Animating Theory and Practice: Critical Media Literacy in the Post-Secondary Classroom

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Since the proliferation of digital media in the 1990s, the Arts and Humanities have undergone a sea change. Many post-secondary Humanities educators (myself included) have been trained in traditional methods of archival research, textual analysis, and historical and theoretical exegesis. However, students today inhabit a digital media environment that requires radically different research methods and skills. The rapid spread of digital cameras, smartphones, go pros, and tablets has put the means of media production into the pockets of a generation of youth. As a result, there has been a rise in students who are adept at using media technologies to make and comment on videos in general life, but may lack the skills to read visual texts critically or assess them for accuracy (Consandine et al 2009; Oblinger and Oblinger 2005). Humanities educators, on the other hand, have strong critical skills, but may lack the training and technical ability to effectively integrate new technologies into their pedagogical practice. In 2009, Considine et al argued that "The result [of limited media use in the classroom] is a failure to build a bridge between the technological world Millennials live in and the classrooms we expect them to learn in" (473). In 2017, when "alternative facts" and "fake news" are the buzzwords of the day, it is more important than ever to bridge the gap and ensure strong critical media literacy skills among post-secondary students and educators alike. Media literacy, as defined by scholars in the Digital Humanities, includes not only being able to decode, interpret, and judge texts, but also to encode, create, and disseminate them (Duncan 2005, Hobbs 1997, Mayer 2009, McPherson 2009). *Critical* media literacy adds to this the ability to recognize bias, to reconsider one's own received notions, to understand the underlying ideologies that shape how information is presented, and to address the role of "multicultural and social difference" in media texts (Kellner and Share 2005, 370). As such,

developing critical media literacy means fostering both traditional skills in visual analysis *and* strong digital media production skills at the faculty and student levels.

In this paper, I will introduce a project designed to promote critical media literacy among students and faculty in the discipline of Film Studies using customized digitally animated videos. While live-action videography may also be used, animation has several benefits that outweigh its inherently time-consuming and work-intensive nature. First, it is a relatively inexpensive format, as it requires no sets, costumes, actors, or even cameras, just basic office supplies and/or software that can be obtained at a small cost. Second, it is engaging in its ability to convey complex topics clearly using eye-catching, easy-to-understand graphics. And third, animation is an inherently self-reflexive medium made up of visibly artificial images that can easily comment on their own constructed nature (Crafton 1993, Wells 2003), making it the perfect format for interrogating how we make and read visual media. I propose that educators can foster greater critical media literacy by producing their own simple animated videos targeted to their pedagogical goals, and teaching students how to make video responses that demonstrate their understanding of key course concepts or larger social issues. As an example, I will present a customized digitally animated video and paired student animation assignment which I created for use in FS270: The Animated Film, an undergraduate-level elective course at Wilfrid Laurier University. This pedagogical experiment acted as a pilot project for a larger study to be carried out in the future. The main goal of the research is to answer the question: <u>how can animation be used as a tool for enhancing critical media literacy in the university-level Humanities classroom?</u> In this paper, I will present preliminary results from the pilot project which reveal that it is quite feasible for faculty and students to create animated videos with very little money or prior experience. However, such an undertaking requires careful preparation and pedagogical grounding in order to ensure that videos engage *critically* with dominant media paradigms.

Historical Context: Educational Animation vs. Propaganda

Animation has a long history of educational use both in the classroom and in the general public sphere. However, there has historically been a fine line between educational animation and animated propaganda of the sort produced by both Allied and Axis film studios during World War II. This historical and political legacy has continued to impact amateur animation production in the digital age, as described by Cassandra Van Buren's study of the ways in which WWII propaganda tropes resurfaced in Flash videos created by members of the American public in response to 9/11 (2006, 537). Even well-meaning students may be over-reliant on the stereotypical characters, tropes, and narrative patterns of classic cartooning if not given any guidance. As such, it is necessary at the outset to identify how animation has been mis-used to convey reductive, misleading, or biased information in historical examples, and to provide alternative methods of creating original animated videos that are accurate, informative, and engaging without being overly simplistic or polemical. Reviewing the history of propaganda and educational animation helps to ensure that critical media literacy, as a self-aware and well-informed practice, is promoted in faculty and student animation projects.

A useful example of the pitfalls of historical propaganda animation is Walt Disney's 1943 short "Reason and Emotion." This is a valuable piece to study because it is *not* one of Disney's more bombastic wartime films, and as such it retains some of the persuasive power that more over-the-top shorts (such as 1943's "Der Fuhrer's Face") have lost over time. "Reason and Emotion" employs an educational tone, with a sedate, authoritative voice-over narration explaining the psychological roles of reason and emotion in wartime life. Along with narration, the short also uses the classic Disney technique of anthropomorphization to visually represent the abstract concepts of "reason" and "emotion" as human-like characters who drive their owner's body like a car. Reason is portrayed as a prim blond haired man in a sober suit, while emotion resembles a red-headed, loin-cloth clad caveman, implying

that reason is evolved and civilized, while emotion is primitive and barbaric (Fig. 1). The narrative

structure of the film is likewise divided into two halves. The first half comically depicts the struggle of

reason to overcome emotion in an "average, normal male" (and later, female) in the United States. The

second half looks at how reason and emotion become unbalanced in the mind of a "Nazi Superman."

Let's examine some of the visual and narrative techniques used in the second part. [View clip 5:00-8:00]

Fig. 1: Emotion and Reason as stereotypes of barbarism vs. civilization

This clip simultaneously illustrates and employs the techniques of propaganda animation. It

explains in detail how a crowd's emotions can be manipulated by a charismatic leader. However, it also

manipulates its own cinematic audiences in the very same ways using visual and audio cues with strong

emotional associations. For instance, the film condemns Hitler's use of fear, sympathy, hatred, and

national pride to manipulate its audiences, while at the same time utilizing all four of these emotions to

convince American audiences of the rightness of their own cause. It elicits fear of Hitler by portraying

him as a threatening figure with sharp, pointed teeth, using the visual exaggerations of caricature and

stereotype. It elicits sympathy with the Superman's rational side by showing him as an "underdog" who

is attacked for speaking up, evoking an affective response to seeing a relatable character unjustly

punished. It promotes hatred of the Nazis using voice-over narration that emphasizes Hitler's opposition

to "the free democratic way of life" of Americans. And finally, it overtly induces national pride by

closing the film with a montage of common patriotic tropes found in many other propaganda films of the

time, such as stirring exhortations to defend the American way, heroic warplane imagery, and a martial anthem reminiscent of "God Save the Queen." The hypocrisy of employing the very manipulative techniques that are criticized in the enemy is masked by the strong binary structure of the film, in which "we" are associated with civilization and control over emotions, while "they" are associated with madness and brutality. In short, it's okay when "we" use propaganda, because "we" are already right.

 Student viewers may be tempted to agree with "Reason and Emotion" even today if their own national and political perspectives align somewhat with the "we" of the filmmakers. (For instance, some may argue: "But Hitler really was evil, and it's right to fight back against fascism with reason and emotion!") However, it is important to emphasize that *the techniques of propaganda exist independently of the content which they purport to express*. Propaganda cartoons emerged in many industrialized nations in the early to mid-twentieth century, and they were used to express ideologies along the entire political spectrum. Japanese studios used folkloric figures and cute animals to paint a positive portrait of Japan's bid for imperial dominance in East Asia (as in Seo Mitsuyo's 1945 feature film *Momotaro's Divine Ocean Warriors*, fig. 2), while animators in the USSR created anti-fascist and anti-capitalist propaganda with a graphically violent, satiric edge (as in 1941's "Fascist Boots Shall Not Trample Our Motherland" by Soyuzmultfilm directors Ivanov and Vano, fig. 3)
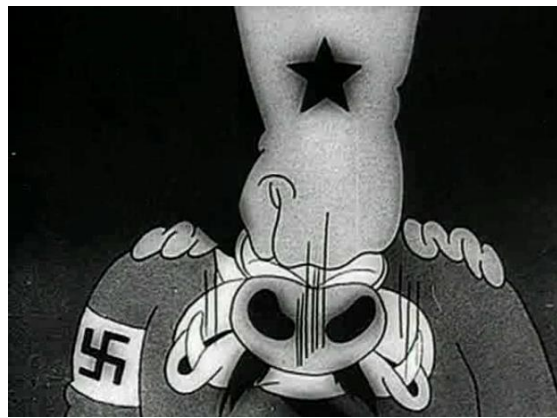

Fig. 2: Seo's cute, appealing soldier animals

Fig. 3: Ivanov and Vano's satiric caricature

Scholars have examined the ways in which animated propaganda films from various countries differed in content, rhetoric, and visual style due to the distinctive national ideologies that guided the filmmakers (Annett 2014, Dower 1986, Roffat 2005). But overall, a cartoon can be identified as propagandistic by the way in which it puts forward messages using visual and auditory techniques that reduce the opportunity for critical thought. These techniques include binary "Us vs. Them" oppositions, stereotype and caricature, and unreflexive use of the medium, such as glossing over hypocrisy and asserting information in an authoritarian manner, with no sources cited and no room for questions or discussion. These problematic techniques should be discussed with amateur animators early on to make sure everyone is aware of the impacts of propaganda, both in its time and today.

As an alternate example, I would like to present a more recent educational short that also distinguishes between two psychological concepts, but does so without a propagandistic emphasis on binary thinking, stereotyping, or authoritarianism. This short film animates an excerpt from a TED Talk by University of Houston research professor Brené Brown, who works on the concept of empathy. It is titled simply "Brene Brown on Empathy." It was produced by the British studio RSA Animates, a division of the British Royal Society of Arts, and was released on the RSA's YouTube channel in 2013.

Like "Reason and Emotion," this film begins with two distinct psychological concepts, empathy and sympathy, and aims to show why one is preferable to the other using a combination of voice-over narration and anthropomorphic characters -in this case, animals that represent human social tendencies. It is important to note that the RSA animators do not use animal iconography according to the stereotypes of classical Hollywood animation. Foxes are stereotypically framed as crafty and are often coded male, as exemplified in works ranging from Disney's *Pinocchio* (1940) to Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009) to the recent Oscar-winning film *Zootopia* (2016). By contrast, this short depicts a female fox character who represents sadness, emotional expression, and a desire for

compassionate interpersonal connection. Bears in conventional Western representation are typically seen as either wild, threatening enemies or cuddly pals along the lines of "Winnie the Pooh." The bear in this short appears to be neither at first glance; he seems like an everyday kind of guy in a T-shirt and ball cap. Finally, while deer are typically gentle, sensitive, and childlike (think *Bambi*), the gazelle-like antagonist in this short is well-meaning but somewhat crass and insensitive. In this way, both negative and positive personal qualities are framed as features of the animals' *behaviours* toward each other rather than a result of their essence or animal *nature*. The highly stylized character designs (Fig. 4) suggest a refusal to naturalize the animals using familiar tropes or fixed personality types, as in "Reason and Emotion." Instead, the short encourages audiences to think flexibly about the individual human traits and experiences the characters express.

Fig. 4: The RSA's clean-lined, geometrical character designs

In the end, this film makes a clear argument for the benefits of empathy over sympathy without relying on exaggerated stereotypes, binary oppositions, or authorial say-so. While it does feature voice-over narration by Brené Brown, who acts as an authority figure explaining the concepts at hand, the information she relays is based on verifiable sources (quotations from academic studies) rather than authoritarian assertion. These facts are illustrated using both dynamic text and images, combining the language of academic research with the language of character animation. This short thus serves as a

useful example of a digitally-animated educational video which promotes understanding of a particular topic in a visually appealing way, without heavy-handed propagandizing.

That said, "Brené Brown on Empathy" displays a much higher level of technical proficiency and polish than the average educator could produce with no budget for use in a single class. In order to demonstrate how an amateur animator might approach a similar project, I would like to turn now to the pilot project which was conducted at my own institution in Canada.

Case Study: Intro

"Annett's Familiar Quotations" is a short animated video which I produced as a pilot project in the summer of 2015, under the mentorship of independent visual/recording artist Jenny Breukelman at the Gulf Islands Film and Television School in British Columbia. I had no prior filmmaking experience and only one week to complete the film from concept to screening. I received a Special Initiative grant of 850.00 from the Office of Research Services at Wilfrid Laurier University for tuition and travel from Toronto to Vancouver. Once there, I used my own DSLR camera for shooting video and photography. GIFTS provided access to computers with the Adobe Creative Suite of software, including Flash and After Effects for digital animation and Premiere for video editing, which were the primary programs used. Since I wanted to make a project that used both digital and analog techniques, GIFTS also provided an old-fashioned back-lit animation table for re-tracing frames, an 8mm film projector and reels of previously-shot footage, and basic materials such as paper and clay. Were one to purchase the equipment I used to make a similar hybrid film, an estimated budget would be around 1700.00, which puts this work in the category of a "micro-budget" production (Table 1). However, if one were to cut out all the expenses related to analog animation and make a 100% digitally animated video, as I would advocate for most educators, then it can be done for as little as 50.00 using top-of-the-line software such as the Adobe Creative Suite, or much less using free editing software such as DaVinci Lite.

Table 1: Estimated budget for similar animation project (analog/digital hybrid)	
Budget Item	**Cost (in CAD)**
Adobe Creative Suite (1 month cloud access)	49.99/mo USD = 66.57 CAD
Canon EOS 70D DSLR camera	999.95
Backlit animation table (new)	330.00
Hand-held portable audio recorder	80.00
8mm film projector/splicer (second-hand)	125.00
Misc. office supplies (paper, pencils, clay, etc.)	100.00
	Total: 1701.52

Goal: the goal of this pilot project was to test the feasibility of making a customized digitally animated video for pedagogical purposes. I wanted to discover if it was plausible for an educator to make a teachable film in a short amount of time, with little experience, and on a reasonably small budget. I also wanted to discover if students could be induced to make similar films in an otherwise purely academic class, and if it would contribute to their learning experience. These two goals came together into a single aim: to find out if a video production project could become a means of integrating professional development for educators and scholarly media production for students, enhancing critical media literacy for all parties involved.

Literature review: I am not the first scholar to use animated film as a pedagogical tool. Since the 1980s, scholars of media literacy have used various theoretical frameworks to support making animation for educational purposes, ranging from Constructionism (Donaldson 2014) to postcolonial feminist pedagogy (Jimenez 2014). Practical activities involving animation that researchers have tested include having Fine Arts undergraduate students produce 3D models of ancient cities and historical

monuments (Flaten 2008), having trainee teachers in practicums make "Slowmation" slide shows for their elementary school students (Hoban 2005, Vratulis, Clarke, Hoban, and Erickson 2011), and having children themselves create "explanatory animations": simple digital animations that illustrate concepts such as Solfeggio (the do-re-mi scale) in music (Jacobs and Robin 2016, Mayer 2009). That said, the majority of work done on using animation for education in the Digital Humanities is focused on primary and secondary school-aged children (e.g. Goodman 2003). 2D animation, in particular, is often seen as a tool most appropriate for children, likely due to the long-standing association between childhood and cartoons in Western popular culture. Authors who have discussed the importance of media literacy for post-secondary educators and students, such as N. Katherine Hayles (2012), have approached it primarily from a theoretical perspective and do not include practical applications or case studies. Education scholars have likewise advocated the textual analysis of animated works, especially Japanese anime, in classes at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary level in order to promote cross-cultural understanding (e.g. Shamoon 2010; Allison forthcoming). These are all valuable approaches with their own merits. However, my project is based on discovering how animation *production*, along with theoretical analysis, can be an appropriate tool at the post-secondary level, drawing on work in animation theory that undermines the long-held Western conception of animation as a primarily child-oriented medium (e.g. Pilling 1998, Stabile 2003).

A second differentiating factor for my project is that the majority of case studies done on media literacy come from the field of Education. Film and Animation Studies scholars have made relatively few inroads into the potentials of using digital animation to promote media production skills alongside media analysis skills. In Film Studies, *Cinema Journal* published an "In-Focus" section on Digital Scholarship and Pedagogy in 2009 with an excellent introduction calling for a new form of "multimodal scholarship" by Tara McPherson (123). In Animation Studies, there has been some attention to the role

of theory and practice in the teaching of animation for Fine Arts student. Key contributions include Paul Ward's article "Some Thoughts on Practice-Theory Relationships in Animation Studies" (2006) and Jacobs and Robin's "Animating Best Practice" (2016). However, there has been much less work on pedagogy that integrates the most current advances in formal animation theory, such as Thomas Lamarre's (2009) "media theory of animation." I suggest that it is important to advance contemporary theory as well as practice by using an interdisciplinary framework that harmonizes scholarship from Digital Humanities, Education, Film Studies, and Animation Studies, supplementing the gaps in each area in order to provide a strong platform for original media research and production.

Methodology: The guiding methodology of this project is founded on the Digital Humanities tactic of integrating theory and practice in pedagogy. After completing "Annett's Familiar Quotations" in 2015, I screened it in a second-year undergraduate course, FS270: The Animated Film. In this course, the film served as both as a prompt for theoretical discussion about the nature of animated filmmaking and as a practical model for students to follow when making their own films for the course.

The driving concept of this film was to catalogue famous characters and catchphrases from animation history, but also defamiliarize them by rendering them with animation techniques from distant eras. The newer films and TV shows, such as *Minions*, *Toy Story*, and *The Simpsons*, are rendered in older techniques, such as hand-drawing, paper cut-outs, and Claymation. The older works, such as *Snow White*, *Betty Boop*, and the *Looney Tunes* series, are rendered using newer or more avant-garde techniques, such as scratching on 8mm film and minimalist/abstract digital animation (Figs. 5 and 6).

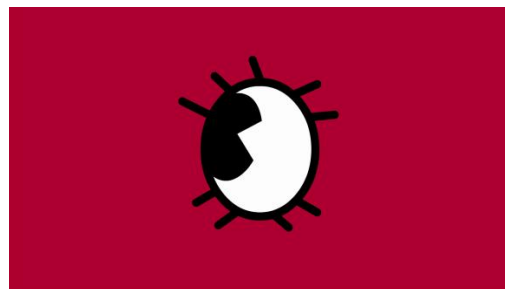Fig. 5: A minion created using pencils and paper Fig. 6: A Betty Boop-style "pie eye" rendered in Flash

The "Familiar Quotations" title and the concept of cataloging characters and techniques was inspired by a copy of the book *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* that I saw in an antiques shop the day before making the film. While all the "quotations" are drawn from commercial American animation due to the constraints of time and considerations of audience, no one style or studio is privileged above the others as the "pinnacle of achievement." The purpose of the film was rather to encourage students to recognize the distinction between familiar animation *characters*, seen as stars that simply exist and act in films, and the techniques of animated filmmaking that inform how images of characters are *created*, what they can do, and why they are depicted as such. Helping students get past the habit of accepting animated characters as given and move toward questioning what technologies and ideologies underlie the images was the first step in promoting critical media literacy. Later lectures in the course addressed topics such as propaganda animation and cross-cultural exchange in world animation, ensuring that students would have the requisite historical knowledge to produce a well-informed film. "Annett's Familiar Quotations" was screened during the first week of class in January 2016 and served as an effective discussion starter about the nature of the animation medium. Since this was the beginning of term, it also acted as an example used in explaining to students what they should do for their own animation assignments.

The animation assignment was carefully crafted to emphasize both the practical and critical aspects of making an animated film. Students were tasked with creating a video between 30 seconds and 2 minutes long that reflected some element of the history or theory of animation covered in the class. They also had to write an Artist's Statement of 500-750 words explaining their animation method and the theoretical underpinning of their work. While they could use any technology they wished, from flipbooks to CGI, I gave strict instructions that their videos should not depict just anything, like a cat walking down the street, but should relate to a core theoretical concept or historical style studied

throughout the term, such as metamorphosis or silent-era animation. Basically, their animations had to have some kind of critical content that demonstrated what they had learned in the class.

FS 270 is a popular elective course for non- majors with little to no filmmaking experience, so the Animation Assignment was an optional project, ensuring that there was no bias in assignment types that would unjustly favour the more experienced students from Laurier's Film Production option. All students had the choice of either doing the Animation Assignment or writing three short personal response papers (called a "Film Journal") about films viewed throughout the term. To help students who wanted to make a film but had no production experience, I held an extracurricular animation workshop over the Reading Week break in which I taught the basics of character design, storyboarding, and animating simple movements such as bouncing balls and walking stick figures using activities gathered from professional animation guidebooks (e.g. Jones 2007, Laybourne 1998, Williams 2001). Materials from the workshop were also posted online for students who couldn't attend in person.

In terms of evaluation, the grade for the assignment was weighted equally between theory and practice, with 50% of the mark awarded for the artist's statement and 50% for the technical proficiency and creativity of the film. The top ten highest-marked films were screened in an in-class "Film Festival" in the final week of term, giving students the opportunity to view and discuss each other's work. The assignment was worth 15% of the final course grade, so it did not replace a formal analytical essay. Rather, it complemented and enhanced established pedagogical methods in Film Studies.

Results: At the end of the Winter 2016 term, I was able to record some quantitative and qualitative measures of the project's success. Most tellingly, 47out of 59 students, or 80% of the class, chose to create an animated short film rather than write traditional response papers. Of the students who made films, 95% passed the assignment by completing a short film at least 30 seconds long that reflected animation theory or history. Some students opted to use analog animation techniques ranging

from optical toys made of spinning cardboard discs to hand-drawn frame-by-frame animation. The majority, however, used some form of easily-available digital animation software, such as 30-day free trials of Flash and free stop motion apps for smartphones. The average grade for the assignment was 72% or B-, which is quite good for a second-year undergraduate course at Laurier.

When this pilot project was conducted, Laurier had not yet moved to online course evaluations with customizable questions, so I was unable to get written feedback on the assignment. However, in an open discussion held on the final day of the course, students related that they found the assignment to be challenging but eye-opening. The main criticism they had was that it took more time and effort to create an animated film than they were used to putting into an assignment worth 15%. They were quite proud of their films and wanted to be rewarded more for their work. An equally common remark was that they had gained a new appreciation for animation techniques and history, particularly how hard animators work to produce the moving images we take for granted as audiences. Some students were even inspired to continue in animation. Among the top ten most highly-graded student filmmakers, one went on the Bachelor of Animation program at Sheridan College, where she further developed the Norman McLaren-inspired style she came up with for her animation assignment. Another presented his animated film in a student-run symposium, and was later accepted into the prestigious Master's program in Film Studies at the University of Toronto.

Among the students who performed poorly on this assignment, the major issue was that they didn't create videos that engaged *critically* with historical styles. One film in particular was problematic because it replicated the violent and polarizing style of WWII propaganda animation with no consideration for the ethical pitfalls of the style. However, in May 2017 the student filmmaker returned to my office for advising and apologized for the insensitivity of his film. He told me that after reading the feedback I'd given him, he realized what he had done wrong in using the propaganda style. It

became a teachable moment (though for confidentiality reasons and at the student's request, I cannot provide specific details about the film in question).

This pedagogical experiment, involving just one original film targeted to the needs of one specific course, is a very small-scale case and is hardly representative of all the possible projects that could arise in other disciplines and educational contexts. It was not intended as an exhaustive study but rather as a pilot project or proof-of-concept for a larger-scale attempt at integrating digital filmmaking into the academic curriculum in Film Studies. In the future, I would like to make a longer video or a series of shorts which more directly addresses the concept of critical media literacy. I plan to screen it in a greater variety of venues, including multiple classroom settings and conference panels, and to conduct formal surveys of the audiences in order to gather data from both students and faculty on the effectiveness and challenges of making customized digitally animated videos. An initial proposal to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding was unsuccessful due to the comparatively modest scale of the project when compared with larger ventures funded in the 2017 competition. However, the adjudicators noted that the project's aims are worthwhile, so I hope to pursue it further in the future.

To conclude, I would like to put forward some questions to you, the reader of this paper for the Workshop on Education, Culture, and Networks. Have you had any opportunities to complete a similar media production or animation project as a student? Have you ever tried using media production projects in a classroom setting as a teacher? What benefits do you think might arise from teaching critical media literacy in this manner? And what pitfalls or problems do you foresee? Education is above all a collaborative effort, and so I look forward the open dialogue to come.

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