show *Spitting Image* (ITV 1984-1996). This had the cachet of being separate from most 1980s mainstream sitcoms and sketch shows, mainly due to its links back to a type of British TV satire that was embodied within series such as BBC’s 1962/1963 *TW3*. *Spitting Image* continued that uneasy blend of countercultural and Oxbridge establishment values, and it also traded on the freedoms achieved by the Alternative Comedy movement of the late 1970s/early 1980s.

In actuality, Alternative Comedy was less concerned with challenging political issues *directly* than it was detonating light entertainment performance modes and supposedly fixed gender and race discourses. Thus the novelty of *Spitting Image*'s animated form, fused with a notable Leftist political slant, became a template for what was to follow. The show prioritised personalised attack over political policy and, as effective as it could be, it always appeared highly compromised in its need to ensure maximum audience inclusivity. Co-creator Roger Law admitted that too often *Spitting Image*'s original highly political approach soon became sacrificed to investigations of celebrity culture and that much of the subsequent commentary in the series became reduced to the level of toilet humour. He makes this explicit when citing the reportage on America's bombing of Libya from British airbases in a 1985 skit, which featured Margaret Thatcher cast as a dog being requested by an addled Ronald Reagan to simply "lick his bottom" (cited by Carpenter, 2000, pp. 329-330). The intensity of the satire became eroded by the demands of meeting the widest audience possible and this dilution has continued within the show's descendants, in the political blankness of the Flash-animated *2D-TV* (ITV 2001-2004) and the sweeping, often imprecise, critique of New Labour that informs Thompson and Pye's *Monkey Dust*. Notably the incredibly similar *Headcases* (ITV 2008) learned its lessons from the ratings failure of *2D-TV* as it dispensed with political comment entirely and focused more on attacks on celebrity.

That *Popetown* cast itself as satire says a great deal about the television culture in which it functioned. As the 20th century turned into the 21st, satire had become one of the most prevalent modes of humour on mainstream television, and this was aided through its connection with animated sitcom. This kind of transmutation is not uncommon within popular culture. Neale suggests that genres and narratives have always reconstituted themselves and used various pleasures in different balances to suit the needs of their time (1981, p. 6-16). *The Simpsons* (1989-to date) presented a notably different kind of critique and commentary that spoke as much as a broader cultural, rather than a socio/political, discourse. This show, along with particularly *South Park* (1997-to date), took full advantage of the greater societal freedoms afforded to it. Both shows appeared to have been granted a permission to make barbed critical statements in a way that would have been untenable previously within US network TV.

Animation was able to attack the societal institution of the Church directly in a way hitherto denied live-action comedy. This was aided by two factors. The first concerned the very nature of animation itself, as the medium appears to have an advantage over live-action comedy when approaching any critique – cultural, political, social etc. – through its acceptable distance from live-action conventions. This formal separation is able to licence the author to make more contentious statements. Wells states that subversive work can be cloaked due to prevailing populist perceptions about animation, and any caustic disposition and intent can be submerged behind the “unambiguous” visceral pleasures often associated with it (1998, p. 6). For, historically, animation has been seen within

mainstream contexts as a facile, children's form. As a result of this misconception, the animated text is seemingly endowed with the potential to work through potentially difficult subject matter. Taking these ideas further then, not only does animation have the capability to illustrate complex ideas through design, diagrammatical, impressionistic and symbological means, but also the process of critique itself is protected by these conditions. Animation appears afforded a free pass as it dilutes the shock of confrontation.

This has benefited US TV animation entirely. American animated sitcoms exerted a profound influence here on UK forms like *Popetown*, and despite the US bias of their narratives both *The Simpsons* and *South Park* have both become fixtures on British network television. *The Simpsons* certainly made full use of the protective space granted to it from powerful establishment-based critics, as Booker suggests, through its prominence as a Fox Network product and its now-unshakeable status as a cultural institution (2006, p. 66). In Groening's show, satire was applied more through parody and was though, ultimately, deferential to an establishment stability (Gray, Jones and Thompson, 2009, p. 25). Where *The Simpsons* broke new ground was especially in its approach to authority and religion, and this undoubtedly pointed the way forward to *Popetown*. Its dialogues on organised religion were fed through the Reverend Lovejoy construct, across numerous examples such as the 1992 'Homer the Heretic', 'Bart Sells his Soul' (1995), 'Lisa the Skeptic' (1997) and 'Simpsons Bible Stories' (1999), which all examined sensitive topics relating to faith. Thus disillusionment, expediency, partisanship, cynicism and un-nuanced devotion, across all aspects of the modern Church, have been highlighted as now-

appropriate comedic subject matter within a primetime animated sitcom. This tonal and thematic shift within mainstream animation continued within *South Park*. However, *South Park*'s choice of tactics, which set out a more overtly provocative agenda, was to cast itself as an "equal opportunity offender" (Matt Stone cited by Davis, 2009, para 8). The writing on the show had been specifically developed to emphasise contemporary news stories, in keeping with traditional satirical practice, and Parker and Stone also used this approach to maintain a sense of differentiation within their stories of small-town moralities from similar territory located within *The Simpsons*.

Johnson-Woods notes that dialogues of scepticism are themes endemic to *South Park*'s make-up. Parker and Stone's show tended to fix on conceptions of multi-denominational organised religion as weighed against their status within society, casting them as corporate entities, brainwashing institutions or as outdated secret societies (2007, p. 228). Using *South Park*'s consistent attacks on the Mormon faith as an example, such as the November 2003 show, 'All About the Mormons', Booker hits on a key point about the show, when he states that much of *South Park*'s commentary on religion worked from a "radically individualist and anti-authoritarian" libertarian basis that consistently favoured people over systems (Booker, 2006, p. 153).<sup>4</sup>

The second factor that facilitated this shift returns us to the postmodern debate once more. Certainly shows like *Popetown* were built on the success of those two moments but these were granted a kind of cultural permission due to an

important cultural transition. As previous live-action and animated models were deferential and gentle, here the address was now more acerbic, diffident and deliberately confrontational. Habermas insisted that a profound issue, resulting from the postmodern dissolving of the metanarratives and in our subsequently ironic, distant cynicism towards the previously regarded certainties of family, law, state etc., was that society's relationship to authority itself had thus unravelled accordingly. He argued that the role of religion and tradition was imperative, as binding narratives to integrate "the social and the cultural" (cited by Denzin, 1992, p. 49). In Western media circles postmodern cynicism and irony have thus destabilised these previously held societal certainties. From this Hoover notes that the postmodern fragmentation of the media terrain itself has also contributed to spiritual narratives becoming reconceptualised and filtered into a more fractured 'niche' landscape (2006). Denzin acknowledges that our current cultural condition's very nature is founded on a more subjective, personalised engagement with history, morality and belief. Indeed, as the notion of "grand systems" cast through conceptions of "totality" recedes today, a more individual response becomes the dominant trend in these times (1991, p. 27). Thus Hoover sees that, as a result of this shift around metanarratives, religion itself has become less the institutional concern it once was and has now become more of an individualist one, it is less about worship and more about "seeking" (2006, p. 52). Leaning on Giddens's definitions of the fragmented, subjective nature of the post-industrial identity that were highlighted in Chapter Three, Hoover also states:

...whereas we once might have looked to a network of social relations in home, school, community, church or family to provide resources necessary to the making of ‘ourselves’, today we think of this as much more our own responsibility... it is all about the self; that it results from self-conscious autonomous action on the part of individuals, and that it is inherently distrustful of received clerical or institutional authority (2006, p. 52).

This dilution of the monolithic institutional nature of religion certainly aids the removal of boundaries around particular subject matters within the media that might be sensitive to the Church. With the kind of blanket authority commonly associated with religion now reduced, then organised faith’s role and power has accordingly also fragmented just enough to allow a more acerbic register to function freely and generally untrammelled within mainstream comedy. As the Church’s powers to act on offence are accordingly reduced, contemporary media is now more freed up to address narratives hitherto regarded as off limits. As a result the registers of satire prevalent within popular culture now also reflect a more personalised, individualist emphasis.

### *Nostalgic spaces within Popetown*

Animated satire’s centrality curiously appears to work counter-intuitively to the demands of mainstream television. *The Simpson* and *South Park* undermined the long-held industry perception that the mode’s inherent negativity has made it one of the least attractive propositions for particularly American television networks and audiences alike (Gray, Jones and Thompson, 2009, p. 14). They

observe that the very constitution of satire itself appears not to be compatible with the demands of mainstream live-action television, let alone as in these animated variants. Traditionally US companies have been keen to undermine the activity of channel surfing whenever possible and have ensured that programming responses are based around television's adherence to repetition, immediacy and brevity. Thus, satire has never been a humorous address that appears to complement this particular broadcast environment. Yet US programmes like Comedy Central's news-parody show *The Daily Show* (1996- to date) along with *South Park*, are not only testament to the market shifts around consumption across multi-media settings, but they have also been prime examples of how TV satire has become invigorated and how its role has been expanded in recent years. Shows like *South Park* et al appear to be performing a critical function that many perceive the mainstream press is too timid or compromised to undertake (Gray, Jones and Thompson, 2009, p. 15).

Yet all of this has to be considered within *Popetown* against this amalgamation of television comedy and mainstream animation archetypes. The loose understanding of satirical traditions in operation within the show works in collusion with a pronounced nostalgic sensibility that informs all of its narratives. This nostalgic tone extends to the demarcations of social space posited within the show itself, which were erected as critical opinions about authority but in fact existed more as proof that *Popetown* appears unable to move beyond past narratives and is too beholden to the conditions of its inception. It appeared to be celebrating aspects of this kind of authority as much as it was condemning it.

The titular city of the show was an imaginary place set within the dreamscape of an anonymous schoolboy, played in live-action opening sequences by Rhys Thomas. This character was shown in the beginning of each episode doodling on his desk, bored by his lesson in an evidently Catholic school. Here there were Swiftian echoes evident in this sense of “cognitive dissonance”, which is a significant formal consideration highlighted within the cornerstone 1729 text, *A Modest Proposal* (Stott, 2005, p. 113). That particular piece, like *Popetown*, is detailed through the mechanism of a third person narrative which compounds an ironic distance and, as a carefully placed conceit, usefully positions Swift’s narrator as the object of derision. That particular distancing device allowed for the smuggling of the unacceptable – for Swift, the cooking and eating of Irish children, for *Popetown* the criminality, hypocrisies and incompetence of the Church – into what appears to be a seemingly sane register of address. The narrator/guide figure within Swift’s work presents himself as a figure of control, one whose status is later discredited within the body of the prose by a deeper “more powerful covert point of view”, and through the ludicrous statements of the character himself (Smith, 1968, p. 144). This is replicated here in a typically fractured postmodern manner. Here, this ironic device is translated to *Popetown* more as more a quotation of style. For as we travelled into the drawings of this schoolboy at the start of each episode this then propelled us into a universe of caricatures which suggested that what we were going to be watching was not to be held as any direct index of actual contemporary figures, but in fact more a highly subjective, flawed, impressionistic and wilfully-naive fantasy view of the Church. This gesture added a protective buffer, a removal from any potential

controversy and it also went some way towards explaining the colourful aesthetic that dominated the show, the pronounced emphasis on scatology as a comic preoccupation and the shrill humorous register throughout. It also highlighted a Juvenalian wry detachment, in that, as with Swift and also with the creators of *Popetown*, it is assumed that we, the civilised viewer, will naturally seek to undermine and understand our relationship to this world with our own self-knowledge and as informed by our own, more acceptable moral framework.

A sense of nostalgic retreat defined the nature of the show itself. Indeed it is noteworthy that actor Ben Miller essayed the comic priest construct so knowingly, note for note, as he led the lessons in each introduction. This, again, reinforced the show's position as more citation than satire. The comic clergyman appeared here as exactly the kind of comic, ossified professional described by Charney (1978). Miller's un-named priest character was over-eager to please, somewhat naive, distracted, self-absorbed and lacked connection, all the while displaying the prerequisite characteristic awkwardness and inappropriate relationship to popular culture that typified this model. This was revealed when thanking children in Episode Four for his "bling" (Dubernet, 2005) and in Episode Three urging children in the middle of an unexplained "chair avalanche" that a sing-song from the controversial and provocative heavy metal band Slipknot "is in order" (Ox, 2005).

The bland nature of the designs for all of the characters, almost interchangeable in articulation and execution, are so unremarkable in themselves as to almost suggest a compilation of half-remembered children's television animation designs from British, American and European contexts from over the past forty years. The animation was completed from the *Moi J'aime* production side with a French team of freelance craftsmen under Christian Bordes's supervision. Although there is little real attempt to render *Popetown* particularly unique in aesthetic terms, these designs undoubtedly complemented a regressive reading of the show. This approach refuted *South Park*'s more unique figurative mode, whereby depthless, cut-out, flat figures glided across the screen in a monoplanal fashion to signal a more difficult tonal territory and thus use form to infer a more definite "alternative" agenda (Furniss, 1998, p. 77). The contemporary trend within many animations at the latter part of the first decade of the 21st century prevailed here, whereby highly detailed three dimensional computer graphics were used to depict concrete walls, interiors, corridors, outside environs et al. This built on formal traditions established within the ballroom sequence in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and also as used in a more subversive, poetic fashion within Chomet's *Les Triplettes de Belleville* (2003). This was contrasted with the traditional "squash-and-stretch" approach that was reserved for the main two dimensional, cel-animated figures (Furniss, 1998, p. 77). This is the popular figurative aesthetic of choice when outlining the humorous effect of weight and gravity on the animated body. But this formal demarcation between the continuous and the malleable is actually vital in reinforcing the larger themes of the show itself. This formal schism aids the concept of the Church as monolith. The adding of a third dimension to the

buildings and background highlighted the prominence of the institution and hinted about the immovable nature of hierarchy and, subsequently, the transience of the characters themselves. It was authority and power that ultimately prevailed here.

This emphasis on location was complemented by the sweeping pan in each of the opening credit sequences through the Popetown environs. Narrative segments were linked from a 'God's-eye' perspective of the town dropping to a ground level which marks the show out as not concerned with matters of the spiritual so much as more earthly issues. The manner by which social space was foregrounded revealed more of the show's nostalgic temperament. The characters were so removed from secular society that such a fetishization of structure may well have highlighted salient points about the socialising nature of authority itself. These images also told us what functions these structures might well serve. The Church here appeared as a static emblem of power that offered fixed certainties, a socialising nostalgic commentary as a modernist reminder and contrast with our own individualist, contemporary culture of perpetual presents. As *Popetown* told its stories through a blending of distant, cross-cultural memories of comedy, satire and Catholicism, it referred to, and contradictorily in truth celebrated, a time before Hoover's conceptions of faith as component and as a subjective, revisable narrative (2006). In its own way Popetown supplied a necessary consistency to the flimsy, ill-defined characters who were unwilling, or more like unable, to embrace Hoover's universe of self-determination and who found solace within this seemingly repressive system. This reading can be taken even further as the very areas of Popetown itself

conformed to this set of nostalgic definitions. The lives of the characters and the spaces they inhabit can be conceptualised through classifications that speak of tradition, albeit cast in an ironic landscape. These are three very distinct areas that were useful in highlighting the nature of authority here but also reflected a larger dialogue within the show itself about the loss of connection that the postmodern condition invokes.

The first of these conceptions of social space within the animation was based around ideas of ‘expediency’. The characters have retreated within Popetown because it offered them a stability missing within contemporary society and this in turn also reminded us, the viewer, of a world that appears constructed from a now-lost modernist framework. ‘Expediency’ here was embodied by the, tellingly numbered rather than named, Cardinals, who were voiced by Matt Lucas, Kevin Eldon and Simon Greenhall respectively and who organised Popetown, and they could be seen as a commentary on the type of middle-management, clerical structures that provided the true power bloc within contemporary authority. These three characters conceived of the Church as an engine to feed their own personal gain. In the first episode ‘The Double’ (Dubernet, Fuhrer and Lucas, 2005), the tone was set for the entire series in that they were actively seeking to utilise the profits gained from “chemical dumping” to initiate an arms deal with a South American dictator and, at the same time, also to manipulate disabled children as an exercise in image management for the Church. From here, each *Popetown* instalment presented an almost interchangeable set-up to drive the narrative forward, whereby the Cardinals were shown attempting weekly to access the ‘world’s wealthiest’ list

over names like the Sultan of Brunei, Michael Jackson, Richard Branson and Queen Elizabeth II, among others. Indeed Cardinal One's statement in the fourth episode 'Trapped' – "we haven't got time for ethics" – could have been a mantra for the entire series (Bachman, 2004). This reveals to what extent they were happy to exploit the moral trap door open to them, perhaps via the confessional process that was hinted at but also very usefully never shown, and also through the institutional and faith-informed protection mechanism of inclusion that Spencer defines as being a founding concept within Catholicism (2012, pp. 141-143). Forgiveness in this setting is an expectation as much as it is a safety apparatus. This pragmatism could be seen as a fundamental comic incongruity that informed the show, in the conflict of a system that favours dialogues built around imagination and mysticism rather than the unethical worldly, corporeal dealings that were relentlessly detailed here (Spencer, 2012, pp. 154-158).

The second category of social space apparent within the show was that of 'unity'. Linehan and Matthew's *Father Ted* proposed that the Catholic Church was little more than a brotherhood of misfits with individual preoccupations, connected only by a dog collar. In that sitcom the main thing, as indeed here, was that the clergy tended to talk about everything *but* faith. *Popetown* was both a quotation of *Father Ted* and in many ways a continuation of that show and, indeed, it was a referent of a broader sitcom tradition which classified hierarchy as family, as suppressant and as support mechanism. The show's ties to Linehan and Matthews were striking, as social, career and familial "stasis" profoundly informed *Father Ted* as much as it did *Popetown* (Linehan cited by Thompson,

2004, p. 196). In its own way this acknowledged another aspect to the dialogue about belonging that Spencer noted as a contrast to the Protestant tendency towards fragmentation, individualisation and separation. Along with an emphasis on imagination, Catholicism also places theological emphasis on unity as a basis for social action and obligation (2012, p. 154). Here this means being a part of something larger than any individual, which then intensifies and highlights the all-encompassing divine role of community.

In *Popetown*, the assistant to the central character, Father Nicholas was Sister Marie, and she readily conformed to this ideal. She was voiced by Morwenna Banks, through a postmodern hybrid of Northern *and* Southern Irish accents that referred more to cultural memory than temporal and geographical exactitude. She was depicted formally across each episode as a series of floating circles which substituted for a feminine shape. Sister Marie was shown as engaged in constant energetic movement that continually dashed across the frame in each episode and that refuted, as befitting animation custom, the laws of physics. She was a compendium, a memory of nun figures, recollected from across numerous live-action comedy and animation contexts. Yet as a character she was not only entirely defined by her position within Popetown but she also appeared as somehow inconceivable away from it, in any meaningful fashion. In being emblematic of not only a restrictive patriarchal system, she was also a physical manifestation of the weight of her role – she was at once constrained, as she was defined by the push/pull of “communal” responsibility (Spencer, 2012, p. 142). The certainty of structure that Popetown itself offers to its inhabitants, and in

turn to its audiences, may well have been corrupt and highly flawed but even this is an ideal defined by linearity and cohesion.

Further deepening our understanding of how space is defined and separated within *Popetown*, the show and the city, is a third nostalgic category of ‘retreat’. The Papal figure placed in Father Nicholas’s charge was one of several animated depictions that had surfaced at that time. This trend included the Vatican-sanctioned bio-pic by Jose Luis Lopez-Guardia, *John Paul II: The Friend of All Humanity* (2006), and the corrupted papal figure who indexed a global network of apathy and negligence central to Hungarian director Áron Gauder’s *Nyócker! (The District!)* (2004), through to Tony Moore and Robert Kirkman’s web-based *Battle Pope* (2008), for Spike TV, derived from their own 2000 comic strip, which featured a womanising, violent, hard-drinking superhero ‘Pope’ (“Cartoon Tribute to Pope John Paul”, 2006, paras 1-2; Imrie, 2008, para 1; Manning, 2008, para 1). *This Pope*, voiced by Ruby Wax, was a curiously marginal presence within Popetown’s organisation. Devoid of accountability, this was a fractious, amoral, uncontrollable, malevolent, outwardly violent, child-like male that was maintained in an emotionally and intellectually retarded state by the Church itself.

These issues were fore-grounded within ‘The Double’ (2005), through the manipulations of the public relations-obsessed Cardinals who sought to maintain a consistent, deliberate distance between the Pope and any visitors to Popetown. He was a protected figurehead, who was revealed to the world only

through inference and fleeting glimpses. This papal figure was given no charge other than to merely exist, as his adult role had so diminished that he appeared as yet another cartoon creation that functioned as an expression of its own unchecked internal desires, free of responsibility and of moral/social propriety (Wells, 1998, pp. 154-155). *Popetown's* resident sexual deviant, Father Bosche, also encapsulated this concept, as these characters routinely conducted their affairs, no matter how improper, unchallenged by a system that continued to support and preserve them. This expressed a broad critique on the kind of protective space that Catholicism offers. But this was couched in the blandest of terms with one eye to serve the narrative's potential translation across international market boundaries. This particular narrative could have referred to any major institution, so reduced was the political debate which was sacrificed in favour of jokes about bodily functions, disabled children or acts of social impropriety by authority figures. The Cardinals' reach was seen to be flawed but inevitably complete and total. Thus, this was a space that discussed authority in the kind of monolithic terms outlined by Hoover and it was one that functioned through modernist absolutes and totalities, rather than the fragmented, fallible and compromised nature of the postmodern context (2005). On the one hand there was a postmodern cynicism in the manner by which authority is held up to be inherently flawed, on the other *Popetown* remains intact, its structures unchanging and secure in their status.

### ***Conclusion***

What emerged here was that organised religion had been co-opted into comedy discourses because of its now more disjointed, less socially-encompassing nature. In fact religion had become a prime metaphor for societal authority per se within US and, through its close associations here, UK mainstream animation. These definitions of authority were specific only in as much as they embodied the kind of disconnection, hypocrisy and repression that was continually held up as oppositional by comedians and animators and that contrasted with the individual freedoms now available within our open, Western, secular society.

Yet we must take care in assigning a greater value to the show's reputation in the wake of its withdrawal from the UK schedules, notably by the BBC itself, than it deserves. *Popetown* may well have been embroiled in the culture of intolerance that dominated the media soon after 9/11, over narratives that lampooned organised religion, but in truth its rejection by the corporation and its failure to connect with European audiences was more down to the show's compromised nature and its lack of pertinent, well-organised critique. This was another aspect of Third Wave Animation that spoke more of network expediency and accessibility than any true radicalism. *Popetown*'s interests lay more in revelling in the Child/Pope's psychotic behaviour and in mapping out boundaries of social acceptability in a post-politically correct comic landscape, rather than highlighting any specific moral or institutional concerns. Once more we have a show that failed to fully utilise animation's unique properties to really respond to the satirical gauntlet thrown down by *South Park* and *The Simpsons*.

Two major points are notable within this study. Firstly, that the manner by which satire and discussions of authority are conjoined here, spoke more about the very nature of the language of the mainstream itself and how this permeated Third Wave Animation. In a desire to emulate the controversial reputation of high-profile shows like *South Park*, this UK/French text demonstrated a less rigid and uncompromising authorial discipline, especially of the kind that Parker and Stone insist on within their Comedy Central show, in its attack on the Catholic Church. *Popetown* used the contemporary culture of sensitivity to attain publicity. *Popetown* circumnavigated solutions and it notably avoided the larger questions that were raised around the Church at the time and indeed around such institutions in general. It merely reiterated that organised religion was self-serving, patriarchal, fiscally-orientated and repressive. This statement has been a continual dialogue within both comedy and animation and in today's current climate it is as empty a proclamation as any unsubstantiated consensual scepticism expressed about the veracity of news reportage or the untrustworthiness of politicians. This is massive miscalculation, for as shows like *South Park* have ably demonstrated, not only is pointed, well-conceived issue-led satire welcomed within network television, but animation that regularly and intelligently attacks flawed structures of authority, in a direct and nuanced fashion, can actually also be commercially viable.

On the one hand this cultural climate has seen satire now fully democratised having been now shifted away from its literate, more erudite roots. On the other, *Popetown* appears to be more a quotation of an *expectation* of what a satire is. As a result satire has been copied and assimilated into the mainstream comic

grammar. The show's desire to build on notably live-action comedy past also brings me to another point, in that the nostalgic dimensions of the show rendered explicit the regressive nature of this Third Wave broadcasting moment. Nostalgia for British cultures past, for a history of comedy and animation archetypes, for a sense of experimentation and excitement attached to the possibilities of animation itself, that the Second Wave animations promised, is here in this particular text supplanted by a deeper, more embedded sense of loss, and one that simultaneously reveals the intensification and acceleration of the postmodern condition itself. The re-examination of nostalgia in this final chapter has been imperative, as previously *Monkey Dust* and *Creature Discomforts* exhibited nostalgic elements that reframed aspects of comedy and culture past to reconnect with authentic moments and to establish personal links with history. Here, that postmodernity functions as the language of consumerism is readily apparent and this also confirms Third Wave Animation as an explicit revelation of this condition.

The primary contradictions that resided within the show, that ultimately insisted that power structures offered a welcome consistency and stability yet were ripe for critique because of this intractable state, is evidence of Jameson's conceptions of history and culture at work. *Popetown* appeared as an accelerated fragment of modernity. For as Jameson says, we as subjects have lost our "capacity to actively extend [its] pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold", that we can now no longer organize the past and future into a "coherent experience", and that such a state inevitably leads to the emergence of "cultural productions" as mere "heaps of fragments", texts that reflect this

unravelling and through this need to replay and cite suggest in their make-up a longing for totality and linearity (Jameson, 1991, p. 25). This nostalgic sensibility signalled what kind of shows that networks wished to promote, as Third Wave Animation is actually really all about our relationship to both animation and comedy here operating as, bizarrely, an uncritical critique.

As we have seen so far in this thesis, nostalgia can serve both a negative *and* a positive role. Either way this phenomenon was one of the primary narrative engines of Third Wave Animation and this factor undoubtedly intensified by the latter part of this moment within British TV animation. Shows like *Bob and Margaret* that appeared as part of the beginning of the Third Wave demonstrated an alliance with a Britain of the past. This was partly as quotation and partly as a tentative step to seeing what animation can be capable of in a mainstream broadcast setting away from experimental Second Wave definitions. By the middle of the first decade of the 21st century these animations' relationship with nostalgia had become so embedded that it now appears as enmeshed within the DNA of Third Wave Animation itself. Certainly nostalgia, in this particular example of *Popetown*, seemed to suggest that radicalism was dead and that the only idyll remained in the past. As progression is blocked and subverted then critique in turn becomes contained, neutered and reduced to a momentary personalised grumble rather than offering a concerted way forward. *Popetown*'s reading of satire appeared as an admission of defeat. For the residual position now appears to be that mainstream animation can only function if it is allied to the past in a way which appears familiar or politically unchallenging. This state not only underestimated television audiences but it

also appeared as a indicator towards an impending creative dead-end. As retreat defined *Popetown* we see another show talking about the past to express dialogues about the contemporary, and in fact failing to do either. That the show, and thus Third Wave Animation, could not extend beyond an inventory of the past in a mainstream setting implied much about the culture in which it was produced and that informed it. The narratives of failure associated with *Popetown* have defined a boundary for Third Wave Animation here and supplied a jumping off point towards where Fourth Wave Animation might go, which we will examine further within my Conclusion.

## Endnotes – Chapter Five

1. *Popetown* signalled, from this point on, BBC 3's disillusionment with expensive, time consuming animated shows. This promoted a shift towards cheaper reality and lifestyle television, and more youth issue-based documentaries instead.
2. In the UK, Gledhill points out that the show had been drawn into the ambitions of the traditionalist Archbishop of Birmingham, The Most Rev Vincent Nichols, an ardent supporter of Pope Benedict XVI. His efforts to put pressure upon the BBC to withdraw *Popetown* cemented a conservative reformist agenda within the Catholic Church of the period towards the way Catholicism was being covered by the media, pointedly to impress the hierarchies at Rome. In itself, this was a massive irony considering the show's narratives concerning political expediency (Gledhill, 2007, para 11). *Popetown's* withdrawal was welcomed in a statement by The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, whose spokesman The Right Reverend Crispian Hollis, Bishop of Portsmouth, stated: "I am delighted... It was obviously going to be a controversial programme which would have caused offence, not least among the Catholic community who hold the person of the Holy Father in the highest regard and affection. Any attempt to belittle or diminish his status as the leader of the Catholic Church is totally unacceptable, and not only to Catholics" ("BBC Pulls Controversial

Popetown”, 2004, paras 10-12). This was an interesting comment as no one from the Church had actually seen the programme itself at this point.

3. Linehan and Matthews insisted that through the deployment of, often tangential, narrative diversions *Father Ted* forged intentional links with animated traditions. For as much as the show was an attempt to replicate the multiple parallel narratives and fast-paced humour of NBC’s *Seinfeld* (1989-1999), the writers also stressed the role of *The Simpsons* as a major influence on their creative sensibilities, as Linehan and Matthews inserted regular plot diversions and cutaways – which were also a feature of Ben Elton, Rik Mayall and Lise Mayer’s BBC *The Young Ones* from 1982 – that often bore little relevance to the central story and fulfilled an agenda to abolish the linear, theatrical-bound traditions of sitcom. This formal breach was made explicit through the digression offered by one of the principle players in the first episode of the series, ‘Good Luck, Father Ted’ (C4 1995). Ardal O’Hanlon’s Father Dougall character’s naivety and deluded nature was highlighted via a slow close-up into what was implied to be his interior thought process, which in turn was summated as a simplistic cycle of animated jumping rabbits. This emphasised the child-like pitch and landscape of that character’s mind. However in doing so, this gesture also broke with the supposedly fixed disposition of exterior ‘reality’, adhered to rigorously within traditional sitcom. This gesture also simultaneously then freed up *Father Ted* from the theatrical expectations associated with the form and it also indicated an alliance to the self-reflexive lineage located

within American television comedy alongside familiar animation conventions. *Father Ted* proffered a willingness to cross the boundaries of an on-screen continuum in a manner that is commonplace within animated forms (Thompson, 2004, pp. 193-210).

4. The manner by which religion has been investigated within contemporary animated comedy has also transmitted to other areas of social authority. But religion became a very fashionable topic for animators to lampoon in this more accepting climate, as Groening's other Fox animated sitcom, *Futurama* (1999-2009), had been afforded a liberty to attack rituals associated with Christianity and Scientology. This in turn has led to the ground being freed up, also, for deliberately contentious US network shows like *God, The Devil and Bob* (2000), *Family Guy* (1999-to date) and *Moral Orel* (2005-2008).

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has not been so much to construct a comprehensive list of every British TV mainstream animation between the periods specified, but its task has more been to assess what the most important touch-points were during a period of production that is defined by very particular conditions. The animations I have focused on between the specified dates have been selected on the grounds that they say much about British comic tastes, contemporary culture and attitudes throughout the period at the end of the last century and into this one. The key texts for each of these chapters have been determined through their uniqueness and their importance in demonstrating specific narratives within Third Wave Animation. This interrogation of Third Wave Animation has emerged through the research I have gathered, and by assessing the narratives around culture, authorship, creativity and industry that have emerged from both the primary and secondary material. I have also located and pieced together notable absences of image, narratives and emphases that have led me to a set of conclusions about the nature of this moment. This Third Wave era (1997-2010) was conceptualised through a subjective reading of media and television history and industry, alongside critical perceptions around animation production,

comedy and agency. The sociological categorizations which have provided this narrative have been useful, for as the Third Wave is an evolution in television animation, it is also a neglected sub-narrative within mainstream British comedy and it provides an important window into society, culture and identity through this period.

My first chapter highlighted the boundaries and definitions between each of my three 'waves'. First Wave Animation (1955-1978) may well have been all about a UK animation industry invigorated by the arrival of commercial television, but in this setting it was very apparent that not only did practitioners generally lack sufficient creative confidence, organisation and support to construct more complex narratives – and notably pitched at an explicitly adult level – but also that the British broadcast environment and popular culture itself was not especially predisposed to support such a climate. The Second Wave of production and broadcast that I see as taking place between 1979 and 1996 came as a creative response to this functional emphasis within UK TV animation. For as the 1970s moved into the 1980s, UK TV animation increasingly embraced more home-grown and European influenced animations, that made explicit an industrial and authorship model that had actually informed the First Wave and that certainly owed more to a continental conception of creativity and production than a transatlantic one. Mainstream television channels of that period began to show short texts from conventions, festivals and examples that had secured limited cinema releases which challenged image and narrative orthodoxies. This evolution also undoubtedly benefited from more favourable cultural, industrial, educational and political conditions. The next era

of animation production was less a celebration of the auteur and more of a shift towards industrial and market expediency. By the 1990s mainstream television was being increasingly determined by shifting conditions of technology, commerce, distribution, availability, access possibilities and the deregulated broadcast climate so by 1997, the beginning of what I call my Third Wave of Animation, it was clear that conceptions of mainstream animation had become subject to global market concerns and were being shaped by the seductive qualities of US animated sitcoms such as *The Simpsons*.

Matt Groening's show appears as a creative and industrial ground zero moment for UK animation and its arrival in 1989 redefined and elevated the status of television animation itself. What shows like *The Simpsons* and its progeny did was dictate an extremely effective new model of constructing and presenting animated comedy which highlighted what could be achieved in terms of narrative structure and institutional context. This meant that networks could now adhere to an adaptable template that could be reconstituted across various creative and industrial settings. As well-assembled as *The Simpsons* was, its global spread subsequently undermined the demand and support for, in this UK setting, one-off shorts and less commercial, more experimental, independent work. The show's accomplishments enforced a rationalization of television animation into the status of 'product', as well as instigating tonal, narrative and visual orthodoxies. Initially broadcast through Rupert Murdoch's Sky channel since its inception, then latterly through the BBC then Channel Four, *The Simpsons*' satirical comment on US culture undoubtedly "tapped popular cultural resonance" (Gray, 2006, p. 6). But in truth it represented incorporation.

In promoting the medium away from the perceived cultural ghetto that mainstream animation had inhabited in recent years, *The Simpsons* in effect cemented comedy and narrative animation within mainstream contexts for the foreseeable future.

Certainly comedy's role in Third Wave Animation is profound. Animation, situation comedy, the sketch show and satire became fixed elements of post-*The Simpsons* work, which enforced a degree of standardisation. This process soon meant that the animated comedy show emerged, for a brief period, as one of the many potential solutions that networks used to address scheduling problems within a landscape of extended airtime and new channels to fill. For *The Simpsons* also demonstrated that global success was possible with the right product and that it could resonate across a variety of international territories and could open up potentially lucrative revenue streams of sales, ratings and syndication.

In UK television, in particular, what further enhanced this moment was the shifting status of comedy itself. Thompson saw this as part of a curatorship mentality within multi-channel television that repeated old comedy shows that served both historical and expedient purposes for networks (2004, pp. 432-433). Although animated productions were mainly ignored by Thompson, the composition of Third Wave Animation was entirely a response to the shifting terrain not only within the terrestrial and non-terrestrial schedules and broadcast environment, but also as part of a rapidly expanding DVD market at the turn of the century, which had revitalised conceptions around ownership of media

products. This was then latterly intensified through the growth of the Internet and the availability of streamed visual media through websites such as *You Tube* etc., which further fragmented the consumption of television comedy.

Alongside an explosion of reality and format television, record DVD sales of each series of BBC's *The Office* (2001-2003) and *Little Britain* (2003-2006) and Channel Four's *Phoenix Nights* (2001-2002) became notable markers of public tastes ("Brent's dance moves *The Office* Series 2 straight to the top spot, breaking records on the way!", 2003, paras 2-5). Comedy's fore-grounding within narrative animation benefited, matched and was in fact informed by larger breakdowns in hierarchies of taste and accepted understandings about the value of certain aspects of popular culture. Notably, comedy appeared to be superseding the modernist-forged conditions of drama as an appropriate conduit for the UK to talk about and of itself, surpassing realist agit-prop/Social Realist dramas such as BBC's *Play for Today* (BBC 1964-1984) that fulfilled a similar function on mainstream television in the latter part of the 20th century.

Animation's highly visual emphasis as a medium itself, its flexibility, its brevity, its removal from live-action traditions and its now increased permission to explicitly address social, political, cultural and moral issues, also meant that it entirely suited the demands of contemporary postmodern culture. Third Wave Animation reflected the cultural condition through its ironic make-up and in exhibiting the postmodern tendency by functioning as "the very locus of self-consciousness and the reflexive" (Jameson, 1991, p. 259). These animated comedies were created from a nuanced understanding of light entertainment

contexts and history. Booth notes irony is a mode that “says” one thing and “does” another to construct “unspoken meanings” (Booth, 1974, p. 7). This is apparent here as Third Wave Animation’s postmodern ironic distance (enforced by the constitution of the medium itself) illustrated our own complex relationship to television, history and culture. This particular emphasis was undoubtedly also a reaction to the creative fallow period that defined situation comedy and light entertainment throughout the 1980s, as enforced by Alternative Comedy. It was by no means an all-encompassing shift within mainstream comedy. However, the intensity of its debate had not only raised questions about the static formal conditions of comedy television but it also highlighted uncomfortable ideological questions that destabilised the comic culture of that period. Much of the television animation produced in the late 1990s onwards was, directly or indirectly, reactive to that moment. Thus, what now revitalised these dormant structures of sketch show and sitcom was their knowing place within a more self-aware media climate.

As Third Wave comedic animations were such highly potent registers of the cultural condition itself, it is then highly appropriate to frame the specific qualities of each of my case studies against aspects of postmodernity and a primary feature within its discourse, nostalgia. This is a concept that needed to be considered from different perspectives throughout this thesis. In my third chapter nostalgia, as a perfect encapsulation of postmodern ambivalence, operates as an ambiguous, fluid address that can allow differing interpretations. Nostalgia showed us how the makers of *Monkey Dust* approached a contemporary cultural concern and in focussing on an Orientalist emphasis,

(whereby Muslim characters were cast as comic fools once more), the nostalgic emphasis of the narrative under study promoted more of an inherent bias and disconnection from the central issues and offered instead a fetishization of comedy past. This gesture also highlighted that the qualities of inclusion and progression that had defined Second Wave Animation had now all-but disappeared in any meaningful fashion within the mainstream comic environment.

Chapter Four intensified this debate about agency. Channel Four's *Modern Toss* certainly exemplified a particular tonal and thematic stress that dominated this period. This was also a show that also explicitly recognised the importance of the Internet as a credible creative platform and was the perfect exemplar of a free-market, entrepreneurial impulse. It allied itself with authenticity through its self-pronounced countercultural status, but the *nature* of that counter position raised concerns. For as much as the show expressed a more accurate, urban class dissection than, say, *Monkey Dust*, or indeed later shows like *Bromwell High*, which was set in an inner-city school, what remained was a kind of superiority and distance imparted through a resolutely male voice. The dysfunctional society depicted within *Modern Toss* appeared as a warning against socio/cultural apathy and it showed the societal consequences of postmodern fragmentation, dissolution and disconnection. It preached against the dangers of individualism over responsibility. But, nihilistically, it also revelled in its blankness, aimlessness and violence, and *Modern Toss* offered little in the way of any credible amelioration. Nostalgia too can be understood as a backdrop here, as all of this was framed against an innate longing for a society

that perhaps never really existed in the first place. What both of the previous chapters had conclude, from differing perspectives, that Third Wave Animation was defined through a white, male, (mainly middle class) lens, and as such, ultimately presented a retrograde step.

Opening out from discussion of gender, race and class, my final chapter continued to investigate nostalgia in a more explicit register, framing the argument within a broader cultural discussion on how authority is dealt with in this Third Wave context. Curiously it appears that British mainstream animation across all settings has engaged with organised religion in a more consistent fashion than it has issues of representation. Partly this is because of the relatively recent shifts in social demographics within Britain itself, as enforced by multiculturalism (Rosen, 2003, pp. 97-99). But also this is evidence of a grander comic tradition. A common narrative within animation and comedy, and also in literature and the arts, is the undermining of authority, which has been reactivated in a more explicit sense in recent years by influential shifts within US animated comedy and television.

*Popetown's* postmodern quotation of authority and religious iconography said much about the nature of the comic language of mainstream animation here, for in Denzin's view the postmodern condition ultimately has to be considered as "social, cultural and economic life under late capitalism" (1992, p. 3). The dominant narrative of this condition is the inevitably cynical and ironic individualist voice of free-market capitalism, which now appears to supersede the grand systems of science, law, faith and morality that are now rendered

fluid, flawed or fragmented. Specific ideological points are sacrificed in favour of quoting from an inventory of comic touch-points, compiled to access the broadest demographic possible. *Popetown* wanted to emulate the controversial reputation of shows like *South Park* by exploiting the contemporary climate of sensitivity around religious critique. Yet the show shied from engaging in the same kind of uncompromising authorial discipline that Parker and Stone insisted upon in their Comedy Central text. *Popetown*'s simultaneous attack on and nostalgic celebration of the Catholic Church exhibits a typically expedient Third Wave approach.

### *Core values*

This idea of regression and conservatism is, as I have stated throughout this thesis, an inescapable conclusion when bringing this discussion to a close. Despite the promise that this wave of animation suggested, in truth these were texts that failed to capitalise on the cultural gains built up by the American shows, certainly in anywhere near the same fashion that sitcoms like *Family Guy* and *South Park* – shown continually on BBC 3 and Channel Four respectively – did. It appears that from its very beginnings this Third Wave actually developed out of a sense of unease about the nature of the medium itself within a mainstream setting. This was a very British response. For UK TV animation bore the weight of accumulated cultural and historical conceptions that were dictated by the saturation of functional animation as advertising, information and/or children's narratives and cemented through the ubiquity of Classical/Post-Classical Hollywood cartoons into television schedules since the

late 1950s. Wells stated that common misunderstandings around animation have always been that the medium connoted “unambiguous visual pleasure” and that it seemed “unthreatening and comforting” (1998, p. 6). This view about animation’s potential to appeal to adults within television network culture had, in truth, not radically altered by the beginnings of the Third Wave in the late 1990s. This rather conservative belief continued to backdrop the entire Third Wave moment and, as such, this idea inevitably restricted animation’s potential within this commercial landscape.

A fundamental lack of belief in the form is palpable in Third Wave Animation’s highly self-conscious alliance to this problematic term of ‘adult’ animation. This categorization consciously and unconsciously reinforced recurrent myths through opposition, whereby lay opinion around narrative-based television animation has been that this has always been a form that has tended to be either functional, facile or simplistic. This perception of the medium goes far beyond the many criticisms that have continually been aimed at television animation, which have tended to focus on the limited, industrialized, nature of its visual construction, as though opulence and spectacle are the only markers of quality in this area. The troublesome definition of ‘adult’ animation that pundits, critics and actually the industry itself, circulated in the wake of *The Simpsons* and *South Park* was always a profound misnomer. Today American shows like *Family Guy* (1999-to date), *American Dad* (2005-to date), the *Adult Swim* (2001-to date) network, *Stripperella* (2003-2004), *Tripping the Rift* (2004-2007) and *Gary the Rat* (2003) all routinely feature aggressive, confrontational humour and use registers deemed unsuitable for early evening or children’s

television. This is evidence of a US culture actually more accepting and comfortable with its animation history and traditions. In truth, the very brief list of shows mentioned above also implies that in fact the sheer weight of texts now commonly available, in US schedules and around the world now, means that adult animation also holds equal prominence with other types within television today.

In the UK, animation has been subject to a highly fragmented creative, critical and industrial history. As a result the conception of 'adult' animation in this Third Wave context was informed from an underestimation and a misrepresentation of the medium's complex and varied past. The industrial emphasis of this term is telling. 'Adult' animation, in effect, means here incorporation, misconception and compromise. It embodies an ignorance of a relatively recent, Second Wave past, which ably proved that animation could be highly symbolic, sophisticated and politicised, and also proved the simple truth that television mainstream animation has continually functioned on a mature level and has never really been specifically aimed just at children. It is a term that creative personnel would probably never feel comfortable fully endorsing to encapsulate this moment.

Commercial adult animation had never really enjoyed a fixed category of its own until the 1970s. Even then that particular nomenclature, as applied to Bakshi's 1971 *Fritz the Cat*, was put in place by industrial concerns to highlight issues of censor ratings and was also in service to promotion. Mainstream cartoons that were accessible, available and were regular fixtures on ITV and

BBC schedules throughout the 1960s onwards often worked at a mature level. Certainly when one examines, say the Fleischers' 1930s work through to the Warner Brothers' cartoons of the 1940s, it is readily apparent that these were cartoons that were often consciously satirical in their make-up. These were cartoons constructed for the cinema that contained elements of social and cultural critique and that were conducted at a knowing, sophisticated register. This impulse continued at varying degrees of alacrity in television shows consciously aimed at all ages, from *The Flintstones* through to Jim Henson's *The Muppet Show* (CBS/ITV 1976-1981) to *The Simpsons* and beyond. These have all been comic animations that have continually demonstrated Davis's fundamental point about comedy as an examination of "moral deficiency", that its purpose is to gauge the gap between what is and what should be (1993, p. 101). Indeed, mass audiences at all ages have not only always been aware of this but have also been highly accepting of such a practice. So Third Wave Animation starts from this conservative misunderstanding by insisting on a separation from a children's medium, as if this was a radical, thrilling new evolution rather than a mere continuation of what had been initiated in a less creatively well organized fashion in earlier times.

The definitions of what adult animated humour actually is also raise concerns here. To cast these shows as being merely transgressive and as united through a rejection of politically correct comedy, imagery and representation does negate the range of possibilities open to a medium capable of so much. As examples like *Modern Toss* suggested, in truth 'adult' animation in fact soon meant 'cult' animation and these shows' countercultural positions and humorous emphasis

became fixed as “skewed toward socially challenged college boys” (Waldrop, 2005, para 25). ‘Adult’ animation, as cast here, was often inconsistent, redundant and never really fully resolved as a credible statement. British television animation ended up denying its potential as a continually evolving, supple medium, more than capable of highlighting “difference and effect” (Wells, 1998, p. 6). Instead it settled for highly subjective quotations of television culture and making innovation secondary to industrial function.

This stasis, this lack of progression, is further compounded by the troubling obsession with nostalgia. Interestingly even First Wave children’s narrative animation on ITV and BBC TV, like *Trumpton* (BBC 1967), *Hattytown* (ITV 1969-1973) and *Thunderbirds* (ITV 1965-1966), also took “the contemporary and the nostalgic on equal terms” (Wood & Miles, 2006, pp. 257-259). It seems that looking backwards has been a continual thread from British TV animation’s very beginnings. This corresponds with the postmodern make-up of our “institutionalised” and “official culture of Western Society” (Jameson, 1991, p. 4). For if postmodernity is, as Lyotard argues “not modernism at its end but as a nascent state” (2001, p. 79), which Jameson develops as an intensified, accelerated condition, whereby we are processing what has gone before at a faster and more intense fashion, then nostalgia’s role here corresponds with this process (Jameson, 1991, pp. ix-xii). Nostalgia is in fact a perfect window into this particular phenomenon.

This can, of course, be read from a positive *and* a negative position.

Nostalgia can be conceived of as a reinforcement of a personal connection to history. It can be a way of negotiating the postmodern culture that unites discord and contradiction into something Ulmer calls “mystory”, a process which subjectively “universalises the singularity” of one person’s experience across a variety of different media and settings (cited by Denzin, 1992, p. 155). As with Cook’s reading along similar lines (2005), this connection with imagery and a fragmented history presents a valuable, highly personal path through a culture of surfaces and it suggests the retention of a more emotional trail within such a fractured postmodern terrain. However, I prefer to see nostalgia in Jamesonian terms. To me this is a condition defined more through loss and it embodies an innate desire to retrieve the kind of cultural stability that memories of modernism suggest. Third Wave Animation allies itself to the past more as a signal of creative expediency and ultimately it expresses a defeat. The reiteration of past values, images and comedy and animation cultures confirms this lack of forward movement.

Along with nostalgia and an intrinsic lack of belief in the animation medium itself, there is another troubling element to Third Wave Animation that needs to be addressed here. Texts such as Steve Harding Hill’s *Creature Discomforts* (2007-8) for Aardman, (a group of short advertisements promoting positive representations of the physically challenged that were released on-line and as print adverts in November 2007 and shown across national UK TV schedules from January 2008), exhibited a nostalgic sensibility in their links to Second Wave Animation alongside an explicit acknowledgement of the impact of

political correctness upon representation within media texts. This was one of the very few texts, as Norris states, to engage with these concepts in a progressive fashion (2008). Third Wave texts undoubtedly appeared unified through a *rejection* of politically correct humour, which not only suggests a *lack* of progression but, perversely, also implies a somewhat circular trajectory. Often British television mainstream comedy culture – and correspondingly animation production, to a lesser or greater degree – from *The Goons* (BBC 1951-1960) through to *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC 1969-1973), to Spike Milligan's *Q* series (BBC 1969-1982) to *The Comic Strip Presents...* (C4 1982-to date) and *The Young Ones* (BBC 1982-1984), up until the early years of *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* (C4 1990-1991), has been divided between broad definitions of 'alternative' and 'mainstream'. Third Wave Animation plays a role here as a marker of the recession of these polarities. The democratising effect of postmodern culture has taken terms like authenticity and differentiation and has undoubtedly flattened them out and made them subject to more expedient industrial concerns. Radicalism, within mainstream comedy and animation, has now become fragmented more into a series of quotes about style rather than being tied to resistance or challenge.

In the absence of palpably oppositional, politicised or more experimental comedy culture on our UK screens, what has emerged is a kind of broad middle ground, which suggests a return to a set of moral, cultural and comic imperatives that are not dissimilar to the 1970s just before the arrival of Alternative Comedy. Although these tonal polarities were present throughout that period, the culture was always skewed in the favour of hegemonic,

consensual texts. For every *Rutland Weekend Television* (BBC 1975-1976) or *The Innes Book of Records* (BBC 1979), there were several corresponding versions of *Father, Dear Father* (ITV 1968-1973) or *Terry and June* (BBC 1979-1987) on both commercial and public service channels. Today we now appear to be in a television comic landscape that exists beyond irony and that now simply functions under fixed ideological conditions. The dominant voice within TV comedy is now ultimately relatively conservative, white male-biased and unashamedly constructed to function effectively within light entertainment settings. The reinforcement of the always compromised and highly loaded illusion of “community” that Dyer highlighted about light entertainment now informs, notably without any irony, *Live at The Apollo* (2004-to date), BBC’s primetime stand-up comedy show, and the reiteration and success of traditional, theatrical-style sitcoms like *Miranda* (2009-to date) and *Not Going Out* (2006-to date) (1973, p.39). Dyer’s critique of the hegemonic, hierarchal nature of mainstream (1973, pp. 39-41) was focused on the 1970s, and the fact that they have re-emerged here in such force and completion would suggest that that we have perhaps come full circle, or at the very least feel more comfortable accepting this state unquestioningly. Third Wave Animation undoubtedly played its role in enforcing this state.

Again this notion of politically correct humour is a major indicator to this climate’s make-up. Political correctness actually appears within today’s comedy and animation culture as more of a myth and as a misreading. Today’s conceptions of 1970s/1980s humour is not subject to a recognition of the emancipatory qualities of the cultural dialogues that addressed inequalities in

labels and representations through this period, and it is more conceived as evidence, especially by the UK tabloid press, of Left Wing ideology's extremist tendencies (Cameron, 1995, pp. 125-127). Often ill-defined, and cast through an ungrounded conception, politically correct humour soon became seen by many comedians, animators, performers and writers as a restrictive, institutionalised mechanism. It is also part of a familiar cultural process of succession whereby the products of each particular decade or moment appear as often counter reactive to what has gone before. Thus as Alternative Comedy supplanted the sexist, racist comedy establishment of the 1970s, the response to that was a more ironic address within UK comedy that turned to more knowing quotations of light entertainment forms. This shift acknowledged an awareness of the way in which stereotyping and reduction operated yet, in doing so, actually returned television comedy to a socio/political status quo once more.

This kind of emphasis undoubtedly evidenced a conservatism that mirrored larger shifts toward a political middle ground that were taking place during Britain of the late 1990s. The UK during this period was bolstered by a relatively stable economy that openly embraced the potential of a global marketplace. It was reactive to the possibilities that the Internet offered and the UK was increasingly becoming defined, culturally, through links more to America than to Europe. In contrast to the political polarities of Left and Right that dominated the UK of the 1970s and 1980s, the Britain that informed Third Wave Animation appeared more at ease sidelining ideology in favour of a utopian political rhetoric and, through an embrace of Thatcherite policies, an eventual adoption of individualism as a credo (Reitan, 2003, pp. 241-245). All

of this suggests that in fact the radicalization within mainstream culture that has since been associated with politically correct humour has, along with openly Socialist societal dialogues, now disappeared as a marker of an earlier time. As we move away from this moment this also looks like a blip in history, tied to a post-war negotiation of values within the formative years of our present multicultural society.

Third Wave Animation ultimately appeared constrained by the all-encompassing logic of the marketplace. As the broadcast of *The Simpson's* 500th episode proved – as shown on 19 February 2012 – the Nielsen ratings of 5.6 million viewers still demonstrate how this show remains an attractive proposition to advertisers and networks (Bibel, 2012, para 17). The audience share, DVD sales, merchandising and syndication successes of *South Park* alone, still on its own terms a very difficult and challenging show, also provides a clear example of what success can mean in this current climate. Even by the 14th season premiere of the show, with the episode ‘Sexual Healing’ (17 March 2010), this show was still achieving ratings of 3.7 million. This was before available adjusted figures in the wake of on-line downloads, repeats etc. (Hibberd, 2010, para 3). Thus with such potential rewards available to networks it is hardly surprising that in this competitive climate the texts that speak to the dominant, male, audience that appears to consume, collate and curate animation fare so very well. Thus what defines this Third Wave moment so comprehensively is that this is where the medium became rationalised and quantified in a broader televisual context. In this setting, as capital appears to be the eventual response to any questions about representation and creativity, then

the democracy of the free market wins and power resides with whoever controls the conditions of that market. Success is not only defined in the above terms but it has become the primary aspirant and the only legitimate end goal.

#### ***Fourth Wave Animation***

Looking forward from here several points need to be addressed. The collapse of BBC TV's *Popetown* has been used as a boundary point in this thesis as what it signified was the end of a period of optimism and confidence for British television mainstream animation. For a brief period of time it did appear that in terms of narrative construction, execution and market performance that maybe UK TV animation *could* operate on the same footing as US forms. Sadly, this did not transpire. For despite the excitement and belief attached to this group of animations, audiences remained reluctant to embrace British narratives in quite the same fashion as their American counterparts.

*Popetown's* failure certainly reinforced the financial risk involved in producing home-grown animation. As Miles Bullough, Managing Director of Absolutely Productions and the executive producer on BBC TV's *Stressed Eric*, noted, "regular, quality animated series" in fact "cost more than most live-action sitcoms" (cited by McCubbin, 1999, para 17). One half-hour episode of *Stressed Eric* in 1999 cost £300,000, the total six-part series budget came in at something approaching £1.8 million between the BBC and Absolutely Productions, and

indeed Channel Four sources had rationalised television animation costs to £10,000 per minute per animated show, although, notably, these figures are set in a less computer technology dominated environment (McCubbin, 1999, para 17). What also presents a hindrance to the production of animation is its prohibitive time-frame. In 2001, it was estimated that the average animated television show could not only cost £2-5m to make but also it could take up to two years, which places a massive burden of expectation on a series before it has even been broadcast (“Animation – An industry that's dogged by caution”, 2001, para 3). With these kind of numbers quoted the apparent risk of such a venture becomes clear.

Recouping high production costs can be dependent on foreign market syndication, advertising revenues and DVD sales, but ultimately the real bottom line here does not bode well for UK animation. Any access to the lucrative syndication markets have always been problematical for a UK television industry that has always operated on a much smaller, less industrial footing than American networks. As Bullough stressed, “In the US, the market is of such a size it can support these costs... Although you hope most of these programmes can be sold globally, you raise most of the money in your domestic market” (cited by McCubbin, 1999, paras 17-23). This is a notable stumbling block in such a limited market as Britain, as then cross-national acceptance thus becomes much more of an imperative to any show seeking longevity. Rarely did any of the Third Wave animated shows attract the ratings necessary to survive within the home markets. In fact few shows in this survey, arguably apart from *Bob and Margaret*, really connected in any profound manner with audiences. The

Third Wave was certainly more a production phenomenon than a reception one. Channel Four's *Modern Toss*, for example, suffered due to institutional struggles at the station and despite an initial high promotional profile at the station for the first series, at its peak it barely managed to secure a fifth of the 3.4 million viewers that were being attracted to live-action sitcoms like *The IT Crowd* (2006-to date) (Rushton, 2008, para 1-4).

We have to add to this situation that as the first decade of the 21st century has progressed comedy and animation's position within the broadcasting landscape has also been further destabilized by the rise of cheap, easy-to-construct reality and formatted programming. Talkback's Chief Executive Peter Fincham stated in January 2003, "We're probably living in a world in which comedy is becoming less important to broadcasters as all forms of factual entertainment are becoming more so ... New comedy on C4 or BBC2 will typically start with quite a modest audience these days whereas if you get the right idea in the reality/factual area, you can come straight in with surprisingly high ratings and that makes this quite a tough time for comedy" (cited by Keighron, 2003, para 3).

I have used 2010 as the cut-off date for my survey, as after *Popetown* UK TV animation was still being produced, but its nature and frequency indicates the beginning of some kind of further re-conceptualisation is necessary. Certainly at the time of writing, industry backing for mainstream narrative-based UK animation has diminished to the point where it appears to be currently in a

notable fallow period. Although other comic animations followed *Popetown*, these appeared as separate, disparate flag bearers of a broadly unsupported medium. Among these were Henry Naylor's celebrity-based show, *Headcases* (2008) for ITV, which used computer imagery to render misshapen caricatures and which also notably signalled the exemption of political satire, finally, from the commercial channel. Nostalgia for the inclusiveness and fantasy of First and Second Wave children's animation can be seen in sitcoms like *The Mighty Boosh*, and latterly in sketch shows like Noel Fielding's 2012 E4 spin-off, *Luxury Comedy*, which regularly used animated inserts as cutaways from the central narrative across all three series. The animated sketch show continued, albeit refigured from its previous incarnation. Ben Wheatley's *The Wrong Door* (2008) deployed highly detailed, photo-realistic computer imagery to augment live-action comedy that played with the tensions between animated fantastical elements and carefully organised documentary-style formal tropes. Armando Iannucci's *Time Trumpet* (2006), which also used Wheatley's fully computer animated sketches inserted into live-action comedy, figured too as part of a late Third Wave moment. Both of those shows ran for one series each. Very recently there was also Adam Miller's *Mongrels* (2010-2011), which was a BBC 3 adult puppet show, deliberately broadcast after 10pm, that managed to extend to two series and which traded on cultural memories of *The Muppets* and the theatrical narrative *Avenue Q* (2003). What is notable here is the refutation of any traditional animated celluloid or stop motion aesthetics. Here these examples either sought to render the medium itself as invisible or they explored animation through more three-dimensional or 'realistic' registers. This desire to appease contemporary audiences rests on the suggestion that more expressive,

impressionistic formal choices represent artistic trends that are currently out of favour in this climate. In narrative animation contexts, the deployment of non-indexical work appears to be, very briefly, in recession. Any assessment of television from this point on would really need to fully account for the industrial and ideological role of computer animation in this process.

These isolated, floating moments of animated television production exist as islands, in their constitution and their settings. Certainly Zac Beattie's *Wonderland: The Trouble with Love and Sex* (BBC 2011) was one of these 'islands' that reminded us of what could be achieved when mainstream networks could be persuaded to take a risk with animation away from mimicking *The Simpsons*. This one-off production appeared as a throwback to Lord and Sproxton's stop-motion *Animated Conversations* (BBC 1981-1983), and it was also a reminder of a time when networks felt documentary and animation – here combined in a 9pm mid-week slot on a terrestrial channel, BBC 2 – could be a perfectly acceptable entertainment for an adult audience. This was a quotation of, and an alliance to, Second Wave practice, and it was animation that sought less than simply to cite a style or a memory, as say *Creature Discomforts*, than it did attempt to demonstrate what the medium could be capable of when applied to subject matter that did not appear immediately compatible. *Wonderland: The Trouble with Love and Sex* used interviews with couples and individuals going through marriage or sexual difficulties and contrasted them with animated images that slipped between direct index and more imaginative moments. This worked as a reminder that an adult address didn't necessarily have to mean simply nihilistic or the

foregrounding violence and sexual content purely for shock effect to contradict common perceptions about the medium.

From here possible directions suggest themselves when considering what the constituent elements of a potential Fourth Wave might be. I cannot believe that a medium with such obviously protean qualities gifted with an ability to “penetrate”, as highlighted by animators John Halas and Joy Batchelor back in 1949, will not be attractive to creative and industrial demands at some later point (cited by Wells, 1998, p. 122). Animation’s unique properties, in being able to symbolise, to evoke internal and abstract concepts and “previously unimaginable” states previously hidden from the viewer, is far too seductive, and today, too all-pervasive to ignore (Halas and Batchelor cited by Wells, 1998, p. 122). Its permission to address difficult areas within drama and comedy, along with its massive cultural history will ensure that networks will eventually return to it.

There appears at this point two ways of conceptualising the future for a Fourth Wave. As what Kitson refers to as “linear TV” (2008, p. 228) recedes into an increasingly fragmented mass of channels, outlets and platforms which today comprises the multi-media landscape, all of the signs suggest that a pragmatism along First Wave lines will dominate future narratives. Animation’s role within television in a UK setting – and away from the larger American studio combines – will be primarily constructed to serve informational and practical purposes. Any narrative examples of animation will be formulated mainly through multi-

platform areas like computer games, working alongside the existing sitcom and mainstream feature outlets. Fragmentation would appear to be the watchword here.

In this broadcasting environment Kitson argues that the continuing prospects for “art animation” raise concerns (2008, p. 230). Such works will become even more restricted to the kinds of occasional animation seasons that were so prevalent during the Second Wave, like Channel Four’s *Sweet Disaster* season from 1984, to be tucked away on the outer margins of the schedules.

Experimental short animation will thus also continue to be dependent on fragmented broadcasts of specialist projects like Channel Four’s *Animate* series, for example. Kitson predicts that the Internet is where more difficult and less formally predictable narrative work will continue to be released, distributed and consumed, certainly as funding and exhibition opportunities become increasingly difficult to secure. This suggests that mainstream work will continue to be subject to the nature of its transmission conditions and thus will accordingly become even more fractured, brief and possibly less complex in narrative-terms.

Inevitably then, dictated by “top down” media ownership patterns, as highlighted by Jenkins, animation’s consumption and expectations will conform to a convergence culture of mobile phone, Internet, viral advertising conditions (2006, p. 18). Hybridity between different media forms will undoubtedly continue to impact, in unpredictable ways, on the manner by which narrative

itself will operate. For, as the primacy of the written word has shifted in the Internet age, then so will the priorities around linear storytelling. The kinds of Third Wave comic animation I have been discussing worked within very clearly established rules of narrative construction that derive from 20th century television. Perhaps anticipating these shifts Kitson sees a bleak “seemingly inevitable future”, of “clips, segments, bits of something but never a whole”, ‘moving wallpaper’, ‘surface-fixated’ work ‘without anything to say’” (2008, p. 230). Whatever the perceived quality of these possible narratives – always subjective, always dependent on reception expectations – as we move further into the 21st century then television will become just one aspect of a larger consumption experience. Although sitcom appears to remain a sturdy part of television network processes at present, as does the sketch show, as American TV show narratives have been constructed around advertising breaks then accordingly these forms will be subject to similar conditions according to their eventual broadcast environment. As we try to understand what a Fourth Wave might entail, it does appear that Third Wave animated comedies sit now as an historical statement, one that is linked to a 1980s moment of originality embodied by *The Simpsons* that refers to an increasingly distant television animation history. This implies that this possible Fourth Wave’s arrival will mean that the texts that emerge through this period will be evidence of what Harries sees as an “ironically ironical” state, as indicators of an progressively more -refracted postmodern discontinuous state where meanings increasingly dissolve (2000, p. 134).

As the postmodern condition, and the media which inform it, intensifies and accelerates into increasingly complex states, then Fourth Wave Animation will be correspondingly disjointed. Inevitably the impulse to conjoin comedy and light entertainment forms that so typified Third Wave Animation will be conducted at an even more superficial level of quotation. Indeed from what we have seen so far it would seem appropriate that Third Wave Animation would inevitably follow the same process that has engulfed First and Second Wave Animation. Both of those types of animation were tied to specific cultural moments and have now disappeared, but they still exist within today's animation culture more as fragments and memories, running as a parallel or as undercurrent to the era that has superseded them. The proximity to media here suggests less a break or a massive shift but more likely that as Third Wave Animation's constitution is an indicator of the postmodern culture itself, then Fourth Wave Animation would also conceivably match Lyotardian and Jamesonian definitions of 'late', or 'post' modernity.

By this I mean that the Third Wave of production would actually not end, as such. It would not be transformed or overridden by another set of formation conditions. It would simply exist on the same terms as the epoch of postmodernity itself. Lyotard conceived of the shifts in post-war society and culture as being less about a definite schism, a breakage and a splitting of culture from modernity, and more about this period being typified as the tail end of modernity itself which, as yet, had not ended but had merely accelerated because of the contemporary communication possibilities and "transformations in the nature of knowledge" (2001, p. 6). It would then seem logical that this

Third Wave that I have presented would be the beginning, a first step towards an increasingly highly convoluted multi-media future. It would mirror this state. When Lyotard highlights late or high modernity, as he sees it, being all about reflecting and “ana-mesing”, this also encapsulates British animation’s coming to terms not just with modernity but indeed with television and culture itself as a ‘high’ or ‘late’ Third Wave (1993, p. 145). The blurring of lines of taste, the demotion of history, the abandonment of linearity, the emphasis on nostalgia, on quotation and the now de rigueur highly reflexive nature of popular culture is not only evidence for the processing of aspects of modernist culture, it also provides a model to conceptualise the future for UK television animation itself as we await the defining conditions of the next cultural epoch.

I want to suggest that there would be no Fourth Wave of Animation but merely an unending Late Third Wave stage that processes not only itself, but also First and Second Wave Animation, in an increasingly fragmented fashion. The necessary task would then be to find the tools and language to assess and quantify these levels of hyper-fragmentation to fully typify such a setting. It seems too often we attempt to grasp these shifts in modernist terms, but this kind of refracted, flat culture of surfaces may well intensify this sense of an end game, a loss. As popular contemporary culture, and thus these defining conditions of popular television animation itself, evolves into what would appear to suggest a ongoing cultural white noise, comprised of intricate layer after layer of quotations and signifiers drawn from past eras, this would become the kind of “moving wallpaper” that Kitson suggests (2008, p. 230).

There is another possible course of consideration for a Fourth Wave of Animation, which could be understood more from a narrative emphasis, rather than a cultural and industrial one. This is a view that suggests more positivist possibilities. It is feasible that at this point the mainstream medium itself could be on the verge of a re-politicising, albeit under different conditions to what has gone before. Third Wave Animation can be seen, in many ways, as ‘boom time’ animation. Certainly shows like *Monkey Dust* began to very tentatively interrogate the implications of a society defined through a growing disparity between rich and poor. That text continually acknowledged the gap between the political rhetoric of New Labour and the realities of day to day existence for many. Yet many of its narratives were more concerned with a society in decline, that’s values were being insidiously corrupted by popular culture, and the sketches were cast from a position of white, middle-aged, middle-class superiority and disdain. Generally though, Third Wave Animation appeared as evidence of a social stability. The commentaries on attitudes revealed within these texts present animations that were united by a comedic emphasis. Temporal location aside, this was humour that looked inwards. The emphasis on policing social boundaries and the fixation on the perceived repressions exerted by political correctness showed that this was animation that functioned within, and often unconsciously depicted, a culture of affluence.

Fourth Wave Animation could well be the medium – in any setting, outlet or channel – to reflect greater forces than just industry, practice and television history. Rosen noted that as various orthodoxies of gender, race, class and

institutions, such as law, marriage, religion etc., declined since the post-war period, in fact 20th century Britain's defining narrative has undoubtedly been one of transformation (2003, pp. 169-175). This is a trend that has continued into the early part of 21st century. Following this, it could well be that commercial animation may begin to focus less on the past and more on the contemporary. It is feasible that it could function more on its own terms through deploying a more explicit political address. The insistence of animation as reportage that has typified Third Wave Animation could well be extended to see the medium evolve to be the perfect conduit by which to monitor turbulent social/cultural times, and indeed live-action comedy could well follow a path that could mirror this.

Phillip French defined that within US film comedy of the early teens, a notable trend has emerged of "recessional" texts (2012, para 1). Here a brace of mainstream comedy films can be discerned as "reflecting anxieties about the current economic crisis and those suffering from its consequences" (2012, para 3). As we move into less certain economic times, nationally and globally, the narratives that appear in the next decade may be addressing a much more troubled landscape using a much more explicit vocabulary. At this moment issues of debate around moral consensus in our culture have been focused more on the conduct of bankers and high finance institutions in the wake of, and during, the financial crashes of 2007. But at the time of writing in 2012, there appears to be the beginnings of a very real and far-reaching consensual shift emerging through social and media discourse, shaped by the effects of potentially long-term UK recession. These kinds of dissatisfactions, enquiries

and critiques could be highly suited to the penetrative qualities that animation offers and could be well positioned to take advantage of in the coming years.. Fourth Wave Animation could well be protest-based, characterized by a politicised narrative stress that confronts the shifting roles of social institutions and morality in this global post-financial crash culture. Although at the time of writing, the notion of any animation ‘movement’ does appear as a rather quaint conceit in such a post-Thatcherite, individualistic, environment.

But what one would hope to see is that, as forged in these increasingly unpredictable contemporary conditions, whatever Fourth Wave Animation will be it should be unrecognisable by today’s conceptions. For as yet, no one definable *The Simpsons* ‘moment’ has materialized to signal any profound shift. But then just as no one could have predicted that UK animation could have been so completely dominated by American sitcom traditions back in 1979, it is entirely possible that the next all-encompassing animation era is still yet to come and that we cannot even conceive of what form that might take. Thus, in a mainstream setting it is imperative to keep on assessing the compromises that arise, for it is in that area where the picture of us, as a nation, ultimately resides.

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## Appendix One

### **Claire Kitson in interview with the author at the Society of Animation Studies conference: ‘Animation Evolution’**

**Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh, Midlothian, Scotland –July 12, 2010.**

Van Norris: Claire Kitson former Commissioning Editor at Channel Four – there was a few questions I wanted to ask mainly in terms about overview, really. When you were at Channel Four you were responsible for bringing animation to the schedules and certainly for bringing some of the key animation work in, around sitcom and comedy. I’m thinking *Bob and Margaret* and *Pond Life* which I think was really under-rated as a show, I was just reading that when Michael Jackson came on board that he was anti-*Bob and Margaret*, and in fact wasn’t anti-animation per se, but in fact was very supportive of animation, but just not the kinds of animation that were being produced. I was wondering if this was a myth that’s kind of sprung up?

CK: After Michael Grade who was really, really supportive of animation in all of the different things I tried to do, Michael Jackson was actually rather disappointing. Having said that he did manage to get a second series of *Crapston Villas*, but Sarah Kennedy couldn’t direct it as she’d had a bad

accident so was executive... something... of lying on her back in the same room as doing it! And he did OK a second series of *Pond Life*, but he insisted that they be half hours and Candy never just got it quite right... the half hour, you know... so those were the problems, actually after Michael Grade left.

VN: I think you can see it in the expectations that people now have of sitcom and yet in terms of structure and industrial concerns, animation isn't, wasn't really made like that. It was all about individual authorship.

CK: Well the kind of animation that we were trying to encourage, yes, that is the case. But I have to say that *Bob and Margaret* after Channel Four had dropped it after one series when they continued it in Canada and America it did become slightly industrial. But it was brilliant. (Interview interrupted for several seconds).

Because Alison and David didn't particularly want to be initiating all of the plots themselves they gradually recruited a really, really good team of writers, who they met like Sally Phillips and Peter Baynham, who I really thought were amongst the cream of British comedy writing. I mean I didn't get to see the final series that we didn't have anything to do with but certainly the first series and the scripting of the second series went on in this country and I thought it was just... brilliant.

VN: Again, you've hit on the heart of what I'm writing about in what I notice in this next shift is in *Bob and Margaret* that you were getting people in like Peter Baynham who were associated more with live-action comedy rather than animation.

CK: Yeah, yeah. And that was very interesting because when you get in people like that but who are directed by Alison and David who have this visual acuity and you're getting both the witty plots and the witty scripts and the wonderful sight gags. And I think that might have been the problem with *Bromwell High*, because if you read the scripts some of them were great actually and really witty. But visually they just didn't kind of do it. I wonder if it's because they didn't have people with the certain kind of genius, well I call it genius, like Alison and David who have this complete... flair for visual comedy.

VN: What happened with *Bromwell High* in terms of...

CK: Well I wasn't at all involved but I looked into it for the sake of the book, and they only commissioned six episodes and it was on in a reasonable slot and the reviews were pretty good. They didn't promote it, they *really* didn't promote it. And the ratings were catastrophic but I'm absolutely sure that if it had been a longer series instead of just six episodes and if it had been properly promoted then it would have done a great deal better. And the proof is that *Crapston Villas* because it was that much earlier... I mean, it's frustrating... Channel Four

hundred per cent financed *Crapston Villas* because they knew that all around the world that no one would want to partner in something that was so rude! And also because they knew that it would appeal to boys after the pub. So Channel Four financed it so there was no delay and went straight ahead with it. So it happened in the days when there was a bit more money, and still Michael Grade who was the one who authorised it... and they promoted it like mad, because they liked it. And we were rewarded by absolutely fantastic ratings.

VN: It was a big moment.

CK: Yeah but then when it came to *Pond Life*, they said well no this is nice gentle comedy, so I think you might find some co-finance. So that really, really delayed it. And then the finance *was* found. But by that time it was Michael Jackson who wasn't quite so enthusiastic about the animation. And then we had the fact that the scheduler... I mean it'd been always absolutely intended for 9.45 slot after *Dispatches*, always intended, he looked at the pilot he said 'great', 'fine for the slot', 'yeah, perfect', and then they... for months and months and months they kept saying there are slight delays, slight delay and then they put it after *Ricki Lake*! I mean... sorry... I'm trying not to be bitter, but I honestly, overall am not bitter because I think Channel Four did fantastic stuff and in very difficult circumstances they behaved extremely well. But just... certainly with *Pond Life* was the big disaster.

VN: I think it was a real missed opportunity, *Pond Life*. I mean I think that for me along with *Crapston* and *Bob and Margaret* was a real bridge towards certainly what's going on with BBC 3's support and things like *I Am Not an Animal* which BBC 2 got behind, which was Baynham's again. I mean I show *Pond Life* to a lot of my undergrads who have never heard of it and are really surprised by it.

CK: Yeah, I mean how are they going to hear about it, if it's billed as 'women's programme' and shown as exactly the same time as *Neighbours* is on? I mean that was the final nail in the coffin. I mean that was the first time I actually resigned from Channel Four!

VN: It actually prompted your resignation?

CK: It did but... it all got smoothed over.

VN: You can only buy it on DVD in Germany... it has subtitles all over it.

CK: Did you get it? I haven't even got it on old VHS!

VN: I'll have a look out for you... I think I got it through E-Bay... I'll see if I can find a copy for you.

CK: And you see now Candy isn't doing animation at all.

VN: And that is a real loss. And the comedy thing is really interesting... Channel Four really did foreground comedy as their saviour in the ratings, didn't they with the American imports and think they kind of plumbed *Crapston Villas* into that. And I think that helped how animation can be seen in a real mainstream market, which I think BBC 3 really grabbed hold of, when they said well we can make *Monkey Dust*, and they can make *Rude...Angry Kid*.

CK: I think that'd been going on a long time and they'd done it and were doing it in different formats, but I'm not sure how much that was really connected to anything much.

VN: I think we mentioned before about the masculine bias in animation. Have you got any ideas on to what extent that is and also what informs it do you think? Is it purely industry?

CK: I haven't quantified it, as I said Sarah Kennedy was the one who kind of sent me off on this track and all she did was a load of interviews, but we really

don't have any... and I thought I'd seen somewhere on the skills set website, is there something on the skills set website that... in their latest that... I really should take this up if I start taking this more seriously, I really need to do that, obviously one needs some figures... but the anecdotal evidence is absolutely incontrovertible. You know, all of the Sarah's interviews produced women who are not now in the industry who were. You know I was just approached by someone from Middlesex, a woman who does computer games and she wants to have a long chat about the way she has... the awful treatment she's been having... the evidence is overwhelming and its definite... it's just a question of getting figures to back it up and trying to talk to more people and finding out why. And when I said at Channel Four I thought that we were getting all these wonderful women, then it was just the natural progression of things, now I'm not so sure. I mean it might be not just about the way the market demands have changed, that they're wanting different things... Channel Four was a bit on the kind of nurturing side, you know we were much nicer to our filmmakers than the market is... so it might just have been that, you know. I mean I'm certainly more like that... I mean it's not worth the aggravation... I'm not that ambitious that I so much need to get on that I will, you know, let people give me shit... I think that's just women ....

VN: No, I think that's actually sanity!

CK: But the problem is that we've got no female politicians for very probably that same reason.

VN: I think the political climate's a big part of it.

CK: The bankers! And you look at where we've got...!

VN: And that's just unchecked greed... it's the stories that are being told... even things like, I mean I love *Monkey Dust* but sitting through three series of it the jokes are often about somebody's girlfriend, there's a tasteless gag about a Muslim woman being stoned to death... and you think 'OK it's supposed to be transgressive, push-y and edgy' but it's the same kind of angle all of the time and you feel it's middle-aged men or adolescent middle-aged men railing against the world they don't understand. We keep coming back to it, it's difficult to avoid... it feels like *The Simpsons* is this unavoidable thing that everyone either resists or incorporates, to what extent do you feel *The Simpsons* was being registered within Channel Four?

CK; Well it was being registered to the extent that the very thing I did when I arrived at Channel Four was an assistant, well they put me in the purchase of programmes department – which was bizarre! But the job was definitely looking after the animation, although it was felt that it was never worth the full title of an animation commissioning editor... but the department they put me into had never actually commissioned anything, so working out how you commissioned anything... programmes was not easy! But the first thing I did was to go to

Monte Carlo, the television thing, and my boss sent me off to see this pilot and it was *The Simpsons* and it was just fantastic, it was the one with the scrabble set and the word is 'oxymoron' and that was a little... and I came out and said that this is absolutely wonderful and said that we have to buy it, and they said yes we're trying to...! And of course the channel could not at that stage get enough money... and also I think Fox wanted it to sell satellites... so we didn't stand a chance... and then Michael did bid against the BBC there. But anyway the channel thought it was great and would have loved to have got it and did get it finally.

VN: But was there a sense in terms of a desire to emulate it or use that as a model, to base British versions of it....?

CK; Well, no... I got into a rather strange exchange with Paul Wells as he sees it that way. I know for a fact after I left they were announcing that they wanted series, and immediately after I left they wanted to develop the animated sitcom and they did use that phrase, 'you know we want the British *Simpsons*', which I guess is not a good thing, because it's pretty formulaic but it's pretty sensible if you're looking for big ratings... you need all ages, you know you've got to try and get a complete... so they were using that phrase, but when I go to a series I don't really think of it that what I was doing was reacting to what we were getting in from, these mostly women, short filmmakers made and then *Bob's Birthday* when it won the Oscar, you know everyone said that American studios were chasing us saying they wanted to do it. Well it all came to nothing actually

but that seemed to be somehow to be predestined to be in a series while the others just came out... and we did each time, with *Pond Life* and *Crapston Villas*, ask them to do a transmittable pilot, which is difficult as I was saying because a pilot is *such* a difficult thing to do, introducing a certain number of characters and you know signalling... but we really did need that because we couldn't afford to waste money on a full pilot unless it was going to be transmitted, so they did both start out as shorts.

VN: So an animated pilot, I'm guessing, is a bigger risk than a filmed pilot?

CK: Yeah.

(Interview terminated).

## **Appendix Two**

### **E-mail correspondence**

**Collected interviews/personal communications between**

**November 2006-January 2007**

**Interview a:**

**Personal communication – Freelance animator, Dominik Binegger**

**November 15, 2006.**

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**From:** "Dominik Binegger" <info@welkenicethings.com>

**Subject:** Re: Modern Toss

**Date:** Wed, 15 Nov 2006 09:15:14 +0000

**To:** "VAN NORRIS-JONES" <van.norris@btinternet.com>

Hi

Again, please accept my apologies for the delay.

I hope this is of any help to you. Please let me know if you require anything else from us.

Many thanks,

Dom

**Modern Toss Questions – Dominik Binegger- 18/10/06**

**How did you get involved with *Modern Toss*?**

Simply going to the animation company 12Foot6 and showing them our portfolio

**Were you aware of Link and Bunnage's work before embarking on the project?**

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Yes. We were huge fans of Modern Toss the comic before.

**What is your background in animation to date?**

We've done a few music videos, title sequences, pitches for programmes and a lot of freelance work on too many projects to be listed here.

**What was your role within the show?**

Animator

**What brief were you given before starting the show? Was there much preparation for the project and how closely did Jon Link and Mick Bunnage confer with you on the project?**

We were just to animate the characters that we were provided with by Jon and Mick. Once a week they'd come in and look at what we've done and talk about it.

**How many personnel were involved with the actual animation of the show/pilot?**

7-9

**Where any previous design or animation examples used as models for the show?**

No, it was all about trying to re-create the look and feel of the book.

**How did Channel Four get involved with the concept?**

I think via the Comedy Lab, where new talent can showcase their work and the best one would be commissioned for a series, which is what happened in the end to Modern Toss.

**What is the nature of 12foot6's relationship with Channel X productions? What productions have you been involved with together?**

I really don't know

**How big a role does Ben Wheatley as editor and director play in the process?**

Again I really don't know. All I do know is that the director in house was Ben Krolick and he was involved with Ben Wheatley a lot. Nonetheless it was him who directed us directly.

---

dominik

<http://www.welikenicethings.com>

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## Interview b:

### Personal communication – Modern Toss author, Jon Link

November 19, 2006.

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**From:** "jon link" <jon@moderntoss.com>

**Subject:** Re: Modern Toss

**Date:** Sun, 19 Nov 2006 20:44:40 +0000

**To:** "VAN NORRIS-JONES" <van.norris@btinternet.com>

Hello Van,

here are some answers, hope this helps you, if you need anything else maybe you on the phone

all the best

Jon  
On 18 Oct 2006, at 11:23, VAN NORRIS-JONES wrote:

Hi Jon

sorry it's been a while getting back to you with these questions (lots of w wade through meant I haven't been able to devote much time to this - w frustrating!) I'm the early stages of setting up this thesis on British Adult aspects of British Culture and Identity and to get me started, (and conne thing) I thought I'd start with the proposed 'end chapter' and focus on sor inspired me the most very recently which was 'Modern Toss'.

I'm planning to focus on 'Drive-By Abuser' and 'Alan' for the lecture on th on and at a paper I have to give on current research, both of which I hav various members of the Film/Media team here at Portsmouth, think are ç

Anyway so, as promised earlier, I've included here a list of questions (be say these may well inspire a whole load more so I'll try not to drain too r of this and ask is it OK to send a couple more over at a later date? While favours would it also be possible OK to establish contact with either Jan and/or Ben Wheatley at all?

Thanks very much for your time in all of this....

Van

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**Modern Toss Questions – Jon Link - 18/10/06**

**How did *Modern Toss* evolve?**

We started working together on *Loaded* about 12 years ago, then I left, but we started "Office Pest", my new job was driving me up the pole plus I was commuting from which was sending me mental, so I started doing some cartoons to make me feel a little better, but I didn't have the money to print it, so I made the web version on there instead (this was at the start of 2003), I used to put up 4 or 5 cartoons a week and more people started looking at them. Then about five months in the film went on, and it started getting really busy (a lot of people were passing them around), we both found ourselves out of work, so I thought it might be a good idea, print all the stuff that had stored up on the website and add some new things to the shops in boxes and asked people if they wanted it, the ICA took 20 copies, Guardian Guide reviewed it, someone at Waterstones saw the review told Pan to bring a book out of it. Then Channel 4 got in touch.

**Was there anything in your previous work at *Loaded* or on-line that direct antecedent?**

Yes, we used to do the cartoon "Office Pest" which ran from 97 to 02, it was all experimental violence in the workplace, it used clip art, minimal dialogue and was a popular item in the magazine, one reader even had it tattooed on his arm.

**How did Channel Four get involved with the concept?**

One of the commissioning editors there had been into it for a while and contacted us.

**What brief did you outline to *12foot6* before starting the project?**

We had been developing some crude animated versions for a while, and these were how we wanted it to look. Very basic, retaining the texture background of the comic. It was more of a cut-out animation style, using mostly original drawings, something that hadn't been supplied they used a big fat oil crayon to add new things.

**When did the decision arrive to mix the formats between live action and animation?**

This was something that Shane Allen at Channel 4 wanted us to do, so we started back with the comic (a daytrippers head stuck on a photograph) and then through character in a real life sitcom. This was all developed when we were planning the first series.

**Why was that decision taken?**

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the live action stuff was meant to make it more accessible to the viewer: bit of a turn off apparently.

**Was there much preparation was made for the project and how close with Tom Holland and Dave Anderson on the project?**

All the animated sketches were supplied as photoshop elements. Including the how it all fitted together (it was very important to keep the design/look of the cartoon with storyboards and either guide voice tracks or finished sound which we edited).

**How big a role does Ben Wheatley as editor and director play in the**

Ben is really important in the Toss process, he's very experienced at making things happen on small budgets and under extreme pressure and put in hours: us editing and preparing/planning for the live action stuff. He eats a lot of nuts.

**Where any previous design or animation examples used as models**  
One big influence was Sesame St. we really liked the mix of live action/music.

*jon link <jon@moderntoss.com> wrote:*

Hello Van,

no problem, send them through when you are ready, there will be a repeat on channel 4, probably about one in the morning mid week, if you sign up on the website we'll be letting everyone know when its on. and yes the first series is out sometime next year when the second series is on, not sure when

thanks for spreading the word and look forward to your questions

Jon

On 28 Sep 2006, at 20:29, VAN NORRIS-JONES wrote:

Hi Jon

thanks for getting back to me so quickly on this and thanks also for asking me a few questions about the show. What I'll do, (if that is ok) is I'll get back to you over the next few days with some questions and get a little more time this end. The idea is in principle to put a chapter towards a chapter of my Phd on *British Adult TV Animation* and use it as a possible chapter for a journal, to present the aspect as paper (and also it will form the basis of a lecture for Level 3 undergrad students).

Quite frankly though, it's just lovely to write about the show and introduce it to people who haven't seen it yet. Which, honestly, is what this I feel like it's all about. Also actually I was just wondering if there any plans for Channel Four to repeat Modern Toss? Is the show going to be a DVD release soon at some point?

Anyway, thanks again for the reply and I'll get onto that soon as

Cheers

Van

**jon link** <[jon@moderntoss.com](mailto:jon@moderntoss.com)> wrote:

Hello Van,

feel free to send some questions over

thanks

Jon

On 28 Sep 2006, at 11:56, Modern Toss Info wrote:

Begin forwarded message:

**From:** VAN NORRIS-JONES  
<[van.norris@btinternet.com](mailto:van.norris@btinternet.com)>  
**Date:** 27 September 2006  
17:11:20 BDT  
**To:** [info@moderntoss.com](mailto:info@moderntoss.com)  
**Subject:** Modern Toss

Hi

I'm based at the University of Portsmouth and I currently teach undergraduate animation theory and history there and just was wondering if you could help me at all?

You see I'm a big fan of, (and am completing some academic work on), the animated show *Modern Toss*. And I was just wondering if it would be at all possible to forward a contact e-mail address on to me for either Mick Bunnage and/or Jon Link to maybe ask them some questions about the show for my research?

Thanks for your time and help on this!

Interview c:

Personal communication – 12foot6 Animator/Director, Tom Mortimer.

8 January, 2007.

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**Date:** Tue, 09 Jan 2007 09:35:19 +0000

**Subject:** Hope this is ok

**From:** "Tom Mortimer" <thomas@12foot6.com> [Add to Address Book](#)

**To:** "VAN NORRIS-JONES" <van.norris@btinternet.com>

> Modern Toss Questions Tom Mortimer- 08/01/07  
>  
>  
> How did you get involved with Modern Toss? Were you aware  
> and Bunnage's work before embarking on the project?

We became involved when we saw the comic in 2004. It turned  
Dave,  
my business partner had known Jon Link from Loaded, when he  
cartoon  
strips for the magazine and Jon was an art director there.  
animation tests for them, the pilot followed, then the series  
>  
> What is your background in animation to date? What is your  
> within 12foot6? What can you tell me about the company?  
We've been going in this format for over six years now. We  
writers in advertising at one time, but were both into car  
entertainment in general. I was self-taught as an animator  
right  
into flash and the web, eventually teaching it at graduate  
post-graduate  
level. We started animating mostly on the web, looking to  
funny  
ideas. I got meningitis in 2001, which focused the mind a bit  
us  
realise what we wanted to do most - make good funny stuff!

>  
>

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> What brief were you given before starting the show?  
Make this art move...

>  
>  
>

> How many personnel were involved with the actual animati  
show?  
We got up to about 20 at one point i think - but it was a

>  
>

> Where any previous design or animation examples/influenc  
> models for the show? Are there any that you considered a  
> animated or designed the show?  
There were many styles of illustration used in the show an  
down  
with Jon Link and Mick at the beginning or each new charac  
out  
the animated style that would work best for each, do some  
each one  
and then get into it. But we were always trying to make ea  
not  
only look different, but also move differently.

>  
>

> How did Channel Four get involved with the concept? Who  
> commissioned the show?

Jon and Mick had a relationship with Shane Allen before he  
Channel4.  
We then linked up with Jon and Mick, and produced a 15 min  
with  
Shane took with him when he joined 4. From there it was pu  
Comedy  
Lab pilot and got it.

>  
>

> What is the nature of 12foot6's relationship with Channe  
productions?  
Channel X are the overall production company and take care  
contracts, live shoots, sound and voice sessions, post pro  
Jon and Mick worked with them on this side of things and t  
contracted to the production to all the animated content.

>  
>

> Was any personnel ascribed to animate any particular cha  
> If so, why would that be?  
Yes they were and mainly for continuity. This is really im  
especially at the beginning of a character's life. Mr Tour  
Sneezeman  
had quite a lot of history and so we had lots of art and a  
library  
items to animate with, but most of the other characters, l  
Peace and Quiet, Barney, and Planet Chat all needed to be  
quickly

and hold their style. Since there was only a short amount  
seemed  
best to let one or two people do each character so there w  
continuity.

>  
>  
>  
>  
>

> What sort of processing power were you using to animate  
> What software was used?

We worked on Mac G5's mainly and used:

Photoshop  
Illustrator  
Flash  
After FX  
Final Cut

And lots and lots of animation paper and oil pastels

>  
>  
>  
>

> How much footage roughly were you expected to produce to  
of schedule?

We started in September and finished in April and made abo  
minutes

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## Interview d:

## Personal communication – Modern Toss Director and Editor, Ben

Wheatley

10 December, 2006.

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Re: Modern Toss

Show Details

yeah wrote and did effects work on time trumpet  
what angle are you taking with your modern toss piece?  
ben

On 12/11/06, VAN NORRIS-JONES <van.norris@btinternet.com> wrote:  
Hi Ben

that's a fantastic (and incredibly quick!) response and thanks for that info - it really helps in getting a sense of clarity here for me on the production dynamic of the show itself. I'm looking to try and get this all tied up over the next few weeks but I dare say, (as ever) there'll be a few questions at a later date to 'fill in the gaps'... thanks again for your time in this!

I didn't realise you'd done the stuff for 'Time Trumpet' too... 'Tesco Wars' is bloody marvellous...

Van

Mr Wheatley <ben.wheatley@gmail.com> wrote:

On 12/10/06, VAN NORRIS-JONES <van.norris@btinternet.com> wrote:  
Hi Ben

It's Van here from Portsmouth University here again, sorry it's taken so long to get back to you... here's some questions on Modern Toss finally, (as promised). Thanks very much for your time on this and hopefully they won't be too much of a chore...

### Modern Toss Questions – Ben Wheatley - 10-12-06

What is your background to date?

my background is varied. I've worked as an editor, director, story board artist, flash animator, writer (film and copy writing) and creative director.

How did you get involved with Modern Toss? Please describe your role on the show.

I edited the pilot. I was put forward for that because the post production was going to be quite complicated and we didn't have much money, my skillset spreads across cg, animation and editing so it made sense. Also my own creative work fits with modern toss <http://www.randomrwheatley.co.uk> and it was thought I'd get it.

After the pilot I kept in touch with Jon and Mick. The year between the pilot and the series starting I directed a lot of complicated effects based viral adverts and had a lot more experience directing. I threw my hat in and asked if they'd have me to direct this time round.

I directed the live action and edited the show.

editing included:

editing the animation animats  
track laying the show  
Over seeing any effects work  
planning the post production, choosing the edit system  
Editing the live action

Directing included

Shooting and editing an animat version of the live action  
Storyboarding the live action  
Casting

Where you aware of Link and Bunnage's work before embarking on the project?

Yes, I'd read the comics and seen the strips online

What brief were you given before starting the project?

I talked with Jon and Mick. I edited the pilot so I knew the material pretty well. We went through the sketches, We are all pretty much on the same wavelength so its pretty painless.

Was there much preparation for the project? How closely did Link and Bunnage confer with you on the project?

There was a lot of preparation and I worked very closely with Jon and Mick. They control every detail of production. I make sure that they are aware of every decision I make. I feel like I have a responsibility to Modern Toss. Its Jon and Micks creation, its my job to make sure as much of it gets translated to the screen, its not my place to make creative decisions without consulting. Thats not to say that I dont get to work creatively, im just mindful that they know what im doing and why.

How many personnel were involved with the actual live action footage of the show?

We had a crew of 30 on the shoot days and then I had an edit assistant and an online editor.  
We edited as we shot so I could make sure it was all fitting together. The Alan shoots were very ambitious and complicated so I needed to make sure it was totally organised.

Did you have any live action models in mind whilst filming 'Drive By Abuser' and 'Alan' at all?

For Alan We talked about classic sitcom and bbc play for the day type dramas. Drive by and customer services were more influenced by the comic. I wanted them to be as graphic as possible.

Were the actors in the live action sequences aware of character design before filming?

Yes, we had comics on set

How tightly was the animation tied to the live action and how much of it was precisely storyboarded/planned?

It was storyboarded by Jon and Mick, then I made animats of all the Alans then I re storyboarded every line. The storyboard had every shot and ran to 100 pages. It was unusual for a shoot but I like to have everything planned out.

Who selected the voice artists for the show? How/why were they chosen?

<http://36ohk6dgmcd1n-c.c.yom.mail.yahoo.net/om/api/1.0/openmail.app.invoke/36oh...> 31/03/2012

Jon and Mick choose the voice artists.

Were the actors made aware of the character designs?

They were shown the comics

How much input did they have into dialogue? How important was it to remain close to the script at the recording stage?

They changed the odd line if they were having trouble, not much though

Were there any previous live action/animation or straight animation shows that act as a model for Modern Toss?

Not really

What factors convinced Channel Four to turn the Comedy Lab pilot into a series?

It was original. It was well recieved.

Who chose things like the music? (The title of the piano piece behind 'Drive By Abuser' and the choices behind 'Alan' come to mind here...)

Jon and Mick chose the music. They were very particular. In general we spent a lot of time on the sound, getting the music and sound fx right. Sound design is as important as editing and its one of the more pleasurable post jobs. It was a real treat to get our teeth into it.

Mr Wheatley <ben.wheatley@gmail.com> wrote:

cool yeah, fire away.

On 11/22/06, VAN NORRIS-JONES <van.norris@btinternet.com> wrote:

Hi Ben

I'm a Senior Lecturer in Film and Media Studies in the School of Creative Arts, Film and Media at the University of Portsmouth. I teach in Film, TV, Comedy and primarily animation history and theory (where I run two units on US and UK/Alternative animation forms). At present I'm currently preparing/researching a chapter on the Channel Four show, *Modern Toss* as part of a PhD project, a projected paper and a possible chapter based around *British Mainstream TV Adult Animation*.

So far I've been in regular contact with Jon Link and the 12foot6 animators about the show *Modern Toss* and Jon said it would be fine to contact you to maybe ask you some questions about the show, your role in it, the form, the approach taken etc.

Would it be OK to send you some questions via e-mail?

I promise it won't be too painful and I'll try to take up a little of your time as possible, but this information will help me to get a picture of how the show was developed.

If you can help that'd be terrific

Thanks for your time

Van Norris

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