

ASPECTS OF CREATIVITY IN ADULT ANIMATION: AN OVERVIEW OF CENSORSHIP AND SELF-CENSORSHIP IN WESTERN COUNTRIES

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Abstract. Today, adult animation is the fastest growing segment in the industry. However, adult animation is also the least researched topic in animation field. In this article, the author explores what key elements hinder the growth in this animation segment with a focus on self-censorship and how it affects modern adult animation creative output and overall production. Also, the author discusses the concept of censorship in animation and its historical development. In other words, the genesis, and then reform of formal censorship systems into the age rating systems. And, while technically, with the abolition of the formal censorship system, today animators can create content of any kind, adult animation in the Western world has only begun to grow relatively recently. This paper investigates the key reasons that motivate self-censorship in animation to exist today, even when all the data shows that never before in the history of this medium, has the adult animation segment had such good conditions to get funded and reach an audience. Additionally, the author examines the concept of mature themes from the perspective of Western censorship apparatus.

Keywords: adult animation, animation, animation censorship, animation self-censorship, creative industries, mature animation.

Introduction

Modern animation is abundant, high quality (in terms of production and content), diverse (in terms of genre, style, technique, themes, origin, and target audience) and easily accessible. It is interesting to note that animation now successfully competes with live-action content in terms of popularity, revenue, and critical achievements.

However, animation studies, due to intimate affinity with (live action) film, often struggles to find its own unique perspective or identity. As Wells (2002, p. 187) notes the

“idea that animation is an innocent medium, ostensibly for children, and largely dismissed in film histories, has done much to inhibit the proper discussions in the field”.

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Thus, scholarly books on animation are significantly lower in numbers compared to books on the live-action medium. As are theses on animation in comparison to film (based on a search of the British Library, United Kingdom (UK), *E-Theses Online Service* database done at the beginning of 2021). And yet there is one research segment in the whole field of animation that is even further neglected compared to its importance and popularity – adult (or mature) animation.

It should be noted, that there is no better time (or reason) to study this phenomenon than now. As the recent white paper, *Adult Animation: Finally Breaking Free of Its Comedy Shackles* (Evershed, 2020, p. 3) states adult animation is “the fastest growing animation category with the most headroom for growth”. However, there are still plenty challenges ahead for creators of adult animation content like talent shortage, limited distribution, legal trends (contractually “locking up” content and the best creators), economical (e.g. adult animation is not as merchandisable as kids, see Evershed, 2020), censorship (Chen, 2020), biased perception of the medium (Boivin, 2017; Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2018; Leigh & Mjolsness, 2020), and underrepresentation of minorities (Fubara-Manuel, 2017; Cohen, 2004; da Costa, 2007). And while most of these challenges deserve wider attention from researchers, this paper will seek to explore only a small issue related to this phenomenon – what are the key reasons today that actively motivate an animation creator to avoid creating for this segment.

1. Animation censorship – setting the stage

At its core, adult animation is animated content that is created for an adult audience and can be expressed in any format, genre, and platform. In other words, adult animation is a form of entertainment that uses the animation medium and tackles such narrative themes (a conceptual or intellectual premise, see Wells, 2002) like death, divorce, sexuality, identity, politics, war, loneliness, existential ennui, addiction, and more. However, for quite some time, the very idea of adult animation was simply unacceptable.

Thus, although, the animation medium itself is over a century old (Bendazzi, 2017), the rise of animated content (in mainstream media) that is specifically created for adult audience is still relatively new and niche. As Boivin (2017, ii) argues “animation is seen as the innocent child of contemporary media and is often considered innocuous and juvenile in general popular culture”. The situation is not helped by the fact that cinemas (even today) often follow the practice of identifying animated films as a genre, thus creating a condition for movie-goers to continue to believe that animation is primarily a light-hearted form of entertainment (Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2018).

One of the most important factors behind this misconception was censorship for cinema and television content that regulated what animation can portrait and what cannot portrait. Thus, for the greater part of the existence of this medium, the world’s animators, working in the mainstream media, have devoted a great deal of effort to hiding or avoiding adult themes in their creations. As Cohen (2004) noticed, during formal censorship in the United States (US) (1934 to 1968) most of the writers were careful not to create anything that could cause problems. And this self-censorship, in turn, was adopted into a way of life. With most animation creators adding that “they were never affected by the censors as they never worked

on anything that needed to be changed” (Cohen, 2004, p. 46). Or in other words, animators adapted to the situation caused by formal censorship so well that they no longer perceive the situation as limiting their creative expression.

A similar situation occurred in the Soviet Union (and its satellite states). However, it is important to note that in Soviet countries formal censorship apparatus was not only in charge of distribution and exhibition supervision, but was also the only source of financing for cinematic projects. And this censorship apparatus was a cumbersome system of filmmaking where films with “ideological errors” were not permitted to exist (Golovskoy & Rimberg, 1986, p. 32). Therefore, creatives that would not fully succumb to political authority could have been severely punished (Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė, 2008). This led to a situation where filmmakers in Soviet states were tranquil within the existing system (Mitkus & Steiblytė, 2018). Or in other words, animators fully accepted the price to professional creative expression is ideologically appropriate content. It was simple dichotomy.

Today most Western democratic countries abandoned formal censorship systems in favor of ones that rates cinematic production based on suitability for different age groups. Of course, some form of censorship still exists even within the new rating system. For example, UK’s most recent decision to ban a film issued on 26th January, 2021 (banned film – 1977 Italian exploitation film *Gestapo’s Last Orgy* (Italian: *L’ultima orgia del III Reich*, 1977, director Cesare Canevari, see British Board of Film Classification, 2022).

Thus, Western democratic countries still practice some form of film censorship to this day, albeit in most cases it just forbids pornographic, hateful, and ultra-violent material in cinemas, and no longer censor films based on political, religious, or moral stand. However, it is interesting to note that the reasons and scientific rationale for censorship itself has been criticized by scholars and have raised questions not only about genre boundaries, but also about the definition and prioritization of art cinema within censoring institutions (Barker, 2016; Kapka, 2017, 2018).

2. (Un)censored animation today

An age rating system is the primarily tool used to protect certain groups in society from potentially harmful cinematic content by ratings classifications that either warn parents or guardians about violent material or restrict theater access to children. And it must be noted that the importance and necessity of this tool is not in doubt. However, in European Union alone there are many different practices for applying this protection tool for minors. By comparison, some countries provide the possibility for young cinema viewers to watch movies that are restricted for them if the child is accompanied by an adult (e.g., Sweden, see Statens medieråd, 2021). However, in other countries such exceptions do not exist (e.g., Lithuania, see Lietuvos kino centras prie Kultūros ministerijos, 2018). Furthermore, some countries use advisory systems (for parental guidance) in addition to restrictions (legally binding). Finally, in some countries (like Poland, see Kirwil, 2003) ratings are not set by any board or advisory body and are based on self-certification by the distributor, cinema, or broadcaster. Thus, it is therefore necessary to consider the fact that any comparison of rating systems between different countries can only be conditional.

Frequently, different countries judge the exact same movie for the exact same age group as differently appropriate. For example, the movie *Sausage Party* (2016, directors Conrad Vernon and Greg Tiernan) received Rated R in the US (Rotten Tomatoes 2022), N-16 in Lithuania (Forumcinemas.lt, 1993–2022) 15 in UK (British Board of Film Classification, 2019), and 11 rating in Sweden (Statens medieråd, 2021). Thus, even in a small sample of countries within Western cultural boundaries there are clear cultural and moral differences in assessing what content is appropriate and what is not appropriate for particular age groups.

It can therefore be argued that while there is a common vision in Western countries that certain content should not be accessible to minors, the further decision on how to implement this protection is unique to each country. However, after examination of the regulatory documents that governs the process of rating films in Australia, Ireland, Lithuania, Sweden, UK and US, it was revealed that, at least conceptually, most countries perceive the notion of what is “adult” quite similarly. The following cinematographic (thematic, visual and aural) elements have been identified (in one form or another) in all countries as suitable only for mature audiences:

- Mature themes (perceived through narrative);
- Violence (any form of danger to the characters);
- Language (obscene, vulgar, offensive or profane);
- Depictions of nudity and/or sexual activity;
- Adult activities (*i.e.* activities that adults, but not minors, may engage in legally);
- Illegal activities (drugs, crime, violence of any kind against the other person, *etc.*).

Of course, the degree and the context of depictions of the listed elements in the cinematic work will determine what age census will be assigned. In other words, nudity that is briefly shown, especially in the context of comedy, will be treated more leniently than the portrayal of a sexual act. And in the US case, sexual acts between unmarried, minors or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender couples will be rated more rigorously. However, summing-up, it is these identified aspects that will always be the basis for a stricter age rating.

It is interesting to note, that some countries quite strongly expand the definitions of content that is not suitable for minors, while others very briefly refer to general guidelines. For comparison, the British Board of Film Classification (2019) not only distinguishes between the categories of nudity and sexual intercourse, but also points to aspects where nudity is assessed more strictly (in the sense of ranking). Meanwhile, the Lithuanian Film Indexing Commission simply has to take into account whether the film contains “erotic or nude body demonstration scenes” (Lietuvos kino centras prie Kultūros ministerijos, 2018).

Also, there are aspects of content that are sensitive for certain countries’ censorship apparatus. In UK and Australia, any form of discrimination is unwelcomed in content for younger audience. Meanwhile, Lithuanian regulations draw additional attention to scenes in where the action or intent of suicide is shown. Thus, it is clear that local censorship apparatus actively reflects on the sensitive social and cultural challenges that the specific country faces.

It should be noted once more that while there is a common vision among analysed countries as to what content should not be accessible to minors, there are still significant differences between countries in how content is valued. One of the key differences between America and Europe are that Americans are much more untroubled by physical violence,

however Americans perceive sexual content as much more problematic. This situation is quite the opposite in Europe (Phillips, 2016; Deutsche Welle, 2022; Timsit, 2022).

Finally, from the censorship apparatus point of view, entire movies are not judged to be child appropriate or not. It is the separate scenes that will determine what age ratings a movie will get. In other words, abandoning one or more scenes can result in an age rating that opens the movie to be watched by younger viewers. Which, in turn, can be a very strong economic motivator for filmmakers (Timsit, 2022).

The latter aspect is analysed quite extensively in the 2006 American documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006, director Kirby Dick) where interviews with filmmakers revealed that NC-17 ratings often significantly reduce a film's chances at the box office (and overall commercial success), because many movie theatres refuse to show NC-17 films, and if they do it is for very limited time periods. Furthermore, stricter age ratings are also harmful to home media sales, as many retailers in US refuse to sell NC-17 or unrated movies. Thus, investor's pressure animators to abandon scenes that lead to stricter censoring, even if those scenes are central to the whole work.

3. The rise of adult animation segment

The rating system that exists today in most Western countries essentially allows animators to create cinematic works that can tackle all narrative themes and be designed to be watched by a viewer of any age (as oppose to be exclusively created for children). However, although the animation industry is subjected to fewer restrictions regarding visual, verbal, and narrative content, that does not mean that there are no other factors that determine what animation content will have the greatest chance of appealing to distributors and exhibitors. In other words, cinema booking and television programming policies decide what will be shown to the public. And those policies usually are based on a strategy to acquire the most compelling content for their specific viewers. Thus, not all content is created equal.

For a long time, it meant that only one segment of animation was truly desirable for decision makers in television and cinema enterprises – content intended for children. This happened because the economic model of cinema and television encourages looking for content that fills each time slots with the most attractive cinematic production for the largest possible number of viewers. Adult animation content was not perceived as something that could become mainstream. Thus, the scarce animated content that was targeted for adults “basically come in three flavours – irreverent (adult swim), family sitcoms (FOX) and Japanese anime” (Evershed, 2020, p. 6). In other words, animation that is cheap to make or to buy.

However, it is important to point out that, although new censorship systems did not remove all artificial challenges for animators that wanted to create content for adults, it was, as Cohen (2004, p. 48) aptly observes, a

“far healthier system than relying on one group to judge the content of films and to restrict the public's choices to works bearing official seals of approval”.

Thus, animators just needed to get a chance to prove that an audience exists for adult content animation.

And this chance appeared with the rise of subscription video on demands (SVODs). Presenting it in an oversimplified way – SVODs, unlike linear format platforms, do not need to worry about how each time slots would be the most attractive to the largest possible number of viewers. Thus, economic model of SVODs has made it possible to provide high quality (even the most niche) animated content for its targeted audience and (most importantly) stay profitable. Furthermore, data presented in the white paper (Evershed, 2020) suggests that with the recent success SVODs have had with adult-themed animation content, other SVOD platforms and linear broadcasters are diversifying their animated content.

Interestingly, while COVID-19 pandemic was huge blow for most segments of entertainment industries, animation (especially adult segment) was one of few entertainment formats that greatly benefited from this disastrous situation. Thus, McGurk (2021) notice that “adult animation was already undergoing something of a renaissance pre-pandemic, as it well and truly broke free of its shopworn zany family format”, but only during the pandemic it was truly proven that adult animation is a viable business plan for mainstream audiences. Arguably the biggest sign of changing perceptions towards this segment is *The Walt Disney Company’s* recent decision to launch a new adult animation division (Yahoo! Finance, 2021).

However, these discussed positive developments for the animated adult segment are taking place exclusively in the US market, so it is necessary to look at Europe separately. And on the Old Continent positive changes are also happening – there are strong signs that animators in Europe also want to change the existing *status quo*. Arguably the most important indicator of this change is the number of feature animation projects presented at cartoon movie forums that are aimed at adult audiences are steadily continuing to grow. Amidi (2016) noticed that in 2016, at the cartoon movie event, a record one-third of the projects were targeted for either adult or young adult audiences. As of 2020 the “films aimed at young adults/adults remained strong with 21%” of all presented projects (Cartoon Media EU, 2022).

However, increasing number of pitches of adult themed animated projects (even in such events like cartoon movie) is not enough to effectively increase the production of films that targets adult audiences. Animation feature length projects for adults are still significantly less attractive to distributors and exhibitors than projects that targets children. As Weber (2019) points out, adult animation film distributors still have to fight the perception that animation is not just entertainment for kids, in order to be able to bring adult animated films to their natural audience. Thus, distributing adult animation in Europe is challenging to say the very least and “it requires the capacity of targeting one’s audience in the most specific possible way” (Weber, 2019). However, these challenges also provide opportunities as the adult animation segment has the possibility to greatly enlarge its audience (Jiménez Pumares et al., 2015).

Animated documentaries and non-fictional narratives, on the other hand, seem to have been conquering global screens for the last 10 years. *Waltz with Bashir* (Hebrew: *Vals Im Bashir*, 2008, director Ari Folman), *Persepolis* (2007, directors Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud), *25 April* (2015, director Leanne Pooley), *Another Day of Life* (Polish: *Jeszcze dzień życia*, 2018, directors Raúl de la Fuente and Damian Nenow) manage not only to obtain universal acclaim but, in many cases, became relative box-office success. And that, in turn, acclimatize viewers, distributors and exhibitors to the concept of adult animation. Thus, there never has been a better time in the medium’s history to create and distribute adult-themed animations as today.

4. Self-censorship and its impact on the segment

For decades, the “adult” animation in the sphere of Western culture was an experience that was rarely found in movie theatres. Not surprisingly, most of adult animation from 1990s and later came from East Asia (Japan is a forefront of adult-themed animation production). It is important to point out that this happened mainly because cultural stigma towards animation as a “children-based-entertainment-form” never found a footing in Japan. Adult-oriented themes in Japan were introduced to cinema goers with such films as *A Thousand and One Nights* (Japanese: *Senya Ichiya Monogatari*, 1969, director Eiichi Yamamoto), anime film *Cleopatra* (Japanese: *Kureopatora*, 1971, director Osamu Tezuka), and *Belladonna of Sadness* (Japanese: *Kanashimi no Beradonna*, 1973, director Yamamoto) in yearly 1970s and had a profound impact on the future development of Japanese animation industry (Gan, 2007). Thus, today Japanese anime is a \$10.9 billion global industry that supplies majority of adult-themed animation in the world.

There is no reason why Europe could not become the next creative center in which animated content for adult audiences could flourish. In fact, Europe has long dominated the global film market with films that successfully address serious and difficult topics. Not to mention positive signs coming from cartoon event shows that a great number of animators from the Old Continent are more than willing to take a chance. Thus, with the growing reach and impact of SVOD platforms, there are more great opportunities than ever to reach adult audiences.

However, adult animation content is still limited to just a few genres. And while this situation is easy to explain – comedy, irreverent or quirky, and anime genres have already proven to have their own audience, making it a much safer and easier to justify investment into new content. Thus, animation creators that want to break down established creative patterns naturally face greater challenges. Interestingly, the best examples that the medium can be used to tell a wide variety of stories is animated documentary. Furthermore, documentary filmmakers have employed animation not to create a more aesthetically appealing or dynamic image for the viewer, but as a more effective (and often more ethical) means of communication to convey a message. Thus, arguably, these documentaries achieved far more interesting results than if the filmmakers had used the live-action medium.

Thus, the genre problem in the adult animation segment is part of a vicious cycle – without success stories it is very difficult to expect that creators and investors will risk and experiment with new genres, and success stories cannot arise if no one invests into new content. But this is part of a broader problem that largely leads to self-censorship in the animation industry. Animated content for adults, especially outside US, is still perceived as economically problematic and risky. In other words, in the global animation industry there is strong economic stimulus for self-censorship.

As it was discussed earlier in the article, if animated works, no matter what format, get rated as appropriate for older age groups, it not only limits how many potential viewers can see the work, but often influences cinema and television booking decisions. Furthermore, some important film markets outside of the Western field (such as Russia and China) have shown that adult-specific animation as a phenomenon is still largely unimaginable or, at very

least, it is very heavily censored (Chen, 2020; Milligan, 2021; Welk, 2020). Thus, narratives that choose to address socially sensitive topics could potentially lose any access to film markets whose censorship apparatus are politically motivated or have conservative moral views.

Moreover, it is necessary to remember that the censorship apparatus does not judge cinematographic works as a wholistic piece of art, but as the sum of scenes. Thus, decisions about age ratings may be dependent on filmmakers' willingness to remove particular scenes (or even just dialogue) from the cinematic works. Therefore, stimulating a culture that encourages filmmakers to produce work in a manner so as not to irritate the censorship apparatus.

Which leads to the third negative outcome produced by self-censorship in animation – talent. As Evershed (2020) states, at this point there are very few studios (in the US) that specialize in mature-themed animation production. Furthermore, the white paper noted that most current adult content creators come from live-action industries rather than an animation background. This is a result, again, mostly because of the long tradition of self-censorship in the global animation industry (Cohen, 2004; Leigh & Mjolsness, 2020). Content creators from the live-action medium come without prejudices or misconceptions about the animation medium and are motivated by opportunities that are not constrained by artificial censorship.

Thus, it is ironic that the adult animated segment, finally freed from century-long censorship shackles, faces challenges involving creativity and expression. Or, in other words, the adult animation segment is in need of storytellers from other mediums to fully unleash its creative potential. And even then, it still holds on to some taboos. A great example is *Netflix's* sitcom *Hoops*, a television series that is known for its excessive foul language. However, its showrunner Ben Hoffman publicly admitted that he actively self-censors all nudity-related content (Venable, 2020). Interestingly, in the same article Hoffman recalls that he asked *Netflix* about the streaming service's position on scenes with nudity. And when he got reassured, that *Netflix* gives free rein to its creators, the showrunner of *Hoops* decided that nudity is unacceptable and that "There's places to go if you want to see an animated penis, and it's not the kind of content that I want to make" (Venable, 2020).

Of course, any animated content creator has a right to decide what he or she wants to show and what not to include in the artwork. Therefore, it would be a wrong approach to fix the situation by blaming someone specifically for refusing to show one or another item. However, it is difficult not to see repetitive patterns in this segment – most adult content created today in the West is sitcom that claims the title "content for adults" through profanities or other vulgar display. Yet content that involves animated violence is still making headlines, even though it is more than a norm in the anime segment. Furthermore, animated erotic elements are still a strict taboo in the Western animation industry, even though nudity and presentation of sexual activity is the norm in live-action television and cinema.

Thus, mainstream adult animation has quite few boundaries to break before the medium will reach the creative potential that live-action has. And, of course, as discussed in this article, it is a complex problem involving economic, social, cultural, legal, and technological aspects that, therefore, cannot be solved easily and quickly. But, on the other hand, it should not be ignored. As various sources show, the golden age of adult animation is upon us. All the industry needs now is animation creators who have the right ideas for this segment, who would be willing to take creative risks and, of course, a little luck.

Conclusions

Animation for adult viewers today has the potential to find funding and reach its target audience like never before in medium's history. It is important to note that most modern democratic countries no longer use formal censorship systems and simply provide an age rating service. Therefore, in theory, animation creators can produce almost any content, and its display will be limited only to how potentially harmful it is to minors. And with the rise of SVOD, which has also had a positive influence on linear format platforms, animation creators today have an incredible opportunity to create content outside of the children segment.

However, self-censorship can be a serious problem, especially when there is a track record that just having a children animation segment (albeit heavily saturated) works just fine. Thus, animation's continuing evolution into a more diverse, adult storytelling medium is fraught with challenges that are mainly fear of risk than real, technological, legal, or economical obstacles. But, without the creators and the writers, this medium will never reach its potential and be recognized as an art form that can tell any and all kinds of stories. Thus, adult segments mostly now need creators that can tell mature themed stories in a way that only the animation medium can.

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