

An Unfolding Inquiry into the Aesthetics of Explicit Nudity in 2D Adult Animation

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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September 2024

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The author has had seven scientific articles published on the thesis topic:

- Mitkus, T. 2021. Aesthetics in adult animation: Animated documentary. *CONFIA 2021. 9th International Conference on Illustration and Animation*, Portugal, October.
- Mitkus, T. 2021. Anime: An approach to erotica and violence in animation for adults. *CONFIA 2021. 9th International Conference on Illustration and Animation*, Portugal, October.
- Mitkus, T. 2023. Adult animation: An overview of censorship and self-censorship In Western countries. *Creative Studies*, 16(1): 39–49.
- Mitkus, T. 2023. Practice diary for animation: A reflective tool for the practitioner, researcher, and educator. *CONFIA 2023. 10th International Conference on Illustration and Animation*, Portugal, July.
- Mitkus, T., Semėnas, R., Jablonskytė, R., & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, V. 2023. AI in visually based creative industries: Impact, challenges, and predictions. *CONFIA 2023. 10th International Conference on Illustration and Animation*, Portugal, July.
- Mitkus, T. 2024. Animating erotica without shame: An autoethnographic creative account. *Creative Studies*, 17(1): 345-361.
- Mitkus, T. 2024. Explicit Nudity in Western Adult Animation Segment: Case Study. *CONFIA 2024. 11th International Conference on Illustration and Animation*, Portugal, July. [in press]

In addition, reports on the studied subjects have been given at five scientific conferences:

- CONFIA 2021. 9th International Conference on Illustration and Animation. October 28–29, Aveiro, Portugal.
- 6th International Conference ‘Visuality 2021: Media and Communication’, April 22–23, Vilnius, Lithuania.
- Audiovisual Media in Lithuania: Research, Education, Ethics, 2022. November 29, Vilnius, Lithuania.

- CONFIA 2023. 10th International Conference on Illustration and Animation. July 6–7, Caldas Da Rainha, Portugal.
- CONFIA 2024. 11th International Conference on Illustration and Animation, July 4-5, Barcelos, Portugal.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how explicit imagery can be used in 2D adult animation content to create engaging, mature stories. The thesis argues that 2D animation provides unique aesthetical solutions and options to tell mature and engaging stories that live-action medium simply cannot.

This study employs autoethnographic methodology with a reflection practice diary and animation tests as two main methods to gather rich data. This research approach was chosen so that the researcher could experience first-hand how cultural programming and the pressure of the Judeo-Christian moral value system affect animators who set themselves on the goal of creating explicit animated content with sexual overtones.

The inquiry's starting point is an examination of the animation medium's relationship with explicit imagery, with a focus on the development and growth of the adult animation segment. This is followed by the analysis of aesthetical applications in various adult animation sub-segments. The thesis then examines examples of explicit animated imagery in non-sexual, erotic, and pornographic content through such aesthetical concepts as motion, colour, appeal, stylisation, and exaggeration.

Textual analysis with empirical evidence has revealed how (mentally and emotionally) challenging it is for an animator from the Western cultural sphere to produce explicit erotic content. The emotional stress was felt and long-lasting. However, research showed that this taboo could be broken, but it requires substantial time investment and a strong will. The findings from animation tests indicate how 2D animation can extract the essence of beauty from explicit nudity and sexual intercourse. Finally, the thesis demonstrates how 2D aesthetics can serve to create unique, mature stories. This thesis concludes with a conversation about why erotica needs animation and animation needs erotica.

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I want to thank the University for the Creative Arts for accepting me back into its community and, in this way, allowing me to finish my studies at the same place where I started so many years ago.

Finally, I want to thank my colleagues from the animation and film industry who helped me with valuable feedback and, more than once, inspired me to look at my research from a different angle and as a result, to generate interesting insights.

I am very happy that I started this journey, and I am eager to know where it will lead me in the future.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Adult animation is the fastest-growing animation segment today. When the author of this thesis started his research journey, the adult animation segment was still considered promising and on the verge of transforming. In less than four years, industry observers have argued that ‘adult animation’ finally meant the age group for which the animation content is intended, but not the genre or style. The term ‘adult animation’ no longer implies anything specific, but only an indication of how animators will approach storytelling.

However, there is a considerable knowledge gap in the research literature on how to approach mature themes in the animation medium aesthetically. This suggests that animators, once they decide to create content that will show explicit nudity or sexual intercourse, have no theoretical basis for how best to approach it. Furthermore, the literature suggests that today’s work culture in the industry motivates animation content creators to actively avoid showing explicit nudity and sex in animated content to secure better financing and distribution deals. Animated mainstream content creators actively avoid stories involving explicit visual material as it is perceived as a high-risk project. As a result, they are fostering a culture and perception in the industry that skills and insights about the depiction of explicit nudity or sexual activity in animation art form is not only unwanted knowledge, but potentially detrimental to an animator’s career and personal image.

As the white paper, *Adult Animation: Finally Breaking Free of Its Comedy Shackles* (Evershed 2020:3) states that adult animation is ‘the fastest growing animation category with the most headroom for growth’. However, there are still plenty of challenges ahead for creators of adult animation content such as talent shortage, limited distribution, legal trends (contractually ‘locking up’ content and the best creators), economical (e.g. adult animation is not as merchandisable as that for minors – see Evershed 2020), censorship (Chen 2020), biased perception of the medium (Boivin 2017; Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitké 2018; Mjolsness & Leigh 2020) and under-representation of minorities (Fubara-Manuel 2017; Cohen 2004; da Costa 2007). While most of these challenges deserve wider attention from researchers and scholars, this doctoral thesis will seek to explore the aesthetics of explicit animated imagery as another key issue facing the sector’s development.

This thesis draws on a range of disciplines and theories to extend our

understanding of aesthetic possibilities in an animation medium when employing explicit imagery. This approach was necessary because explicit animated imagery historically received very little sustained scholarly analysis; many critical texts used in this thesis rely on literature that deals exclusively with live action. Many texts that are influential and shaped erotic and pornographic studies were first published in the last three decades, including Linda Williams' *Hard Core* (1999 – first edition 1989), *Screening Sex* (2008) and *Porn Studies* (2004), Mandy Merck *The Sexual Subject: Screen Reader in Sexuality* (1992), Damon R. Young *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies* (2018), Shira Tarrant *The Pornography Industry* (2016). However, with the continued growth and development of 'erotic and pornographic studies', there is hope that in the near future, animation will be included in this research field.

The situation with the studies that examine the concept and application of aesthetics in animation art is significantly better. Such animation scholars as Scott Bukatman, Esther Leslie, Eric Herhuth, Maureen Furniss, and Paul Wells have established theoretical foundations that can be employed to research, produce, or criticise animated artwork. However, the inquiry into the aesthetics of 2D animation that has sexual overtones showed that this direction of research is extremely unattractive among animation researchers.

There are many definitions of aesthetics terms in the scientific literature. Therefore, in this thesis, the term *aesthetics* is defined as a creative outcome that can invoke emotional experience from animated work viewers. However, in animation aesthetics, emotional experience can be divided into two groups: objective (taste) and subjective (beauty is in the eye of the beholder). In this thesis, the researcher will focus on motion, colour, appeal, stylisation, exaggeration, sublime, taste (character and background) design, acting, and the uncanny valley.

At the heart of this research are animation tests that have not once changed their form, scope, and aims through the research journey. Nevertheless, through the reflective process, these animation tests helped identify many cultural aspects intertwined with the aesthetics of explicit animated imagery. This doctoral thesis offers a more nuanced understanding of the aesthetics of explicit animated imagery and its relationship with sexual morality and behaviour in both the Western cultural sphere and mainstream animation industries.

Finally, this thesis employs an ethnographical approach to gather data on the

research topic. It is paramount to address the auto part in the introduction of this thesis. The author of this doctoral thesis is an animation practitioner, pedagogue (working in a higher education institution), and researcher. These professional attributes are at the core of explaining what pushed the author to raise these specific research questions and why he chose a doctoral journey to answer them.

1.1 Research Questions, Aim, and Methods of the Research

This research aimed at advancing the understanding of challenges and opportunities for 2D animation practitioners to portray explicit nudity and sexual intercourse to tell mature stories. The main research question was formulated as follows:

‘What are the challenges and opportunities of the 2D aesthetics when portraying explicit nudity and sexual intercourse?’

From this, five progressive questions emerged that directed the research:

1. How do you define the adult animation segment?
2. Why could the adult animation segment not establish itself in mainstream TV and cinema for so long?
3. What are the approaches to animated adult content?
4. How do you approach the creation of explicit animated sexual intercourse content when Western society and the industry consider it quasi-taboo?
5. Why does animation need to be able to portray explicit nudity and sexual intercourse?

The following objectives were set to achieve the aim of the thesis:

- To explore the concept, genesis, and development of animated work for adult audiences;
- To identify and define the differences between non-sexual imagery, erotica, and pornography;
- To critique the context of contemporary 2D animation practice when depicting explicit nudity and sexual intercourse;

- To perform experiments (animation tests) to gather data about aesthetical challenges and opportunities for 2D animation practitioners;
- To assess internal effects that arise when an animator produces animated explicit sexual content;
- To propose recommendations on how to approach the creation of explicit animated sexual content.

In this thesis, three methods are employed to answer the research questions:

- Literature review (monographs, textbooks, academic articles, animation films, documentaries etc.);
- Reflection and review process, which employs an autoethnographic approach to address the additional research questions;
- Creative experiments (animation tests), addressing the main research question through practice and demonstrating how the accumulated theoretical knowledge can be applied in the adult animation segment.

1.2 Research Background and Emerging Questions

Due to the stigma surrounding research involving explicit nudity in animation art forms, more research is necessary into the subject to understand the phenomenon better. Therefore, it is only possible to answer the main question of this doctoral research by simultaneously expanding the research scope and aiming to reduce the knowledge gap regarding adjoining subjects.

1.2.1 Q1. How do you define adult animation?

Not that long ago, the term *adult animation* was often used as a label for animated content with explicit erotic or pornographic elements. Today's situation is considerably better – industry events and academic texts use this term to indicate that animated content is intended for adult audiences. The term is no longer a synonym for animated pornography. But the fact that this term is very much needed in the industry showcases how uncommon the phenomenon is. For comparison, such a term does not exist in a live-action format.

This transformation of the term requires a precise modern definition and,

arguably more importantly, what animation viewers and creators expect from this segment.

1.2.2 Q2. Why could the adult animation segment not establish itself in mainstream TV and cinema for so long?

In 2020, Evershed presented a previously unheard claim about the adult animation segment in his white paper. That claim was that modern adult 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. As animation targeted explicitly at adults is becoming the fastest-growing segment in the global animation industry, it means that perceptions of what animation is (or rather, who it is for) will have to adjust globally.

In the case of the aesthetics of animated erotica and pornography, it is impossible to study the phenomena without lateral exploration into causes that motivated the world's mainstream media animators to devote a great deal of effort to hide or avoid adult themes in their creations. Theoretical knowledge of how to aesthetically approach the visual representation of explicit nudity and sexual intercourse in animation may not be helpful if self-censorship is firmly holding animators from approaching these subjects visually and narratively.

1.2.3 Q3. What are the aesthetic approaches to animated adult content?

Although animation works are often analysed through visual execution, surprisingly, it is rare that works would be analysed through aesthetic concepts such as *uncanny*, *sublime*, *sensation*, *beauty* and *taste*. Although researchers often use the term aesthetics in their animation artwork analysis, they use it to describe overall visual delivery rather than the relationship between animation and aesthetics.

In this context, only three methodical works stand out: Herhuth's book *Pixar and the Aesthetic Imagination: Animation, Storytelling, and Digital Culture* (2017), Crafton's *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making* (2012), and Buchan's *The Quay Brothers: Into a Metaphysical Playroom* (2011). These books explore the impact of aesthetic concepts on subjective experience and provide a comprehensive aesthetic analysis of contemporary animation. Other books on animation aesthetics, such as Pilling's *A Reader in Animation Studies* (1997) and

Furniss' *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics* (2008), primarily focus on the unique mechanics of animation implementation (such as the illusion of life through movement, the overall style of the animated work, or the believability) and its relationship with the cinematic aspects of live action (the overall *mise-en-scène*).

To achieve the aims of this thesis, it is paramount to explore how different adult animation sub-segments approach mature content and, arguably even more important, how they tell these animated stories uniquely to this medium. The relevance of this research does not end only with the necessity to acquire new knowledge about how to aesthetically approach the visual representation of explicit nudity and sexual intercourse in animation. This thesis also seeks to understand the adult animation phenomenon better. As a result, it provides tools for animation practitioners on how best to approach and defend the animation medium as the most fitting vehicle to tell particular mature stories.

1.2.4 Q4. How do you approach the creation of explicit animated sexual intercourse content when Western society and the industry consider it quasi-taboo?

The unpleasant reality is that, at this point, the mainstream animation industry lacks the knowledge (and willpower) to include explicit nudity to tell stories for mature audiences, making the medium less than it could be. That, in itself, is a considerable concern for this art form because animation can employ visual solutions and aesthetic options to tell an engaging story that live-action media simply cannot. It is also a medium that can remove the objectification of actors from the equation. This is a massive problem in live-action media that only recently started to surface publicly.

But identifying the somewhat obvious situation that explicit nudity and sexual intercourse is undesirable narrative and cinematic tool for creators of animated content for adults (as opposed to other elements that are deemed suitable explicitly for adults like profanity and violence) does not automatically provide tools on how to research the phenomenon and, in result, provide the means for change. Therefore, any research into animated erotica and pornography practices that aim to suggest how to improve them cannot yield tangible benefits without understanding the scope and effect of these genres. In fact, without answering the question of how to break free from existing taboos surrounding animated erotica and pornography, there is no need for knowledge of how best to produce these genres.

1.2.5 Q5. Why does animation need to be able to portray explicit nudity and sexual intercourse?

Throughout all doctoral research journeys, the author heard one repeated question – *Why? Why does animation need to be able to portray explicit nudity and sexual intercourse?* This question was raised both in friendly discussions with industry colleagues and in an academic environment where it was necessary to defend the need for this research (to exist) to move forward in the journey. This doctoral research journey contained an unexpected challenge – the necessity to vindicate the right of animation medium to have a choice to employ explicit imagery.

This recurring question has slowly but inexorably become an essential part of the research itself. Not only because the answer to this question is extremely valuable when anyone questions why this doctoral research should transpire (at least in the shape, form, and direction it is now), but also because the answer annotates why the medium needs to be able to use explicit imagery.

1.3 Research Design

A research project should always start with selecting a topic, problem, and paradigm (Creswell, 1994; Mason, 1996; Punch, 2016). The modern understanding of the term paradigm is that it is a principal example among examples. It is an example of designing further actions. In the context of research, the paradigm is a ‘basic set of beliefs that guide action’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:157) or simply a model or approach to research that is considered the standard by a substantial number of researchers in the field (Punch, 2016).

The author’s epistemological position regarding the research in this thesis is formulated as follows: a) it is impossible to make aesthetic decisions in an animation project without involving narrative analysis; therefore, b) aesthetic decisions such as design direction (style, character, background, and props designs), and quality movement (acting, staging, editing, etc.) are the result of a process in narrative interpretations. However, as the literature review suggests, a particular mindset is required to portray mature themes in animation media without automatically self-censoring. The author has identified that autoethnography (self-reflection) methodology is best suited to achieve the set research goals.

Two different methods were employed to gather data. The first one is a *reflective*

practice dairy. It captures procedures and approaches to creative tasks, mindsets, and insights. In turn, it helps to identify challenges and opportunities of aesthetic approaches to 2D animated content when portraying explicit nudity and sexual intercourse. The second method is *animation tests*. However, autoethnography is a relatively new approach to producing knowledge in creative fields. Therefore, the rationale for this research strategy (and chosen methods) is to strengthen the theory by triangulation of evidence.

1.4 Ethical Safety or Risk Issues in this Research

Qualitative methodologies rely on subjective data. However, ethical considerations and risks still need to be addressed even when the research methodology does not employ interviews, experimentation that includes participants, or any other type of human involvement to gather data. In the context of this thesis, two research risks need to be addressed. First, is the subject of explicit (animated) nudity and sexual intercourse; the second is how to conduct autoethnographic research.

Research and experimentation with the visual content of explicit nudity and sexual intercourse come with a few separate risks. The first is the sensitive matter of the subject. For example, erotica and especially pornography genres may be considered sensitive by various groups of people. For this reason, the author holds the view that all individuals have the fundamental right not to be exposed to erotic or pornographic content. Therefore, all produced animated content produced by the author of this thesis and which exhibited explicit nudity or sexual intercourse was (i) presented only to legal adults, and (ii) only presented after a person, before viewing, had been introduced to the nature of the content and research objectives. Then, only if the person provided verbal consent would they be able to watch animation tests (and provide sought feedback).

The second is the legal risk that research into the pornography genre comes with. To the author's genuine surprise, production and distribution of pornography material are still illegal in Lithuania (the country of residence of the author of the thesis; Lithuanian Criminal Code, 2023). This realisation demanded the adjustment of the research experimentation plan, urgent legal consultation, and unambiguous and detailed documentation of the research experiments. Finally, the author wants to state that animated content intended for legal adults should not be accessible to minors.

Research risks involve ethical challenges arising in conducting and presenting autoethnographic research (Tullis, 2013). However, one of the most often raised challenges involves relational ethics. This is because autoethnographic stories are not wholly our own and, therefore involve the public presentation of relationships with others (Ellis, 2004; Lapadat, 2017; Tullis, 2013). Therefore, ethnographers must always consider their responsibilities to characters in their stories that can be easily identified (intimate others, family members, neighbours, colleagues, and so on), and obtain consent as early as possible (Tullis, 2013).

On the other hand, as Lapadat (2017) noticed, autoethnography involves a complex process of seeking consent from others as it unfolds over time and uniquely in each case. No universal rule can be successfully applied in every research project. Pathak (2010) argues that four guiding ethical principles must be considered when writing autoethnographic text – accountability, context, truthfulness, and community. However, as Douglas and Carless (2013:99) point out, ethics are not static and can include ‘not only relational ethics, but moral ethics, ethical mindfulness, an ethic of trust, an ethic of care, and an ethic to look out for the well-being of ourselves as well as the other as we engage in emotionally laden journeys’. Finally, Forber-Pratt (2015) urges not to be shy to create one’s process to ensure validity, credibility, and ethical stand.

Therefore, following reviewed recommendations, rules were established on how the information will be presented in the reflective practice diary. For example, all people mentioned in this diary should be presented anonymously. However, they should provide enough details so that if that person would read it, they can easily identify themselves. In addition, it is necessary to state that all information from interactions with other people (reactions, feedback, etc.) provided in the practice diary is presented only subjectively – it is a subjective interpretation of events that transpired and are written from memory. The researcher does not claim that recollection of events is detached from emotional reading. However, the author always sought to present events as accurately as possible with all necessary contexts, also adhering to all measures that would allow the documentation of interpretations of events, processes, observations, or insights to be as objective as possible.

1.5 Limitations of the Research

The research limitations were described as follows. First, the findings of this research were limited due to the time-consuming and financially costly animation production process¹. Animation tests conducted were extremely valuable in gathering insights into what aesthetic opportunities and challenges 2D animation presents when animation creators aim to tell stories that include explicit nudity or sexual intercourse. However, many more hypotheses need to be tested to have a whole picture and complete understanding of the phenomenon. A few animation tests can only scratch the surface of a medium that can employ many different styles and tell such diverse stories. Therefore, a continuation of experimentation is necessary to fully grasp the possibilities of 2D animation to tell stories involving explicit nudity and sexual intercourse. Separate research studies are also needed to explore how explicit nudity and sexual intercourse can be presented with different animation techniques, as the findings with 2D animation may have limited applicability.

Second, the issue of very little prior research on this topic needs to be addressed. The lack of previous research studies caused challenges in formulating the research design and developing a hypothesis in the early stages of the research. A triangulation of various data-gathering approaches was deemed necessary to see both the big picture and the various determining factors that led to such sparse depiction of explicit nudity and sexual intercourse in Western-produced animated content intended for an adult audience.

1.6 Organisation of Chapters

The doctoral thesis consists of the following parts: six chapters, final concluding remarks, two appendices, and a bibliography. The thesis consists of 195 pages, without the bibliography and the appendices. There are 44 figures.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth overview of the chosen methodology and an analysis of how this research methodology has been employed in animation field studies in the past. The chapter then presents the two methods used to collect the

¹ Providing context for the financial aspect of animation production, the starting price for one second of 2D animation starts at €65 in Lithuania. High-quality animation costs around double that. This price, however, does not include character and background designs, directing, scriptwriting, storyboarding, colouring, and editing expenses.

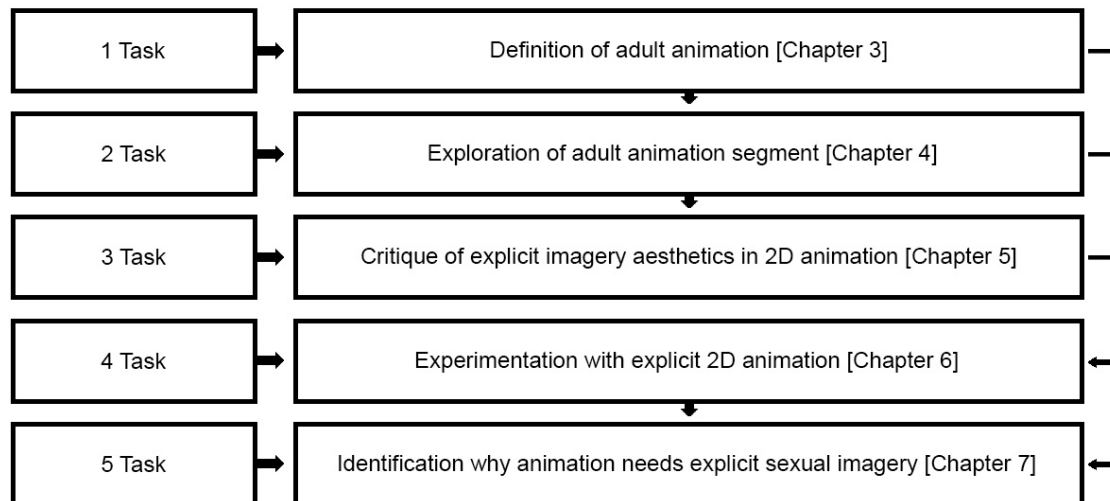


Figure 1. The logical structure of the doctoral thesis. Compiled by the author.

data.

Chapter 3 briefly overviews the essential animation terms and concepts relevant to the research questions. The chapter then provides an in-depth analysis of the definition of modern animation media, focusing on historical context to identify critical circumstances that result in ongoing challenges for the medium to produce mainstream content for adult audiences.

Chapter 4 begins with an exploration of aesthetics and its key concepts, and follows with a discussion of how those concepts are applied in the animation medium. Later in this chapter, an investigation into prominent adult animation sub-segments is conducted, which uncovers how aesthetically the animation medium can approach mature stories and how animation can help to tell stories that would be impossible or, at the very least, not that impactful if told in a live-action medium.

In Chapter 5, the history of the development of erotica and pornography genres is analysed through a new theoretical paradigm based on the aesthetic response to explicit nudity and sexual intercourse. In this chapter, the author also investigates animated explicit nudity that does not seek to invoke sexual arousal in the audience.

Chapter 6 begins with a review of the research journey, discussing the important elements of both theoretical and practical reflection that produce new insights and understanding about the phenomenon. This is followed by an autoethnographic account of the research journey and the making of animation tests through which final research questions are resolved. Finally, the chapter discusses the importance of doctoral-level research for advancing animation art forms.

Chapter 7 concludes the journey of doctoral research. The chapter reflects on the research process and discusses new knowledge gained and methods used to disseminate research findings. Implications for future research and ways the research may be used are also discussed.

The logical structure of the doctoral thesis is presented in Figure 1.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research design provides a fundamental framework for conducting a research project from sampling method, data collection, and measurement, and data analysis, timeframe, ethical considerations, and necessary resources for data validation (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Sekaran & Bougie, 2013; Hair et al., 2010). Every research requires a framework that outlines a systematic process not only to answer research questions but also to ensure the reliability and validity of the study.

The author aims to produce new knowledge on a complex, sensitive, and under-researched topic; to answer research questions about subjective experiences and perspectives, in-depth insight into cultural and social settings is necessary. Therefore, the author identified that the qualitative research approach is best suited for this study.

Several methodologies were considered, such as phenomenology, action research, and case study. Although each of the methodologies, as mentioned earlier, offered tools that allowed a detailed study of one of the aspects of explicit imagery in 2D animation, unfortunately none of them could present a complete picture necessary to fully understand the phenomenon under study. Only when the autoethnographic approach was analysed was it identified that this methodology was best suited to collect data and utilise the author's practical animation skills.

However, autoethnographic doctoral research that employs practice as one of the methods is still a relatively new approach to gathering data and, in turn, producing new knowledge – even more so in the animation field. Therefore, there is a need to take a holistic, in-depth look not only into how research was previously conducted in animation research projects around the globe, but also to analyse what methods were used to gather data.

This chapter has three objectives: the first is to conduct an in-depth analysis of how best to implement autoethnographic research in the field of animation. The second objective is to examine the reflective practice diary to take advantage of the main strengths of the method. The third objective is to formulate aims and hypotheses for animation tests to gather insights through animation practice.

2.1 Why Erotica Needs Animation and Animation Needs Erotica

Animation is an incredible medium, and erotica is a very sensational genre. It is extremely easy to imagine how these two phenomena can work together in synergy to create something sensual and captivating. The fact that Japanese animated pornography is the undisputed king regarding consumers' preference for masturbatory content illustrates how potent this medium is for telling sexually charged narratives. The author's argument is not that animation medium would be great for telling explicit erotic and pornographic stories, as animated pornographic content creators from Japan have already proved this. Therefore, a more accurate argument would be that Western animators lost the opportunity to tell full stories without shame and censorship. Stories that are important to our collective culture; stories that matter to us and narratives that reflect (or challenge) our values, beliefs, and perceptions.

The author will employ a simple metaphor – animation without erotica is like a teen with excellent prospects yet is forbidden to mature. Sure, like every teen, the medium can try to be *cool* – use profanity and worship the aesthetics of violence, but sexuality ... it can be admired, even implied, but not experienced because all that is related to sexuality is for grown-ups. Therefore, animation in the Western cultural sphere is in perpetual adolescence – rebellious and loud yet without actual agency. A member of the cinematic community that doesn't (yet) have the right to sit at the adults' table.

The researcher has spent two-thirds of his doctoral journey discovering how this medium interacts perfectly with this genre. Of course, for the first one-third of that journey, the researcher actively tried to avoid and camouflage any research related to sexuality in animation. But the time the author spent trying to learn and understand as much as possible from various angles about explicit non-sexuality, erotica, and pornography made the author simultaneously feel wonder and sorrow as it was realised what great potential there is and how little that potential is fulfilled. Therefore, to briefly present the reasons why the animation medium is so well suited for the erotic genre, the author presents a short list of all aspects that were identified through this doctoral research:

- **Diverse artistic styles.** Animation encompasses a wide range of artistic styles that can present the interpretation of the world from very stylised to incredibly realistic. This stylistic diversity provides storytellers with an

incredible visual tool that can be employed to instil explicit imagery with senses of freshness, charm, and elegance, or boldness, seductiveness, excitement, and danger. Animation provides an unparalleled opportunity to cater style to the feeling that the filmmaker wants to be heightened in the audience's minds and hearts.

- **Visual symbolism.** Animation allows the embedding of multiple levels of information into a single image. From character or background design to colour and acting choices, animated content creators can simultaneously telegraph information about the outer world's status and the characters' inner emotional constitution. This creative result can be achieved due to the principle of *amplification through simplification*, as animation content creators can strip away any redundant information and, in such a way, magnify the remaining visual elements.
- **Suspension of disbelief.** Viewers have a significantly higher tolerance for animated content when it comes to the will to suspend their disbelief. This can be particularly advantageous in the erotic and pornographic genres, where animated content creators can produce an idealised, dream-like, or surreal atmosphere, and hyperbolic, larger-than-life, or imposing characters. The medium allows animation content creators to portray heightened sensual experiences and, in turn, explore sexual fantasies, erotic desires, and arousing experiences in an aesthetically captivating and powerful form.
- **Unrestrained cinematic approach.** Compared to live-action format, the animation medium is not limited by physical conditions and can portray its cinematic world in any scope, form, speed, design, or material. It can visually portray concepts or metaphorical representations of situations, memories, or experiences that may not have obviously visible manifestations on the physical plane.
- **Ethics.** Although ethics can have many meanings and applications in the context of erotic and especially pornographic genres, in this particular case, the author wanted to focus on the animation medium's ability to create a cinematic experience without using live actors. In this way, there is the ability to create an explicit representation of sexual intercourse

without the need for real-world people to perform in explicit (simulated or un-simulated) coitus in front of the film crew and then to be witnessed by the audiences.

More arguments could be presented to prove why animation is a great art expression to tell erotic and pornographic stories. Still, if these five are not enough, it means that a person at their core does not believe that this artistic medium can be employed to tell mature stories with sexual overtones. But this medium's development and the maturation of this medium cannot be stopped by the inaccurate belief that animation is an art form suited exclusively for children's entertainment. If the first part of this segment was to present arguments why erotica needs animation, the answer to why animation needs erotica is possible with just one sentence – because without it, the animation will not be able to grow up.

2.2 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that has become popular in the social sciences and is being adopted in a wide range of disciplines, including business, health sciences, education, social work, communications, and humanities. This methodology takes the researcher/author as the subject of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Richardson, 2000a, 2002). Autoethnographers aim to examine their feelings, insights, and understandings to gather data on the research topic, so researchers are both the research subject and the analysts who examine and interpret the data (Dumitrica, 2010).

Although autoethnography is related to other qualitative methodologies such as critical ethnography, reflective ethnography, or performance narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002), autoethnography's key difference is that empirical data is gathered from researchers' personal experiences. Autoethnography embraces researchers' subjectivity rather than attempting to restrict it; this methodology is best used when the researcher's experience can extend the understanding of a particular discipline or culture (Holt, 2003). However, while all personal writing could be regarded as an inquiry into the culture, not all text is autoethnographic. Not all self-reflective processes promote awareness of the relationship between self and others, or self and society, not to mention that by employing autoethnography, there are aspects that may invoke ethical concerns. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how to conduct it properly.

2.2.1 Autoethnography as a Research Approach in Animation Studies

When researchers employ ethnography, they study culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences to provide insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) to understand the culture better (Maso, 2001). In addition to telling about the researcher's experiences, autoethnographers are also required to analyse these experiences (Ellis et al., 2010). Jones et al. (2013:22) describe the characteristics that make a researcher's personal narratives autoethnographic:

1. purposefully commenting on/critiquing culture and cultural practices;
2. making contributions to existing research;
3. embracing vulnerability with purpose;
4. creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences to compel a response.

The text is usually written in the first person when using autoethnography to gather data. It features emotion, dialogue, and self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography emerged from anthropology (Scott-Pollock, 2020) and, as a research methodology, was established as an academic work through Carolyn Ellis' and Art Bochner's work in the early 1990s (Anderson, 2006; Dumitrica, 2010; Scott-Pollock, 2020). However, the development of the methodology can be traced back to the late 1970s with the new approaches to phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and existential sociology (Adler and Adler, 1987; Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2013). This new approach argued for the value of documenting the researcher's experiences and emotions, and those of the participants. Researchers started to entertain the idea of documenting their own subjective experiences and presenting them as data that could help to shed light on the researched phenomena.

When a researcher decides to use the autoethnography methodology, there is much to consider even before writing the first words. Lapadat (2017) argues that autoethnography clearly states the study's background and personal perspectives, theoretical stance, interaction style, and political aims. Therefore, Lapadat continues, autoethnography needs to say 'I' in the journaling to present subjective interpretations and resist the temptation to produce authoritative accounts or interpretations that generalise.

Dumitrica (2010:28) argues that good autoethnography can contribute to understanding society and provide new knowledge on the subject in a clear, appealing, and emotionally impactful manner. A good autoethnography work is reflective and motivates the reader to engage in the dialogue (Ellis, 2004; Sparkes, 2002; Dumitrica, 2010). Etherington (2004) urges autoethnographers to always be transparent in their documentation about how they come to particular decisions.

To analyse (or to tell a story about) yourself is not enough of a reason to use the autoethnography methodology. There should be an aim for the reflective journey, and there should be a reason beyond simple curiosity for readers to know the person's *auto* story. That story should help us further understand or learn about culture (Winkler, 2018) and help us imagine a better world (Scott-Pollock, 2020). Otherwise, the story may become not autoethnographical but autobiographical and, as a result, violates ethical conditions about the nature of the research and its ideological promise.

Analysing doctoral theses in the field of animation that employ action research methodological framework (see Lo-Garry, 2010; Steward, 2016; daCosta, 2007; Bliss, 2016; Drumm, 2014; Linhart, 2020; Dima, 2013; Gouvatsos, 2018; Fonseca, 2015; MacGillivray, 2014) suggests that autoethnography (reflection) is a vital tool to gather insights about the process or practice. Autoethnography, although not always formally acknowledged as a methodology in doctoral theses, is always present to some degree. Even those doctoral theses that do not formally identify autoethnography or creative process documentation as methods used in their methodology, present creative practice process through a reflective autobiographic stand that aims to provide insights into the research process. This suggests that insight *into* and *out of* animation practice is always subjective by nature. Hence, the *story of self* is at the core of artistic research.

Around half of the analysed doctoral theses use additional methods to verify their findings and insights. For example, the most popular additional method is qualitative interviews with the industry representatives (see Lo-Garry, 2010; daCosta 2007; Coull, 2006; Drumm, 2014; Belviso, 2016). A few used film screenings or exhibitions (see daCosta 2007; Parker, 2015; Steward, 2016; MacGillivray, 2014), and one thesis employed case studies (Fonseca, 2015).

Therefore, it is necessary to explore further how the reflection method can be used in research that employs practice to gather data. Boyd and Fales (1983:99) describe reflective learning as the process 'of internally examining and exploring an

issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective'. For animators, practitioners, and researchers, the reflective study is explicit, intellectual, and continuous (Lo-Garry, 2010; MacGillivray, 2014). Reflection can turn experience into learning (Boud et al., 1985), so it can be a very effective tool for practitioners to motivate personal development.

For practitioners, there could be two approaches to critical reflection – reflection *on* action and reflection *in* action. While reflection on action has long scholarly traditions, the reflection-in-actions approach is significantly less common in academic literature (Keevers & Treleaven, 2011; Jordan et al., 2009; Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009).

Lo-Garry (2010:98), in her thesis, notes these reflection tools and techniques that were found to be helpful when using practice as a research approach:

- active recording – logbook using text, sketches, and diagrams;
- mental rehearsal and internal dialogue (asking why, how, what if, etc.);
- observation, noticing and intervention (mindful practices);
- reporting 'the story' and discussion with the third party;
- audio/video recording;
- decompression (mindful and critical thinking).

In addition, she noticed that her report writing was much more effective than recording because it allows a more organised approach to data collection and review; she also noticed that her reports went through a few interactions, as new interpretations emerged from experience. Finally, she identified that some aspects of documentation were ambiguous. Therefore, Lo-Garry presumed that, at times, she could not describe her practice explicitly in words. It is important to always identify cause and effect to understand and evaluate one's (implicit) knowledge.

2.2.2 Rationale for Using Autoethnography to Research Animated Explicit Imagery

Scott-Pollock (2020) and Lapadat (2017) argue that the motivation and standpoint in relationship to the research object are critical not only to defend the rigour of research design but also from the ethics point of view. Therefore, the author will address these aspects before further approaching the strengths of this methodology to answer research questions. The thesis author's key motivation to use this method leans on

Evershed's (2020) observation that very few studios (in the USA) specialise in mature-themed animation production. Evershed argues that to be able to produce animated stories for adults, a special mindset is needed in addition to animation skills that are equivalent to industry standards.

Upon reading this particular statement by Evershed, the researcher spent a good deal of time in inner thinking and discussions with industry peers, about the notion that animators' legal status as an adult may not be enough in itself to produce animated content for mature audiences. This is especially when, from first sight, this hypothetical problem does not appear in any capacity in live-action industries. However, the further this topic was analysed, the more indirect evidence the author found to support Evershed's statement. Further literature analysis on censorship and self-censorship in the animation medium revealed that because of historical, social, economic, and cultural aspects, today's animation industry essentially practices self-censorship (Cohen, 2004; Leigh & Mjolsness, 2020; Chen, 2020; Welk, 2020). From animation students to highest-ranking animation specialists, producers, and even scriptwriters – everyone is motivated to avoid the adult segment as more challenging, unpredictable, and economically riskier than the 'family-friendly and children' segment.

However, only through the autoethnographic investigation was it possible not only to confirm, but also to measure the repealing force of shame that comes with attempts to produce explicit imagery with sexual overtones. Furthermore, this methodological approach also provides tools to identify how best to approach and overcome existing quasi-taboos.

In addition, it is necessary to discuss how the rarity of successful cases of mainstream adult animation can affect the very approach to aesthetics. It is very likely that with very few examples of how explicit animated nudity and sexual intercourse can be successfully employed to tell mature, impactful, and aesthetically pleasing stories, most animated content creators, investors, and distributors are simply subconsciously dismissing this visual storytelling tool. Because of logical error in reasoning, a belief is formed that avoidance of explicit imagery is due to aesthetical challenges. Put simply, it is extremely challenging to create explicit imagery in an animation medium that would not look vulgar, shocking, or offensive.

While the autoethnographic approach cannot detect what a whole group of professionals think or believe (this requires a different research technique), this methodology can help to identify how sparse visual representation of explicit imagery

in mainstream animation affects a researcher's creative development process. This situation affects the creative approach to character designs, staging, and overall acting.

Therefore, if the hypothesis is that for various animation specialists to be successful in the adult animation segment, they need to acquire a particular mindset (in addition to industry-level hard skills), autoethnography is specifically suited to test this premise. Because the author does not have any previous professional experience with the production of animated content that would fit the label of adult animation, this inquiry into the mindset is perfect for gathering insights that could later be shared with other specialists that would like to work with mature-themed animated content.

The researcher's motivation to use autoethnography is to understand and map the inner journey into the mindset required to efficiently use visual cinematic tools to produce content that portrays explicit nudity or sexual intercourse (where the goal of the depiction is not fan service). The standpoint with the research object is because the author, in his professional life, has never employed any element of explicit nudity or sexual material, and believes that a professional (creative) relationship with this mature material (before this research) was non-existent.

2.2.3 The Auto-story

Autoethnographic research is a journey that brings together the personal and the academic. It is the research approach that bears both the strengths and limitations of human perceptions and feelings (Richardson, 2000b). Through the process of autoethnographic exploration, the researcher is encouraged to employ reflexive thinking as a tool to produce insights and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The story of self is at the core of artistic research, so before the researcher can move to explore the research phenomenon, they must begin with their feelings and memories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

The previous sub-section presented the researcher's motivation to use autoethnographic methodology. However, motivation is only half of the information that is necessary to construct a qualitative inquiry into the research subject. This sub-section will present the other necessary half – the information about the researcher himself – this part of the information is vital. As Lapadat (2011) states, autoethnography requires the researchers to situate themselves in the study by revealing their background and personal perspectives, theoretical stance, and political

aims, so the author's experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and insights are central to the autoethnographic process. It is necessary to identify and present the unique experiences, cultures, and perceptions that the researcher has to enhance social and cultural understanding.

The researcher is a white heterosexual male who works in higher education (as a pedagogue and researcher) and creative industries (mainly in animation, comic books, and cinematic live-action segments). It can be added that the researcher, while he was born and now lives in Lithuania, had obtained his higher education (bachelor's and first master's degrees) in the UK, and has worked as an animator in a video games studio in Texas, USA, for a year. Finally, he is a family man, has liberal political views and although now balancing two overlapping careers – as a researcher and as a practitioner – my passion lies within the practice.

Here is where the author has found the biggest conflict between the two roles: the researcher wants to write in a scholarly manner, but the practitioner element demands an autoethnographic approach. It is a dilemma that the writing of this thesis has to face. Having been a researcher for more than fifteen years had a great effect on how the author of this thesis approached the reflection process in general, and the diary method in particular. To the author's great surprise, the Lithuanian conservative academic values, which shaped the researcher's scholarly world view, fiercely opposed any research that gathered subjective data and presented interpretations of the situation. Therefore, autoethnographic research was the author's most (emotionally) inconvenient possible methodological approach, and even the presentation of an autoethnographic investigation (in the sixth chapter) required major internal changes on the part of the author.

It should be specified that the researcher's liberal views were finally formed only during doctoral studies. The researcher had no political party or ideological priority before starting the doctoral research journey. During each election, the researcher's vote was given based on which politician best represented the researcher's needs at the particular time (raising the minimum wage, greater investments in science and culture segments, construction of new kindergartens, etc.). However, while conducting a literature review (specifically – about censorship), the researcher found great distaste for any political worldview that believes that the government must protect its (voting age) citizens from themselves. The researcher cannot fathom the idea that citizens can have the right to vote, use legally attainable intoxicants, gamble, marry

and have children, join the army (and take the life of a state's enemy) but do not hold the intellectual capacity to protect themselves from mental and moral corruption if exposed to explicit nudity.

It is fascinating how just three words – *white*, *heterosexual*, and *male* – can tell so little and yet so much about a person. These three words can help to name what challenges a person may face in their life and, on the contrary, what aspects of life can be unnoticed if a person purposefully does not seek to learn about them. The author of the research has limited and only second-hand information about how the everyday life a person of different skin, sexual orientation, and gender would be. Of course, that does not mean that any person should not aim to put themselves in another person's shoes.

Interestingly, being a white European (from Lithuania) made no tangible difference in the context of this research. Most likely, this is because the author of this research lives in a predominantly white country. In the cases when he lived in the UK and the USA, the author was an immigrant from Central - Eastern Europe, so being white did not give the researcher any detectable privileges in a multicultural society. Of course, this does not mean that the author did not know or did not witness situations where representatives of other races encountered biased treatment. However, both in life and in this study, the researcher's skin colour had the same effect as the colour of his eyes.

Being a male, however, had noticeable consequences for the researcher, both positive and negative. To be more precise, although the author more than once in a situation in his life when being a male gave him an obvious advantage over his female colleagues, in the context of this research thesis, the author's gender provided only a disadvantage. This aspect will be presented and significantly discussed further in this doctoral thesis. However, the author has never faced such prejudice for characteristics that have nothing to do with abilities and skills. This experience was genuinely educational.

Another important aspect regarding gender that influenced the researcher's worldview was the unpleasant observation regarding the agency of traditional animated female characters – to be precise, the lack of it. The birth of the researcher's daughter triggered this observation about the unfavourable representation of female heroes in mainstream animated content. This led to a personal promise to always try to depict female characters in personal artwork that could be role models for the

researcher's daughter. This observation also influenced the author's newfound distaste for *fan service* content in animation².

However, the researcher's experience in various creative project leading positions led to the understanding that creative people rarely have the opportunity to execute their vision without any compromise that, in producers' and investors' opinion, would increase the chances of financial return. The first and most important goal in creative industries is financial gain, and cultural value is only a by-product, so perceiving the creative world in black and white would be unproductive, naïve, and unfair. That being said, animated female characters' objectification and, in extreme cases, degrading portraiture should not be accepted as normal or natural. Even if the act has little to no chance that the animated character's sexual objectification would be removed from the project, creatives should still aim to voice their concerns or dislike of this practice.

The aspect of sexual orientation influenced only a few parts in the implementation of this doctoral research. In mainstream animation literature, there is an often-repeated notion that animators are actors who act through their animated characters. It must be noted that before this research, the author never had to imagine a scenario where there would be a need to animate animation characters of homosexual orientation. During this research, when inner discussions arose about how the researcher would feel if he had to animate an explicit sexual act of a homosexual couple, this gave an utterly new appreciation for the actor's profession. Drawing inspiration from personal life events is easy. Still, it requires the highest level of skills to act out the believable performance of a situation without previous experience or even understanding of the social construct.

Finally, the author needs to note separately the reason why the relationship of the research with the three named aspects was briefly presented. Race, sexual orientation, and gender today are highly sensitive subjects and integral to one's identity, social status, experiences, and, ultimately, vulnerability. In this thesis, the researcher aims to produce new knowledge about a highly controversial subject on the borderline of a socially acceptable discussion topic. However, the researcher strongly believes that without this discussion, the animation medium cannot evolve

² It should be specified that the author does not believe that fan service should be banned or regulated beyond age-based censorship. The phenomenon of fan service is an issue of bad taste and not depravity.

and reach its full artistic potential. It is crucial to exercise a conversation about such sensitive subjects and approach these discussions with empathy, respect, and a willingness to listen and learn from the perspectives of other groups. This is because the aesthetics of animated explicit nudity can only be approached with an open mind and the ability to change one's mindset and perspective.

Jones (2016) notices that autoethnography reminds us that theory is not a body of a given, static, and autonomous knowledge but an ongoing, movement-driven process that links concrete and abstract thinking, acting, aesthetics, and criticism. This auto-story is a story of metamorphosis – a process of change of mindset and values, because it is impossible to unlock the knowledge of aesthetics of explicit animated non-sexual, erotic, and pornographic imagery without first transforming oneself into a person who can see and admire the beauty in such explicit animated imagery.

2.3 Collecting Autoethnographic Data

Autoethnographic research (like any other type of research design) requires careful planning to collect the right data. Furthermore, for the best results with this methodology, the researcher must formulate the right research questions, find suitable methods to capture personal experiences, and interpret data to establish the connection between the researcher's inner feelings and thoughts, and social phenomena. When an autoethnographic study is done correctly, it can generate rich data and unique perspectives that challenge conventional scholarly understandings and introduce personal stories behind the data.

Therefore, choosing the correct data-gathering method for autoethnographic research is critical because it directly impacts the findings' quality, validity, and reliability. Furthermore, the choice of the data-collection method will significantly influence how the researcher will navigate the self-reflection process and provide impactful insights with integrity and reliability.

In this segment, the author first explains how autoethnography will be employed to gather, analyse, and disseminate rich data. The following two subsections present specific methods used in the empirical study of the thesis, focusing on how the data-collection techniques were adapted to the needs of this doctoral research. The final subsection presents how collected data will be evaluated.

2.3.1 Autoethnography as Data Collecting Approach

Autoethnography uses the researcher as the subject of an investigation to understand a particular discipline or culture better (Holt, 2003). However, for the self-reflective investigation to be autoethnographic (and not autobiographic), the collected experience has to provide insights about the phenomenon that would otherwise not be obtainable; therefore, autoethnography is a methodology that aims to provide data from inside (Chang, 2008).

For autoethnographers, the decision about what data-collection method to use is basically a question of how best to record the behaviours, thoughts, emotions, and interactions as they happen. As Chang (2008) notes, there are quite a few techniques from which the researcher can choose on how to collect self-observational data. For example, the researcher can choose to record data at specific time periods or as they occur; present reflection in action or once the action has ended; record self-observation in a free manner or complete a pre-prepared form; what style of the recording should be employed (academic, natural, poetic, etc.) record only in a written form or supplement entries with various visual and audio material (Chang, 2008; Poulos, 2021). As Chang (2008) argues, all these self-observational, data-collecting techniques are helpful for different reasons and occasions. Thus, the researcher can mix and match them to find the most appropriate solution for implementing an empirical study.

It is vital to mention again that the autoethnographic methodology was employed primarily as the best research tool to identify the strength of the self-censorship effect when producing erotic and pornographic animation content. Thus, to find the best data-collecting approach for this research, the author looked for the method that would provide the best means to reflect 'in' action and 'on' action. In addition, as self-observational research requires establishing a causal relationship, the process of collecting thoughts, emotions, and insights in a predetermined format is best suited for data collection. Finally, the autoethnographic approach was chosen to collect data during a very narrow and clearly defined professional activity; therefore, combining data collection with practical activities is necessary, and the data-collection process must work in synergy with practical activities (such as the production of animation tests).

After analysing various self-reflective data recording techniques and strategies,

the author of this thesis identified that the diary method is exceptionally well suited to achieve research goals. In addition, the rationale for using a diary to collect data (rather than other methods such as focus groups, interviews, or observation) is that the topic of animated erotica (and pornography) could be uncomfortable for the participants. Also, with the interviews, participants may be unable to recall events or feelings. As the literature suggests, many animation practitioners could have created mental justifications for why they don't need explicit elements to tell their stories. Because of self-censorship, animators could not perceive avoiding erotic themes in their work as something negative or limiting.

Finally, for a reflective diary to work, constant inner dialogue must challenge the practitioner's beliefs, underlying assumptions, biases, doubts, and uncertainties (Jalilifar et al., 2014). Only then can reflective practitioners become decision-makers who develop thoughtful plans to bring new understanding into action (York-Barr et al., 2001). Thus, this self-observational data-gathering method can work only with the right mindset; otherwise, no research method will be sufficient.

2.3.2 Reflective Practice Diary

This thesis employs a reflective practice diary as the primary data collection method. In this section, the author of this doctoral thesis will first provide an in-depth overview of the method, and its strengths and weaknesses. Following this, the author will present the rationale for employing this method in this doctoral thesis and conclude the section with information on how a reflective practice diary was designed to achieve research goals.

A reflective diary or journal is a flexible method that can be used with qualitative methodologies such as (auto)ethnography, phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, and narrative inquiry, and as a research tool to gather quantitative data. Blaikie (2000), in his text on research design, identified that in social sciences research alone, there are twelve different designs: experimental, survey, fieldwork/ethnography, comparative/historical, case study, content analysis, observation, simulating and gaming, evaluation research, social impact research, and action research. Therefore, a diary can easily be moulded to suit different research designs.

A diary is a document created by an individual seeking to maintain a regular, contemporaneous, and personal record (Alaszewski, 2006). However, Klimova (2015) expands the definition of a diary by adding that people can write their thoughts, ideas,

feelings, or experiences (interactions) in this document. Based on individual needs, a diary can be shaped and formed into various formats that vary in detail, level of personal commentary and reflection, regularity, or even medium used to record entries to suit the researcher's or practitioner's needs. Also, a diarist may explicitly write for a specific audience – for personal use, specifically for other scholars, or to be consumed by the public.

Alaszewski (2006) argues that the diary method can help overcome the disadvantages of conventional methods (such as interviews) by providing more accurate and thorough data, as the diarist writes their entries shortly after the event or experience transpires. This method 'is designed to minimise recall and memory errors and cognitive strain' (Coxon, 1996). Another important strength of this method is that diarists increase their observational skills (Calister, 1993) and perceive events in a less personal, more objective way. As journaling can assist diarists by providing an avenue for addressing the theory/practice gap (Fonteyn, 2001; Hancock, 1999), a diary is a vibrant and effective method to capture phenomena of interest when it requires regular study in context, depth, and over time (Hyers, 2019).

But, like any method, it has not only strengths but also weaknesses. First, the quality of the diary's content is directly linked with the diarist's ability to observe, identify patterns, and last but not least, express them constructively, critically, and straightforwardly. As well, journaling requires a considerable amount of dedication. Although the diary is usually identified with intimate privacy, in the context of research it becomes not only a publicly available document but also one where every thought and feeling of the diarist is examined and analysed in detail. That may invoke a strong feeling for the diarist to self-censor and to remove or amend any aspects that may shed light in an unflattering light. Another serious drawback of the method is that people consider completing their professional diaries an effort (therefore a task they are unwilling to perform) (Glava, 2009). Finally, there are also ethical considerations – how to portray events in an autobiographical study that involve other people without providing them with the opportunity to defend or explain their stand (Ellis, 2004; Lapadat, 2017; Tullis, 2013; Hyers, 2019).

The most significant challenges this method still faces are continuous questions and doubts about the findings' scientific validity (Hyers, 2019; Alaszewski, 2006). From the positivist and empiricist positions, it is improper for the researcher to take the observer's position and observe (Hyers, 2019; Lapadat, 2017); this sentiment has

strong roots even among researchers working in social and artistic fields. In addition, in some cultures the diary is perceived as a highly private activity attributed to specific social roles. For example, in Western cultures, keeping a diary can be viewed as a somewhat feminine and juvenile activity (Hyers, 2019).

However, in medicine and healthcare, researchers have extensively used qualitative diaries to record symptoms, prescribe treatments, and identify the realities of treatment in an individual patient's life (Milligan et al., 2005; Chapman et al., 2009). Education is another research field where a diary is used extensively and successfully. Studies revealed that diaries could facilitate language learning (Jalilifar et al., 2014; Klimova, 2015), increase students' understanding, and enhance their learning process (Milinkovic & Field, 2005).

The situation in the animation field, however, is quite different. Not only is the method of reflective journaling absent in all key animation literature, but even the practitioner's thought process is not addressed clearly for the readers (Lo-Garry, 2010). The review of UK doctoral theses in the animation field revealed that, although a few researchers mentioned in passing that they are taking notes, only the thesis written by MacGillivray (2014) formally acknowledged that a diary method was employed in the empirical part of the research.

The doctoral thesis written by Lo-Garry (2010) revealed that the industry does not motivate animators to document their insights about conducted practices and experimentation. The animators feel that documenting their techniques and animation studies would interfere with their primary work – animation content production. This is counter-intuitive because for the creative practitioner (e.g. animator) to excel in their field (and move upwards in their career), they must acquire them through observation, practice, and evaluation (result interpretation; Epstein, 1999).

Lastly, it is necessary to review recommendations presented in the literature on using various techniques and tools to acquire knowledge through practice. Diarists should always have a clear understanding of (i) what is the goal of the practice diary and (ii) what aspects of practice should be recorded in the document before even starting the diary (Hyers, 2019). Once the diary's goal is established, the following steps are to identify what kind of format the diary will be in – what medium will be used, how often and how detailed entries will be, what is the timeframe over which entries will be recorded, and what aspects of the practice will be reflected. For the format of the entries themselves is helpful to use Gibbs' (1988) model that proposes a cycle of

six key stages: (1) describing what happened, (2) an examination of feelings and thoughts related to this, (3) evaluation of the positive and negative aspects, (4) subsequent analysis where sense is made, (5) conclusions drawn regarding what else can be done, and (6) action planning – involving actions that may be applied with future re-occurrence.

However, as the literature review revealed, the reflection diary method must be carefully tailored for every research project. The diarist's strong self-discipline is necessary for the data to be presented objectively and for the gathered insights to be helpful for the study. Equally important is the diarist's ability to present autoethnographic data ethically; further in this section, the researcher presents what measures were taken to ensure that the method would best meet the research objectives.

The chosen format of the diary is a digital document in which the researcher would reflect *in* and *on action* (during the creative task and after it is finished). In the first few pages of the document, two types of information were placed: (a) rules of engagement and (b) the goals of this practice journal. These objectives and limitations are essential for this empirical research part, as they give clear research direction and provide an approach to how best to gather rich data ethically. Set objectives and limitations are the elements that make data gathered through the reflection process useful for this doctoral research. The first page provided six rules for conducting the reflective journaling process. Here are a few examples from the rules set:

- Write openly and do not hide any thoughts, doubts, or mistakes. The success of this journal depends only on my openness to myself.
- Describe all events within 24 hours or note that they are written later. However, always aim to write as soon as possible.
- Do no content editing after the entry. The only exception is grammar error correction, and only in such a manner so that written thoughts would not change in any way.

The second page describes the research goals set to achieve with the practice diary. Every single entry in the diary has five data points: (i) date, (ii) task name, (iii) comments before starting, (iv) comments during the task, and (v) comments after finishing. However, because some entries are not about the practice work itself but

about the practice reflection process (e.g. meetings, feedback, or presentations), these entries, naturally, would not provide comments in action.

The 'comments before starting' section establishes the goals with the specific practice task, the challenges, and how the author will approach them. The final segment of the entry is always a critical reflection of how the author succeeded in achieving set goals and what worked and what did not. In addition, if it applies to the task – what would the authors approach to a similar task be in the future? Finally, during the task, the author would document the thought process, creative approach, mind-task results, etc. This section is usually the largest text-wise as it is the raw data to help analyse the overall creative and thought processes, and determine how to improve them.

In addition, there is an aspect of ethics. A reflective diary should not aim to present reflected events or interactions with other people as objective data. Also, a diary should always aim to preserve other people's identities anonymously.

Finally, it is essential to note that developing the necessary skills to identify what is worth recording takes time. In addition, learning how to present any practical failure without shame or excuse also took time, so with time and continued reflection practice, diary entries became more constructive, objective, and valuable.

2.3.1 Animation Tests

After a literature review on methodology and popular data-gathering methods, the author decided to employ additional qualitative method to collect rich data. The reason for choosing the qualitative autoethnographic approach was that early in the research, it was identified that self-censorship plays a vital role in the animation industry. Therefore, the quantitative approach to gathering insights about the aesthetics of explicit animated nudity and sexual intercourse was unsuitable.

To test the hypotheses raised, the author formulated objectives for five animation tests. The author implemented all these animation tests alone except for one test that was executed with the help of an additional animator. Objectives of the five animation tests were:

- *Nude woman walking* (cycle). This test aimed to animate a fully naked woman (from the front and the side). This test hypothesised that nudity, which has no erotic element that could be read from pose or action, would not cause emotional discomfort.

- *Couple having sex I* (erotic, cycle). This test aimed to animate sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. This test hypothesises that (in contrast to the first one) this exercise will cause the researcher mild to moderate emotional discomfort and physical anxiety.
- *Couple having sex II* (pornographic, cycle). This test aimed to animate sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. However, unlike the previous test, sexual penetration must be visible (compositional focus point). Up to the very start of the test, the researcher did not have any clearly formulated hypothesis, as the researcher did not know if he would manage to go through with this test.
- *Seduction* (erotic). This test aimed to animate a semi-nude woman performing an erotic (seductive) act. The purpose of this test was mainly to test aesthetic, creative decisions. Also, the hypothesis was that by this point, it should be much easier to produce erotic animated content.
- *Sci-fi sex scene* (erotic). This test aimed to animate an entire erotic sequence (and not a single shot as done in previous tests). Again, the sci-fi setting was chosen to illustrate how animation could provide an environment where live-action would struggle to produce believable execution.

Although the initial line-up of the animation tests was constructed at the very start of the research, with the completion of every animation test, the goals and hypothesis of follow-up animation tests were corrected based on gained experiences, outcomes, and insights.

2.3.4 Collected Data Analysis and Dissemination

As Chang (2008) noticed, the autoethnographic approach requires not only correct data selection and a recording method that would best serve the researcher's goal, but also an applicable analysis and interpretation approach. The researcher must evaluate and interpret rich qualitative data collected in the database (practice diary) to generate trustworthy and ethical insights, and produce new knowledge.

Like all qualitative inquiry, an autoethnographic study must undergo rigorous peer review. It must contribute to knowledge while being evocative, compelling, moving, generative, dialogical, and transformative (Poulos, 2021). To achieve that, the

chosen method (or methods) of inquiry and reflective research practice must make sense of raw, rich data consisting of observations, conversations, insights, and memories, so the researcher must craft a coherent research-constructed story (Poulos, 2021).

Various management strategies were employed to handle the collected data. All entries in the reflection diary were labelled, the date of the entry was indicated, and each new entry formed a mini-hypotheses of the task and provided generalisations (data interpretations). In addition, the set rules of the reflection process provided effective guidance on how to collect and capture data for maximum benefit. Thus, the recording process itself encouraged targeted data collection and evaluation of the ongoing progress.

Employed data management strategies helped considerably with the autoethnographic data analysis process. The analysis was conducted in several stages. The first one was to identify valuable data and discard irrelevant ones. The next stage was identifying clear patterns, themes, and causality relationships. Finally, data analysis was used to look for changes in mental state and world views that occurred during the empirical study. After completing this stage, data interpretation work was started.

As Chang (2008) argues, the autoethnographic data interpretation process is strongly intertwined with analysis activities. Thus, in the autoethnographic study, interpretation is often an information transformation process into a coherent and meaningful story of observed phenomena, rather than a task of describing what happened in the researcher's life. In the autoethnographic study, the interpretation process is the last step, where gathered information is transformed into text that provides culturally meaningful explanations.

In the context of this doctoral research, the key focus for autoethnographic data interpretation was to identify any psychological and physiological sensations evoked by the creation of erotic and pornographic animated content. Additionally, attention was focused on identifying the conditions necessary for the animator to be free from shame. Finally, during this stage, the researcher intended to determine how the self-observational collected data on aesthetic judgements of explicit nudity correlate with the data collected during the literature analysis.

Qualitative research is more concerned with finding answers to questions formulated as 'how is' and 'why is', rather than 'what is'. Thus, autoethnographic

inquiry seeks to interpret the researcher's personal experiences (and, often, occurred transformation due to a self-analytical process) to make sense of cultural phenomena.

2.4 The Conclusions of Chapter Two

As a research methodology, autoethnography has a firm footing in animation research. Literature reviews suggest that the practitioner-researcher's reflective insights about the creative process are at the core of animation practice studies. Although autoethnography is a subjective methodology by nature, when used properly it can produce explicit knowledge that is impossible to acquire by quantitative methods.

To combat the challenges of subjectivity, a considerable part of analysed doctoral theses in the animation field employ multiple data-gathering methods to support their claim that newly produced knowledge is verifiable. However, it is essential to address that in some cases, the research questions can be answered (and new knowledge can be generated) only through combined approaches of experience and reason; data triangulation is necessary to see the big picture.

In this doctoral thesis, two qualitative methods are employed to gather data. These two methods are *reflective practice diaries* and *animation tests*. Although used in different forms, the first method is very popular in animation doctoral research. This suggests that the diary method is extremely well suited to animation studies using the autoethnographic approach. After an extensive literature review, it was decided that a practice diary that uses reflection *in* and *on* action is best suited for this particular research.

The second method is used because several formed hypotheses cannot be answered without performing empirical examination. With these experiments, a knowledge gap can be sufficiently closed. However, it is necessary once again to address that this doctoral research is not *practice-led* or *practice-based*, as the primary goal of this doctoral research is not to improve animation practice or to find something new about creative practice by applying something new, different, or unfamiliar to the process.

3. THE COMPLEX NATURE OF THE MEDIUM

While animation pre-dates live-action medium (Bendazzi, 2016a), it still struggles to achieve the same level of critical recognition, academic inquiry, or even genre diversity. Moreover, unfortunate historical circumstances have led to the fact that animation faces many misconceptions today (Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2018), not to mention the widely used but very vague terms found in the context of this media. This situation requires thorough exploration and examination to answer the additional research questions.

This chapter has two objectives: first, to explore main animation concepts and terms, and by setting boundaries, clearly define what 2D animation is. The second objective is to investigate the concepts, genesis, and development of the mainstream adult animation segment with a key focus on censorship practices in various Western countries. Figure 2 shows a subjective network of domains related to the phenomenon of adult animation.

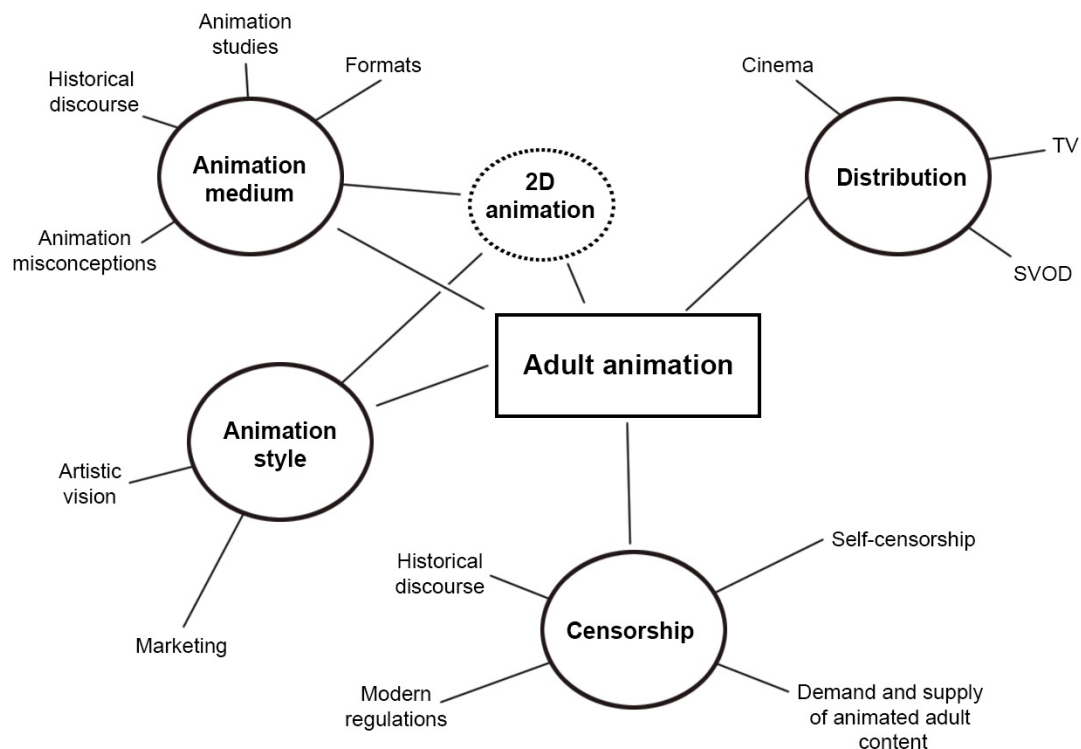


Figure 2. An initial map showing studies related to adult animation. Compiled by the author.

3.1 Defining Animation Medium

Animation comes from the Latin verb *animare*, meaning *to give life*. This Latin word describing animation as an interaction of art and technique was chosen not by chance but to emphasise that a competent animation creator can create an illusion that something not real can feel like it has life and agency. Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas (1995:146), two legendary American animators, give great insight into how fitting this name is for the medium:

Animation was beginning to mean something different to each of us, and everyone was surprised at the definition one employee found in the dictionary. 'Most people think the word "animation" means movement', he said, 'but it doesn't. It comes from "animus" which means "life or to live". Making it move is not animation, but just the mechanics of it'.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that animation quality is judged by animated objects' ability to convince viewers of their vitality. If animated objects on the screen only portray mechanical movements but fail to convey the character's emotions or unique character traits, this is not considered a quality animation. This is contrary to animators who can create the illusion that an object is alive, able to respond adequately to the environment, and simultaneously convey their emotions and attitudes to the events progressing in the narrative.

The phenomenon of animation is possible due to human physiological characteristics. The illusion of continuous movement in animation arises from the ability of our brain to hold a visible image for a fraction of a second. Therefore, when a sequence of individual images is displayed at a rate of at least 16 frames per second, we are given the illusion that we see a continuous image³. Because of this physiological trait, people can enjoy animation, cinema, TV, and video games.

MacGillivray (2014) argues that the physiological trait that is to blame for humans' ability to perceive motion from rapidly changing static images is especially suited to consuming animated content. This is because brains are always looking for the most energy-efficient ways to complete tasks (i.e. lazy), and in that sense, animation is a

³ 10–12 fps is considered the absolute minimum for motion portrayal. Anything below is recognised as the individual images (Bakaus, 2022).

perfect visual information format because it removes unnecessary data and leaves the most easily consumable bits of information. Brains find visual information presented in animated format extremely appealing.

This idea that animated motion is delightful to perceive is also somewhat supported by Soviet film director Eisenstein who, after watching Disney's *Bambi* (1942), praised animation as an artform that is 'the purest example of the application of the method of art in its very purest form' as it can 'take any form dynamically' (2017). Eisenstein expressed his belief that high-quality animation can produce continuous movement that invokes lasting 'ecstasy' (Rebecchi, 2020). This notion that animation provides a visually pleasant representation of movement was noticed with the first works of quality animation.

One of the most prominent challenges the medium faces today is the widespread misconception that defines the purpose and content of animation. Animation is often perceived as a *genre* (a story with recurring narrative elements) rather than a *medium* (a way or form to tell a narrative). Therefore, it is necessary to briefly explore the concept of the medium before moving to the concept of animation.

The term medium borrowed its meaning from Latin, where the word means the *middle* or *middle of*. This Latin word eventually became the basis for the modern term, which is used today to describe mass media platforms (e.g. television, cinema, radio, press, internet) and less massive but seemingly irreplaceable forms of communication such as traffic lights, a restaurant menu, an ATM screen and the human body. Therefore, the term 'medium' is a platform to deliver a message to the target audience.

The misconception of perceiving animation as a genre rather than a medium arose for several historically formed reasons. First, the confusion between the concepts of media and genre (in the context of animation) originated from the fact that, for a long time, animation media was mainly used to portray content intended for children. This – and the fact that Hollywood, from the beginning of the film industry, used the classification system that grouped all cinematographic works into genres – led to the natural result of naming animated works as one of the genres of cinema (and later – TV). Because the division of cinematic works into genres helped to identify and group movies not only for the filmmakers but also for consumers of cultural products (Crebber, 2015), the transformation of animation into genre resulted from a natural process (albeit based on false assumptions).

Therefore, it must be admitted that the casual viewer of animation products in most

of the twentieth century did not err too much by perceiving all animations as belonging to one group. After all, the animation was, almost without exception, intended for the child audience. As a result, several generations of animation viewers have grown up believing that animation is appropriate for conveying a narrative of frivolous or light-hearted content, and because the animation viewers and those who invest in film and TV production thought that way, this misconception became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The second reason that led to and helped establish this confusion is that animation, as a medium, has never had its exclusive platform for mass distribution. To illustrate this, there has never been a cinema theatre that exclusively showed animated films (so there was no *animation theatre*), as there never were separate TV sets at homes that broadcasted exclusively animated content (no *ani-tele-vision*). Animated works have always reached consumers as a small part of the supply through a platform where the remaining content was grouped by genre. Therefore, the practice of naming animation as a genre eventually became natural and unchallenged.

This happened because animation, like most other media of popular culture that emerged in the early twentieth century, has been considered an unsuitable topic for serious academic research for a long time (Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė, 2020). This means there have been no individuals who can authoritatively combat this misconception. However, it is necessary to emphasise that today, animation as an expression of art is thoroughly examined by professional film critics and academics⁴.

Of course, by calling animation a genre, it does not become less of an artistic expression. However, the belief that animation is a genre becomes a severe problem when investors, distributors, or decision makers in charge of state support for cinematic projects believe that the animation medium is not acceptable for conveying complex or complicated narratives. The slow rise of European-produced animated movies that tackle mature themes shows that this stigma is gradually disappearing. Still, it would be incorrect to state that animation content creators no longer face this problem.

The situation is worse in the context of European TV, where animation targeted at adults (non-erotic) is so sparse that the situation cannot be labelled as 'non-existing'

⁴ Today, there are several specialised scientific journals, such as *Animation Studies*, *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, *Animation Practice, Process & Production*, and *Computer Animation & Virtual Worlds*, that publish academic articles dedicated to expanding and deepening the understanding and possibilities of animation.

only because of technicality. From 2018 onwards, animated TV projects presented at *Cartoon Forum* events targeting young adults/adults are always present (Cartoon Media, 2023). Yet, no available information would support the notion that any of these European TV animation projects were produced and distributed. Available data suggest that unlike in Asia and North America, where content for this target audience is very popular (Digital Vector, 2016; Evershed, 2020), European investors and broadcasters do not want to take a chance with this segment.

Now is the time to clearly define what animation is. Animation is a creative technique that produces the illusion of life and/or movement of objects when the frames are presented in sequence in the same space. This definition of animation consists of several essential aspects that need to be discussed separately. It is necessary to start with the term *technique*. This term indicates that a particular production process or creative method is applied to produce animated content. Using the term technique in the medium definition indicates that animation results from purposeful work that requires specific knowledge and skills. Therefore, a visual expression randomly generated by any type of software (including artificial intelligence) should not be considered an animation. Animation is an artistic expression only when each frame is created by the animator (Annecy International Animation Film Festival, 2017).

There have been extensive debates over the usage of motion or performance capture tools to portray characters in animated form (see Freedman, 2012; Amidi, 2011; Aldred, 2011; Leiva, 2011). However, for now, the consensus is that motion capture is not animation because it is an actor's and not an animator's performance that guides the virtual character's behaviour. Because an animated character's performance is not entirely produced by an animator (frame by frame), it cannot be considered animation even though it was designed, built, rigged, and rendered by animation specialists. Finally, it is essential to notice that this position is expressed even in the official Academy Awards rules (92nd Academy Awards, 2021):

Some of the techniques of animating films include but are not limited to hand-drawn animation, computer animation, stop-motion, clay animation, pixelation, cutout animation, (...). Motion capture and real-time puppetry are not by themselves animation techniques.

However, in most blockbuster movie cases, even when heavily relying on motion



Figure 3. A still from the making of Cinderella (1950). In this picture, two stages of animation production are shown – the filmed material with the live actors (later used as a reference for the animators to rotoscope) and the final result of the animation (only the characters). © Disney. Fair use.

capture, most computer-generated imagery (CGI) objects' performance is created by animators using the 'frame-by-frame' technique. There is increasing confusion in the industry and academia on how to clearly identify the difference between live action enhanced by visual effects and animated infused with live action. The discussion is further inflated by the fact that the rotoscoping technique used in traditional animation techniques is ultimately accepted as an undisputed process of animation making (see Figure 3; Rubber Onion, 2016). Regrettably, animation identification by the 'frame-by-frame' method is not efficient enough and requires a case-by-case analysis without a guarantee that there will always be a consensus.

In summary, animation is a medium suitable for telling a wide variety of stories and using a diverse range of stylistic expressions. It is an artistic expression that can create the illusion of life in the most unexpected and distinct environments, and even give form to such intangible things as experiences, ideas, and concepts. However, it is also a medium that requires a lot of specific knowledge and skills to master. As soon as this medium is freed from the grip of misconceptions, animation will reach its true artistic potential.

3.2 2D Animation: Between Style, Technique, and Format

As a phenomenon, animation has an incredible number of concepts, terms, and even industry jargon that are often (communication-wise) vague, ill-defined, and even illogical. 2D is one of those animation terms. In fact, it is hard to imagine another term in animation vocabulary that has that many possible meanings that often contradict each other or even logic. But, because this term is essential to the research questions, a clear definition of 2D is necessary.

The definition of 2D animation must begin with an analysis of the term *format*. It should be noted that the term format is quite confusing (because it is thematically very appropriate). This concept was formed in France by adapting the Latin version of the word, which at the time indicated the size and shape of a book. Today, the term is used very widely and indicates specific technical characteristics. In a cinematic context, the term format can indicate a few technical aspects of an audiovisual work:

- the size of a single frame of film, indicating the length and width of the edges of the frame;
- the aspect ratio of a movie projection or TV screen (such as 4:3, 16:9, or 2.39: 1);
- whether all colours will be used for the final version of the audiovisual work, or whether it be in black and white (or a mixture of both);
- whether the projection of the audiovisual work will create the illusion of depth (*stereo 3D*) or will be two-dimensional;
- the dichotomous typology format based on the duration of an audiovisual work (for example, a *feature-length film* or *short film*).

In addition to the technical aspects already listed, animation formats can also be distinguished by media (cinema and TV). However, several animation formats are cross-platform, such as *advertising* or *animation designed for online distribution* (VOD – video on demand and SVOD – subscription video on demand). It is also necessary to mention that animation can be an integral part of video games, operating systems, or software, so the term ‘format’ should always be understood as an indication of an audiovisual work’s technical (but not creative) aspects.

The next term that needs to be clearly defined is *style*. Dictionaries define the word *style* as a *particular or distinctive way of expression*. In animation, this refers to

the *design* or *implementation according to a plan*. So in animation, a (visual) style is defined as a unique expression or approach used to create animation elements. It is necessary to specify that when creating animation content, the principles of the chosen style or design must be applied to all objects of animation (characters, environments, props); otherwise, the animation may become visually disharmonious.

Style is strongly intertwined with aesthetics as all stylistic decisions that animation content creators make are carried out with one purpose – how it will help evoke the desired emotion in every shot. However, whereas the phenomenon of aesthetics is discussed in detail in the next chapter in this section, attention is paid exclusively to the technical aspect of 2D style. This section will only discuss the possibilities and challenges of 2D style compared to other animation techniques.

Each animation technique creates certain boundaries for creators. However, the natural limitations of the animation technique can lead animators to discover new and better ways to convey the narrative (White, 2006). Many of the now-known and easy-to-recognise animation styles have emerged because animators have sought to solve particular technical challenges or to simply stand out. For example, the animated series *The Simpsons* (1989–), *South Park* (1997–), *Samurai Jack* (2001–2004, 2017), and *Adventure Time* (2010–2018) today are well known (among other things) for their recognisable style. This perfectly illustrates that a unique and nowhere-seen animation style can help an animation stand out and become a reason for praise by critics and fans of an artwork.

On the other hand, there are also benefits to using a well-known animation style because it comes with an established audience. Traditional animation technique has easily identifiable and famous styles such as *anime*, *rubber hose*, *cartoonish*, or *Saturday morning cartoons*. Each of these named animation styles has a substantial number of fans who may be interested in a new movie or TV content precisely because they feel a weakness in the styles mentioned earlier. Other styles of this animation technique could be identified based on animation schools of different countries (e.g. Japan or France), by major animation studios (e.g. Walt Disney Animation Studios or Studio Ghibli), or even by specific authors (Genndy Tartakovsky or Don Bluth; see Figure 4).

It is vital to note that no identifiable style would go by the name of 2D animation. As Nasr and Higgett (2002:1) state, ‘there are thousands of different styles of 2D hand-drawn animations’. Therefore, the notion that the term 2D could provide at least

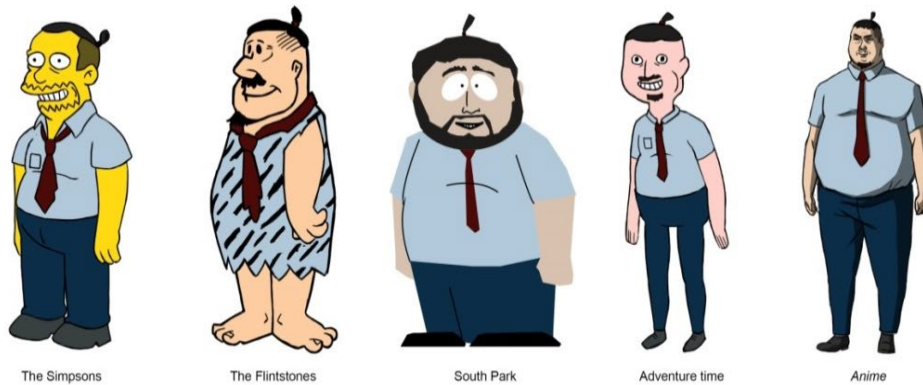


Figure 4. Examples of different traditional animation technique styles (compiled by the author)

somewhat tangible information about the chosen design direction in an animation project is simply naïve. While professionally written material rarely uses the term *2D animation style* or *look* (or any other synonym) without quick follow-up about different styles, the scientific literature does use the term. Nonetheless, in the majority of cases, it was in reference to CGI software and its ability to render a ‘2D look’ (see Hudon et al., 2018; Nasr & Higgett, 2002; Kim, 2007; Kitahata & Sakamoto, 2018) or vice versa (see Iyer & Le, 2019). While technically the 2D animation style term is used incorrectly, it identifies that there was a need for researchers to express the core stylistic difference between three-dimensional (CGI and stop-motion) and two-dimensional (traditional and 2D rigged) animation.

This leads to a rather interesting question: are there any common key stylistic features that can be identified among all 2D stylistic varieties? Nasr and Higgett (2002:1) argue that ‘the strength of this technique is that objects can be freely modified with ease, and there is no limit to how the animation is rendered’. This view is shared by animator Tracy Butler (Schnier, 2020), who summarises her fascination with 2D animation with some insights:

Subtle imperfection, unplanned model breaks. With puppet animation, you’re confined to whatever was initially planned for the puppet. It takes time to break the model apart and insert new faces, mouths, and rotations spontaneously. When the character is drawn, there’s no need for that.

This privilege to break shape, form, or even entity is applied not only to characters but also to material, especially in contrast to 3D, where similar solutions

may create aesthetic problems (Soto, 2018). As Hudon et al. (2018) argue, there is freedom in hand-drawn 2D animation that remains unchallenged. However, the freedom of animated object modification is not the only crucial aesthetic aspect of 2D animation that deserves further analysis.

Animated 2D characters, no matter what style, are heavily stylised. This means that their appearances 'are generally more accepted by the audiences, as the demands of reality are diminished'. (O'Neill, 2016:7). Writer and comic book theorist Scott McCloud argues that by reducing details, we are directing the audience to focus on specific features of the design. It amplifies remaining visual information 'in a way that realistic art can't' (McCloud, 1993:30; see Figure 5). The limited amount of texture, the simplicity of lighting and the elegance of the line to communicate details are the essential tools for creating communicatively clear and attractive 2D characters.

The other stylistic aspect of 2D animation that some professionals notice is the art of backgrounds. 2D background art, even the most detailed, is essentially not *photo-real*. One of photorealism's drawbacks is that it may adversely affect the overall image and message through unnecessary specificity, visual clutter, and physical limitations (Winnemoller, 2006). 2D, on the other hand, 'offers more organic, aesthetically unique, artistically excellent quality, like what the great renaissance artist and painter gave their work' (White, 2006:296). It is not surprising that Scott Wills, art

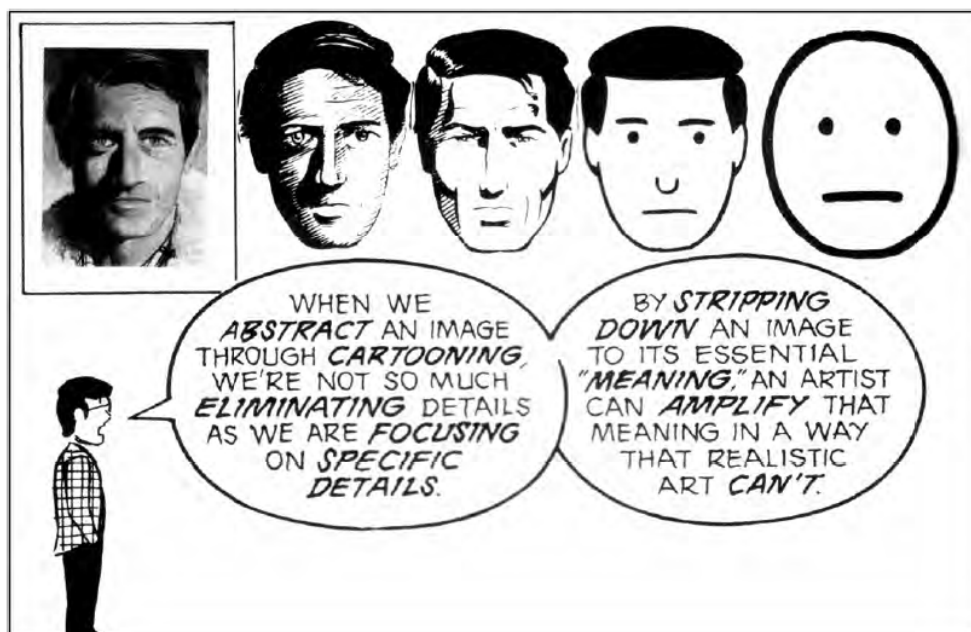


Figure 5. Abstraction of the human face by Scott McCloud. © Scott McCloud. Fair use.

director of *Samurai Jack* and *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, argues that the natural or CG-driven backgrounds simply don't look right compared to hand-painted backgrounds (Ball, 2003).

The appeal of the 2D background art is easy to understand – it can relatively cheaply provide an aesthetic look that can be on an epic scale and can be ambiguous in details so that it does not compete with the character, and amplifies information shown on the screen. Although it cannot be argued that 2D environments are in some particular aesthetic respect superior to 3D environments, the economic factor is undoubtedly on the 2D side.

But let's go back a bit and continue to explore why the term *2D animation* is, unfortunately, one of the industry's most widely and vaguely used terms. Another reason is that this term is also used as a synonym for traditional animation techniques and, for a time, this made sense. However, with the development of 2D rigged animation, this term became, once again, vague and uninformative without additional information. But 2D animation today, at the same time, is used to name both – the process of creative animation work (primarily by identifying that it is not CGI or stop-motion animation techniques) and the general direction of style.

However, this is not the end of the confusion about the 2D term. In cinema, the term 3D (sometimes 3-D) is unambiguously used to indicate that a session will display a stereoscopic image to the viewer. Therefore, a film not shown in stereoscopic 3D format is perceived as 2D (Devernay & Beardsley, 2010). Because of this cinema practice, now and then somewhat peculiar posters can be found that advertise an animated '2D' movie exhibited in 3D format (see Figure 6).

A brief analysis of international animation industry events such as Cartoon Movie or Annecy shows that 2D (the term used in both events is '2D computer') is used as a very broadly interpreted term to refer to the general principle of the production process and is applied to name a wide variety of stylistics. However, quite a few animation projects presented at these events, next to the information about *2D Computer*, also added *Drawings* (Cartoon Movie) or *Drawing on paper* (Annecy). This indicates that different methods of the same animation technique (digital and analogue) are used.

To avoid the confusion caused by the ambiguous 3D term, the previously mentioned industry events offer animation professionals (that pitch in the events) the possibility to choose two different phrases to provide the most accurate information about their project – *3D Computer* to indicate the general production technique that

was used in the project, and *stereoscopic 3D* to indicate the viewing format.

Today, the 2D term can be understood as one of the following formats or indicators:

- a broad indicator of the creative production process;
- a broad indicator of the animation style;
- a term designating that the displayed animated work is presented in a non-stereoscopic format.



Figure 6. Poster for *Beauty and the Beast 3D* (1991; re-released in 3D in 2012). © Disney. Fair use.

Only in the third example can the 2D term provide explicit information. In other cases, the 2D animation term can only provide very limited information and can be completely useless (communication-wise). On the other hand, each of the animation techniques today has such a variety of technical tools and methods (software, materials that can be used to create objects, production pipelines, etc.) that it is naïve to expect that terminology would be developed that clearly identifies what creative production process was (or will be) used in a given project. Quite a few professionals in the industry mention that whenever a new project starts, there are challenges while everyone in the team works out all the bugs and gets used to each other (Hartley, 2020; Catmull & Wallace, 2014; Winder & Dowlatabadi, 2001).

The animation techniques may have indicated the exact pipeline used in the medium's past. However, today, due to technical development and innovations, it can only provide general information on what type of specialists and infrastructure are needed to execute specific animation projects. The term *2D* or *2D computer*, when used in the context of what techniques were used, only provides information that to complete the animation production stage, a specialist with solid drawing skills is required, at least in the majority of cases.

Finally though, as the inquiry revealed, the term 2D animation is extremely vague. Still, for better or worse, it is the best term that can accommodate this research's need to group vast numbers of stylistic approaches under one umbrella and provide an opportunity to implement investigation of aesthetic possibilities and challenges. In the context of this thesis the term 2D, unless identified otherwise, will be used to reference the general style and aesthetic possibilities of 2D animation.

3.3 Animation for Adults

At its core, adult animation is animated content that is created for adult audiences and can be expressed in any format, genre, and platform. Adult animation is an entertainment form that uses animation medium and tackles such narrative themes (a conceptual or intellectual premise; Well, 2002) such as death, divorce, sexuality, identity, politics, war, loneliness, existential ennui, or addiction. Although the animation medium is over a century old (Bendazzi, 2016a), the rise of Western animation content (in mainstream media) created explicitly for adult audiences is still relatively new and niche⁵. The situation is not helped by the fact that cinemas (even today) often identify animated films as a genre, creating a condition for movie-goers to believe that animation is primarily a light-hearted form of entertainment (Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitké, 2018).

3.3.1 Setting the Stage

One of the most critical factors behind the misconception that animation is a genre and not a medium was censorship for cinema and TV that regulated what animation could portray and what it could not. For the greater part of the existence of this medium, the world's animators working in the mainstream media have devoted much effort to hiding or avoiding adult themes in their creations. As Cohen (2004) noticed, during formal censorship in the USA (1934 to 1968), most writers were careful not to create anything that could cause problems. This self-censorship, in turn, was adapted into a way of life. Many animation creators confess that 'they were never affected by the censors as they never worked on anything that needed to be changed' (Cohen,

⁵ It is necessary to clarify that the situation between Western mainstream TV and cinema animated content for adults is currently different. While serialised animated content for adults for the last few years 'has truly skyrocketed to popularity' (McDonough, 2024), the positive change for animated films is yet to happen.

2004: 46).

A similar situation was in the Soviet Union (and its satellite states). However, it is essential to note that in Soviet countries, the formal censorship apparatus was not only in charge of distribution and exhibition supervision but was also the only source of financing for cinematic projects. This censorship apparatus was a cumbersome system of filmmaking where films with 'ideological errors' were not permitted to exist (Golovskoy & Rimberg, 1986:32). Therefore, creatives that would not entirely succumb to political authority could have been severely punished (Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė, 2008). This led to a situation where filmmakers in the Soviet states were accepting of the existing system (Mitkus & Steiblytės, 2018).

Today, most democratic countries have abandoned formal censorship systems in favour of ones that rate cinematic production based on suitability for different age groups. However, some form of censorship still exists even within the new rating system albeit, in most cases, it just forbids showing pornographic, hate, and ultra-violence material in cinemas and no longer censors films based on a political, religious, or moral stand.

However, the United Kingdom stands out in this context – films are still censored. The most recent decision to ban a film was issued on 26 January 2021 (banned film – 1977 Italian exploitation film *Gestapo's Last Orgy*). Scholars have criticised the reasoning and scientific rationale for censorship and have raised questions about genre boundaries and the definition and prioritisation of art cinema within UK institutions (Barker, 2016; Kapka, 2017, 2018).

Although the form and shape of the censorship apparatus evolved significantly over time (at least in democratic countries), it is hard to accurately measure how formal censorship still affects the modern film and TV industries.

3.3.2 (Un)censored Animation Today

An age rating system (a system that follows a formal censorship system) is primarily a tool to protect certain groups in society from potentially harmful cinematic content by rating classifications that either warn parents about violent, sexual, or immoral material, or restrict theatre access to children. It must be noted that the importance and necessity of this tool are not in doubt. However, in the EU, there are many different practices for applying this protection tool. By comparison, some countries allow young cinema viewers to watch movies restricted for them if the child is accompanied by an

adult (e.g. Sweden, Finland). In other countries, such exceptions do not exist (e.g. Lithuania). Some countries also use advisory systems (for parents' guidance), and some employ restrictions (legally binding). In some countries (such as Poland), ratings are not set by any board or advisory body and are based on self-certification by the distributor, cinema, or broadcaster. Therefore, it is necessary to consider that comparing rating systems between different countries can only be conditional.

A great example of how countries judge differently for what age group the same movie is appropriate is the animated movie *Sausage Party* (2016). This movie received an *R*-rating in the United States, *N-16* in Lithuania, *15* in the UK, *12* in France, and an *11* rating in Sweden. Even in a small sample of countries within Western cultural boundaries, there are apparent cultural and moral differences in assessing what content is appropriate and what is not for a particular age group (see Figure 7). Finally, in China *Sausage Party* was cancelled by the distributor to prevent parents from accidentally taking their kids to see it (Pooley, 2018). The distributor decided that no amount of additional information and promotion that this animation is not suitable for children would affect the Chinese parents' belief that animation is a medium that can be employed to tell a variety of different stories (and not always suitable for viewers of all ages) and not an art form which is used exclusively to create light-



Figure 7. Although there is a lot of violence in *Sausage Party*, it seems that the food orgy scene caused most of the heated discussion to determine which age rating is most appropriate for this animation. On the one hand, the cartoon characters obviously perform actions that are exclusively performed during sexual intercourse. But on the other hand, these characters are not only objects but also do not have any sexual organs. © Columbia Pictures. Fair use.

hearted entertainment for children.

It can be argued that while Western countries have a shared vision that certain content should not be accessible to minors, the decision on implementing this protection is unique to each country. However, after examining the regulatory documents that govern the process of rating films in Australia, Ireland, Lithuania, Sweden, the UK, and the USA, it was revealed that, at least conceptually, most of the analysed countries perceive what content should be accessible to adults exclusively are quite similar. The following cinematographic (thematic, visual, and aural) elements have been identified (in one form or another) in all analysed 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.

In addition, it is vital to note that not only the display of the listed elements but also the intention to perform actions which is perceived as an experience that should not be a part of a child's world will lead to stricter age census by the censorship apparatus. The purpose of the stricter age census is not only to protect the younger audience from witnessing imagery that could negatively affect the child's development, but also to protect them from ideas and thoughts that could lead young viewers to unsettling questions.

The degree of the context of depicting the named mature elements in the cinematic work also play important part, as it will determine what the age census will be assigned. Nudity that is brief and no genitalia is shown, especially in the context of comedy, will be treated more leniently than the explicit portrayal of a sexual act (see BBFC, 2019; IFCO, 2024).

Also, there are some local aspects of content that are sensitive to the censorship apparatus. For example, in the UK and Australia, any form of discrimination is unwelcoming in cinematic content for a younger audience. The censorship apparatus operates on the belief that any examples of prejudice should not be part of the content

intended for young viewers. Meanwhile, Lithuanian regulations draw additional attention to scenes in which the action or intent of suicide is shown (see LKC, 2024). It is clear that the local censorship apparatus actively reflects the sensitive social and cultural challenges that the country is facing. However, as it will be discussed later in this chapter, not all countries agree what values, opinions, and even lifestyles should be promoted, and what should be removed from content intended for children.

It should be noted that while analysed countries have a shared vision of what content should not be accessible to minors, there are still significant differences between countries in how content is valued. For example, one of the key differences between the USA and Europe is that Americans are much more accepting of violence and perceive sexual content as much more problematic. This situation is quite the opposite in Europe (Phillips, 2016; Burack, 2017; Timsit, 2018).

Finally, from a censorship apparatus point of view, movies, as a whole, are not judged to be child-appropriate. Instead, the separate scenes will determine what age ratings the movie will receive. Abandoning one or more scenes can result in an age rating that opens the movie to be watched by younger viewers. This can be a powerful economic motivator for filmmakers (Timsit, 2018). The latter aspect is analysed quite extensively in the 2006 American documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, 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 minimal periods. Stricter age ratings also harm home media sales, as many retailers in the USA refuse to sell NC-17 or unrated movies. Investors' pressure on animation creators to abandon scenes that lead to stricter censorship assessments can be quite intense, even if those scenes are central to the whole work.

3.3.3 The Rise of the Adult Animation Segment

Today's rating system in most Western countries essentially allows animators to create cinematic works that tackle all narrative themes and be designed to be watched by a viewer of any age (as opposed to being exclusively created for children). However, although animation industries are 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 a greater chance to appeal to distributors and exhibitors. Cinema booking and TV 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 viewers, so not all content is created equal.

It is essential to point out that, as Cohen (2004: 48) aptly observes, ‘this is 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’. Unfortunately, however, for a long time it meant that only one animation segment was truly desirable for TV and cinema decision makers – content intended for children. The animated content that was targeted at adults ‘basically comes in three flavours – irreverent (Adult Swim), family sitcoms (Fox), and Japanese anime’ (Evershed, 2020:6).

This situation changed with the rise of SVODs. Presenting the situation in an oversimplified way – SVODs, unlike linear format platforms, do not need to worry about how each time slot would be the most attractive to the most significant number of viewers. The economic model of SVODs has made it possible to provide high-quality (even the most niche) animated content for its targeted audience and stay profitable. Data presented in the white paper (Evershed, 2020) suggest that with the recent SVOD success with adult-themed animation content, other SVOD platforms and linear broadcasters are diversifying their animated content.

There is an important reason why SVOD platforms quite suddenly became interested in this segment; their ability to clearly identify the interest of various content. Such a risky and untested segment as adult animation would never attract the interest of investors if it were not for unambiguous data showing the high interest of users of such content. For example, a report presented in 2021 claimed that Rick and Morty (2013–present) over the late summer period ‘was the most in-demand adult animated show worldwide, having 71.32 times more demand than the average television show’ (Parrot Analytics, 2021). And, as another Parrot Analytics (2023) report claims, ‘the demand growth for adult animation is significantly higher than the growth in supply for this genre’.

It is also worth noting that almost all new mainstream serialised animated content in the world comes from two countries – the USA and Japan. Thus, while there is an evident global demand for animated adult content, currently there is no solid evidence that developers and investors from other countries would seriously considering the production of such content. This situation can be explained by a number of factors – small local markets; small (or non-existent) investment by local broadcasters into

production of local animation content; somewhat conservative views of investors towards the animation artform; lack of tradition of local animation industries in telling mature stories; and finally, the lack of success stories that would inspire animated content creators from around the world to invest their time, energy, and money into project targeted for mature audiences. American and Japanese serialised animated content for adults is being created and consumed like never before in history, but the data suggest that it will take some time for the rest of the world to join in telling mature stories in an adult form.

The situation is completely opposite when it comes to films. While animated feature films targeted for adult audiences is a relatively rare phenomenon in North America, it is quite the opposite in Europe and East Asia (Mak, 2020). Interestingly, the reason why Europe and East Asia produce more mature animated content than North America is that the film form is treated more as an art than a commercial venture (unlike TV content). Filmmakers from outside the USA can secure funding for animated film if they can prove the artistic merit of the project, while in the USA, the animation medium is reserved for the younger audience that (at the moment) is simply perceived as most profitable. This trend, that American animation films are exclusively produced for children (and thus, the grown-ups simply have to endure them) was infamously stated by presenters at the 94th Academy Awards (Edwards, 2022). And while this statement invoked great public outrage of the American animation industry the message of most prestigious North American cinema industry event was clear – animation, even at this age, is not even a little brother to live-action films; it is more of an afterthought.

It is encouraging to see that in Europe, animated content creators are starting to develop animated film projects for adults more often. Arguably, the most crucial indicator of this positive trend is the number of feature animation projects presented at Cartoon Movie forums aimed at adult audiences. In the 2016 Cartoon Movie event, a record one-third of the projects were targeted at either adult or young adult audiences (Amidi, 2016). As of 2020, the ‘films aimed at young adults/adults remained strong with 21%’ of all presented projects (Cartoon Media, 2020).

However, increased pitches of adult-themed animated projects (even in such events as Cartoon Movie) are not enough to effectively increase the production of films that target adult audiences. Animation feature-length projects for adults are still significantly less attractive to distributors and exhibitors than projects that target

children. As Weber (2019) points out, adult animation film distributors must still fight the perception that animation is not entertainment just for children to be able to bring the animated film to its targeted audience. Furthermore, distribution of animated films for adult audiences requires the capacity of targeting one's audience in the most specific-possible way' (Weber, 2019). The extent of this problem is also illustrated by the fact that in many territories, adult animation is still automatically classifying animation as a children's subject (Weber, 2019), presented as a genre (Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitké, 2018), or downright refusing to distribute potentially problematic content (Pooley, 2018).

However, as is the case with most challenges, it also provides opportunities. First, data show that majority of adult animation viewers in all content are from the 16 to 34 age group (BB Media, 2023) – the age group that most often goes to cinemas (Lindner, 2023). Second, there is very little competition. Furthermore, adult animation segment can greatly enlarge its audience (Pumares et al., 2015). Thus, there is a considerable advantage for the creators who will be able to successfully win the hearts of the viewers first. Because, as Parrot Analytics (2023) reports argue, animated adult content films 'are poised to become increasingly valuable to entertainment companies and IP owners over time'.

Finally, animated documentaries have been conquering the global screens for the last ten years. *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), *Persepolis* (2007), *25 April* (2015), *Another Day of Life* (2018) (and others) were able not only to obtain universal acclaim but, in many cases, became a relative box office success. That, in turn, acclimatizes viewers, distributors, and exhibitors to the concept of adult animation. There has never been a better time in medium history to create and distribute adult-themed animations than today. As a result, there has never been a greater need for a better understanding of the adult animation phenomenon.

3.3.4 Self-censorship and its Impact on the Segment

For decades, 'adult' animation in the sphere of Western culture was an experience that was rarely found in movie theatres. Not surprisingly, most adult animation from the 1990s and later came from the Far East (Japan is at the forefront of adult-themed animation content). It is essential to point out that this happened mainly because cultural stigma towards animation as a 'child-based entertainment form' never found footing in Japan. Adult-oriented themes in Japan were introduced to cinemagoers with

such films as *One Thousand and One Nights* (1969), *Cleopatra* (1971), and *Belladonna* (1973) in the early 1970s. They had a profound impact on the future development of the Japanese animation industry (Hui, 2007). Today, Japanese anime is a \$10.9 billion global industry that supplies most adult-themed animation worldwide.

There is no reason why Europe could not become the next creative centre where animated content for adult audiences could flourish. Europe has long dominated the global film market with films that successfully address severe and challenging topics (Rucheri, 2016; Jones, 2020). Not to mention, positive signs from *Cartoon* events indicate that many animation content creators from the old continental are more than willing to take a chance with projects targeted at adult audiences. With the growing reach and impact of SVOD platforms, there are more great opportunities than ever to reach an adult audience. However, adult animation content is still limited to just a few genres. While this situation is easy to explain – comedy, irreverent (or quirky), and anime genres already have their audience, making it much safer and easier to justify investment into the new content. Animation creators who want to break down established creative patterns naturally face more significant challenges.

Animated documentaries are great examples of how animation can be used to tell a wide variety of stories. 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. These documentaries achieved far more stimulating results than if filmmakers had used a live-action approach.

The genre problem in the adult animation segment is part of a vicious circle – without success stories, it is very difficult to expect creators and investors to take risks and experiment with new genres, and success stories cannot arise if no one invests in new content. However, this is part of a broader problem that leads to self-censorship in the animation industry. In addition, animated content for adults is still perceived as economically problematic and risky, so there is a robust economic stimulus for self-censorship.

As discussed earlier in the thesis, if animated content, no matter what format, gets a rating for the older age group, it not only limits how many potential viewers can see the work but often influences cinema and TV booking decisions. Some important film markets outside the Western field (such as Russia and China) have shown that adult-specific animation as a phenomenon is still essentially unimaginable or, at the

very least, it is very heavily censored (Chen, 2020; Milligan, 2021; Welk, 2020; Pooley, 2018). Narratives that choose to address socially sensitive topics could potentially lose 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 holistic piece of art but as the sum of scenes. The decision of what age rating will be issued may be dependent on filmmakers' willingness to remove a particular scene (or even just a dialogue) from a cinematic work. Therefore, a culture is stimulated for filmmakers to produce work so as not to irritate the censorship apparatus.

This leads to the third negative outcome produced by self-censorship in animation – talent. As Evershed (2020) points out, very few studios (in the USA) specialise in mature-themed animation production. His white paper mentioned that most content creators are specialists from live-action industries rather than creators previously working in animation industries. This is the result, primarily, of a long tradition of self-censorship in the global animation industry (Cohen, 2004; Leigh & Mjolsness, 2020). Content creators from live-action media come without prejudice or misconceptions about the animation medium and are motivated by opportunities not constrained by artificial censorship.

While some animators today can express themselves exquisitely (and push forward the medium) in the adult animation segment, in the overall context, far more animators aim to work in the children's segment. As discussed in this thesis, it is a complex problem involving economic, social, cultural, legal, and technological aspects that cannot be solved easily and quickly. As various sources show, although the golden age of adult animation has not yet begun, the conditions are just right for it to start. All the industry needs now is animation creators with the right ideas for the adult segment, investors who would be willing to take risks and, of course, a little luck.

3.4 The Conclusions of Chapter Three

The literature review indicated that there is a lack of research in the area of adult animation and its practices. This situation is strongly linked to the fact that, although the animation medium is over a century old, the rise of animated content explicitly created for a mainstream adult audience is relatively new and niche. Therefore,

although mainstream adult animation is on the rise, researchers have only recently started paying attention to this segment.

2D animation is a widely used term in the medium that could indicate style, technique, or (cinema) format in different contexts. Most often, it is used to indicate stylistic vision or design direction. However, without additional information, the 2D animation term is extremely vague and imprecise.

2D animation has quite a few common stylistic features that can be perceived as strengths among all 2D stylistic varieties. The first one is the unchallenged ability to easily modify the shape and form. What is arguably even more important is that not only does it not create aesthetic problems, but it can even be perceived as a unique stylistic approach that the viewers appraise. Finally, the heavy stylisation among all variations of 2D animation makes design generally more accepted by the audiences as the demands of reality are diminished (O'Neill, 2016). This, in turn, allows the creation of incredible (yet relatively cheap) 2D background art – an aesthetic look that can be on an epic scale and ambiguous in details so that it does not compete with the character and simultaneously amplifies information shown on the screen.

Finally, literature reviews suggest that, although most of the world has moved from formal to age-based censorship, there are still additional challenges regarding adult animated content. Not only are decision makers in broadcasting, distribution, and cinema sectors reluctant to take a chance on adult content, but there are indicators that, in general, animators themselves actively practise a self-censorship work culture and produce work in a manner so as not to irritate the censorship apparatus and potentially lose any access to film markets.

4. AESTHETICS IN ADULT ANIMATION

Aesthetics is the philosophical study of beauty and taste. The term was coined from the Greek word *aisthanomai* (meaning perception using the senses) and introduced into the philosophical lexicon during the eighteenth century. From then, the term 'aesthetic' has come to designate, among other things, 'a kind of object, a kind of judg(e)ment, a kind of attitude, a kind of experience, and a kind of value' (Shelley, 2022). Aesthetics does not only encompass a vast array of philosophical concepts connected to the understanding of beauty in art, but also art itself.

Unsurprisingly, this branch of philosophy employs other philosophical fields such as epistemology, ontology, ethics, logic, and even the philosophy of information and computation (Guter, 2010). Today, beauty can be found (and analysed) not only in visual or aural arts but also in various looks and actions in sports, engineering, design, nature, and even new achievements in various science fields. Aesthetics of art is only a small segment of this branch of philosophy, yet highly intertwined not only with other branches of philosophy but also with different fields of science. Therefore, aesthetics, although broadly constructed, is not unified.

Today, aesthetics covers a wide range of topics. Moreover, it is studied in fields of science that have nothing to do with philosophy and art. To illustrate this fact, browse the scientific literature platform *Google Scholar*. On searching for literature with the keyword *aesthetics*, the platform returns almost 6,000 results. This result is obtained by setting keywords to show only articles and books published within the last three months. Therefore, when reviewing such a broad phenomenon as aesthetics, it is necessary to state that several aspects must be presented in a simplified or omitted manner. Therefore, further in this thesis, less attention will be paid to the historical discourse of the phenomenon (skipping everything before the eighteenth century) and altogether avoiding metaphysical theories of beauty. In this thesis, the researcher will focus on the perception of aesthetics in the arts, cinematography, and especially animation.

This chapter has three objectives: The first objective is to provide a brief overview of the essential terms and concepts related to aesthetics in animation, which are relevant to the research questions. The second is to analyse various aesthetic trends in the adult animation segment. The third objective is to critique the concept of animation aesthetics in contemporary 2D animation practice, mainly when depicting

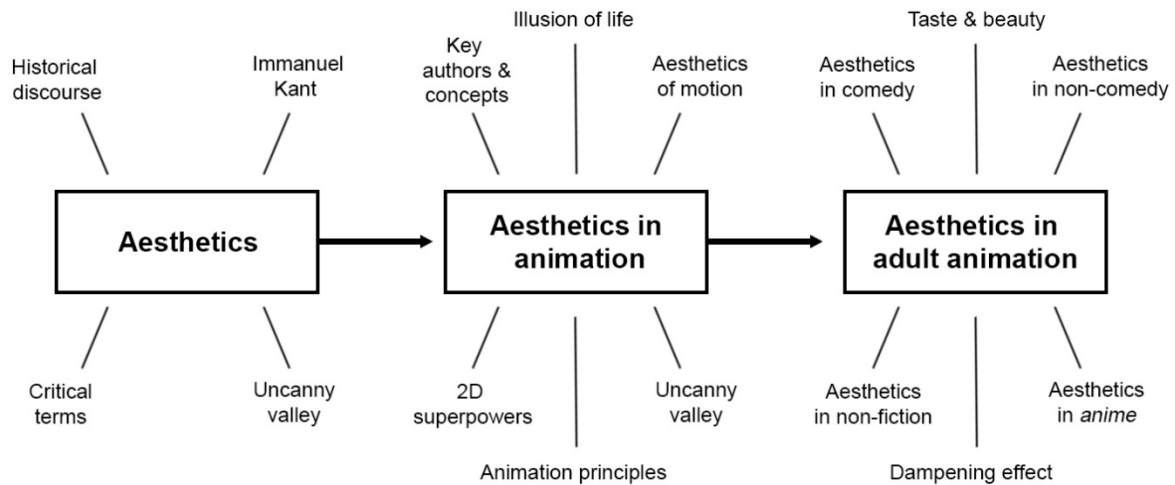


Figure 8. An initial map showing studies and critical concepts related to the aesthetics in adult animation. Compiled by the author.

scenes with explicit nudity and sexual intercourse.

Figure 8 shows a subjective network of domains related to the phenomenon of adult animation.

4.1 The Aesthetics

Alexander Baumgarten introduced the term ‘aesthetics’ in 1735 and became the first philosopher on the subject. He defined aesthetics as sensitive cognition (Baumgarten, 1763), which was supposed to complement the science of rational cognition and logic, firmly linked to considerations of beauty and art (with poetry at the forefront). Unfortunately, Baumgarten’s achievements in the discipline stop with introducing the word ‘aesthetics’. However, his ideas motivated others to investigate this conceptual framework further.

David Hume, in his essay *Of the Standard of Taste* in 1757, a philosophical classic, argued that beauty is in the mind; aesthetic responses are subjective and tend to invoke specific pleasurable stimuli. Therefore, beauty is truly in the eye of the beholder and does not come from the object’s external characteristics. However, Hume also believed that there should be a standard of taste – there is a need to identify the standard and use it as a foundation for judgement by critics. It is hard to miss Hume’s apparent paradox in his proposal that while the understanding of beauty is subjective, there should be a set of common rules that allows the claim that some art is objectively better than others (Carroll, 1984).

German philosopher Immanuel Kant, regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of the eighteenth century, is another figure in Western philosophy who not only pushed the concept of aesthetics further, but his influence is still felt in the discipline even today. He was one of the first philosophers to develop and integrate aesthetic theory into a unified and comprehensive philosophical system by trying to resolve the tension between the British empiricist tradition (represented by Burke, Hutcheson, and Hume) and the rationalist tradition (represented by Baumgarten) with the proposition that the judgement of beauty is reflective – a judgement in which we seek a new concept, rather than applying a known concept of something (Guter, 2010). A person judging a beautiful object has no interest in it and finds no purpose for it but likes it all the same (Herhuth, 2017). Moreover, he introduced or developed most of the critical terms that are used in modernist art analysis:

- **Beauty** – an aesthetic property that is also inherently good and pleasurable. It can be understood as a (1) property or a set of properties of an object, (2) something that is experienced subjectively (aka ‘in the eyes of the beholder’) and (3) indescribable property, ascending from intuition. In the twenty-first century, the concept of beauty was replaced with an interest in aesthetics (Guter, 2010).
- **Sublime** – if beauty gives pleasure, sublime gives the most potent (or even overpowering) emotions that the mind can withstand. From the modern point of view, a sublime is a psychological feeling produced by objects that are overwhelmingly powerful, vast, uncommon, or have some notion of greatness. For Kant, the sublime is a pleasure possible only through displeasure.
- **Reflective judgement** – Kant’s judgement of beauty is reflective. It is ‘a judgement in which we seek a new concept, rather than applying a known concept to something’ (Guter, 2010:112).
- The presence of **‘free play’** – Kant’s position is that aesthetic judgement involves a ‘free play’ between the imagination and understanding when perceiving an object. Kant uses this notion to argue that pleasure in the beautiful can be universally imputed (Ginsborg, 1997).

- **Taste** – for Kant, taste is a judgement (and not a feeling). Kant argues that to judge aesthetics, a person must use communicability, common sense and the harmony of the cognitive sub-faculties (Burnham, 2023).
- **Soulless art** – Kant argues that fine art can be tasteful and simultaneously *soulless*. Without a soul, fine artwork is just an artificial version of a beautiful object.
- **Genius** (artist) – Kant describes the artist of genius as possessing a unique talent required to create beautiful art. An artist genius's talent cannot be acquired or learned as its main principle (or property) is originality, so creators of fine art can only be born, not shaped.

Because Kant emphasises the arts, his idea of aesthetics has occupied a permanent place among the significant philosophical disciplines (Kristeller, 1952). As Herhuth (2017) noticed, all recent strands in philosophical aesthetics owe a considerable debt to the formulation of aesthetic judgement in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. As Gero (in Elkins, 2006) argues, all contemporary art theorists can be viewed as negotiating a position in relation to Kant.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was one of the significant figures of nineteenth-century philosophy and the most crucial figure in German idealism. In aesthetics, he influenced such movements as phenomenology, hermeneutics, Marxism, and the Frankfurt School. This happened mainly through critical engagement with Hegel's *end-of-art thesis* (Guter, 2010). However, Hegel also introduced most contemporary art philosophy and forged the link between modern conceptions of art and the art of antiquity through German Romanticism's influence.

Post-Hegelian aesthetics in the nineteenth century proved to be of little lasting interest, with only one exception – George Santayana and his late-century publication *The Sense of Beauty* (1896), where he argues that pleasure is the central aesthetic category. Santayana approached aesthetics from a naturalistic basis in human psychology; beauty comes from the individual's sense of beauty. All human functions and experiences may contribute to the sense of beauty, which has two broad categories of objects: form and expression.

With a start of the twentieth century and the rise of the expressionism movement, Benedetto Croce must be mentioned. Croce was a dominant figure in aesthetics, and

his key position on aesthetics is the idea that art expresses emotions, not ideas. This led to the development of a position later known as aesthetic expressivism. For Robin George Collingwood, the final or complete artwork is when the artist has clarified the emotion, so creative work is not an artefact but an experience. However, Collingwood's theory was criticised for the many absurdities that ensue from its mentalist ontology, the restricting definition of 'art proper', and the incoherence of his criterion of understanding in art (Guter, 2010).

From the second half of the twentieth century, considerations about philosophical aesthetics essentially stopped (Danto, 1997). However, that does not mean that theoretical reflections on aesthetics and its relationship to art came to a complete halt. On the contrary, there are a number of studies that examine aesthetics in different cross-sections and in relation to various other disciplines. However, there are two key reasons why further and more detailed analysis of recent philosophical theories of aesthetics is not necessary for the context of this thesis. First, at present, the work of recent researchers is still difficult to evaluate objectively. Second, the philosophical aspect of aesthetics today is often entirely overlooked by both the creators and the users of cinematic art themselves.

To illustrate this statement, books in the relatively recent discipline of animation can be picked up, which even use the word aesthetics in their title – *DreamWorks Animation: Intertextuality and Aesthetics in Shrek and Beyond* (Summers, 2020), *Aesthetic 3D Lighting: History, Theory, and Application* (Lanier, 2018), *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics* (Pierson, 2019), *Motion Graphic Design: Applied History and Aesthetics* (Krasnerr, 2013), *Animation in the Middle East: Practice and Aesthetics from Baghdad to Casablanca* (Peer et al., 2017) – and the reader will find, at best, only a few aesthetic philosophy theories or concepts and only in passing. The overall trend of industrial and scholarly writings is to perceive aesthetics through the lenses of style, skills, and artwork's ability to communicate emotion and overall appeal rather than question art's relationship to a person, its value, or logic justification behind judgements.

Finally, before ending this section, it is necessary to discuss one of the most critical aesthetic concepts formed in the twentieth century – the *uncanny valley*. The uncanny valley is a term used to describe the phenomenon that human simulations that are nearly but not quite realistic often give viewers an uneasy, eerie feeling (MacDorman, 2019). This phenomenon was identified by Masahiro Mori, then a

robotics professor at the Tokyo Institute of Technology. After observing how humans interacted with robots with various levels of human likeness, Mori hypothesised that a person's response to a robot would shift from empathy to revulsion as it approached, but failed to attain, a lifelike appearance (Mori et al., 2012).

These insights first appeared in an obscure Japanese journal called *Energy* in 1970, where they failed to attract any noticeable attention. However, the uncanny valley concept slowly started to be mentioned in various robotics-related observations, statements, and academic papers. Soon after, the idea became discussed in other scientific fields (such as biology, sociology, and psychology) and even creative industries. The application of the uncanny valley concept will likely be analysed even more in the near future as technical possibilities improve, and the need to create realistic-looking humanoids (both real and virtual) will only grow.

The concept of the uncanny valley proposes an idea that by climbing towards the goal of making robots appear human, people's affinity for them increases until the valley is reached (Figure 9). That is why Mori proposed to call it the *uncanny valley* (Mori et al., 2012). The uncanny valley represents human-looking characters that have imperfections that human people find unsettling (Ho & MacDorman, 2010; MacDorman et al., 2009; Mori et al., 2012). As robots or virtual humans approach photorealistic perfection, they risk making real humans uncomfortable.

As MacDorman et al. (2009) notice, this is a very intriguing phenomenon as it is well known but not well understood. MacDorman et al. argue that this phenomenon

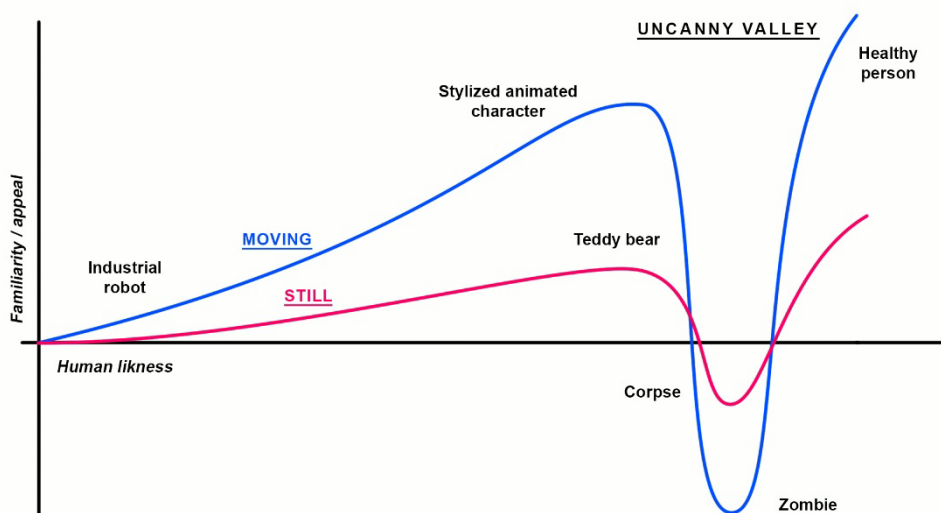


Figure 9. *Uncanny valley* graph (based on Masahiro Mori).

results from perceptual, cognitive, and social mechanisms that help humans to address riddles such as empathy, mate selection, threat avoidance, cognitive dissonance, and psychological defences. However, in the context of this thesis, the most interesting findings were presented by Bartneck et al.'s (2007) empirical study, which revealed that pictures of real humans were rated as likeable as pictures of humanoids or toy robots. Stylisation (reduction of details) creates much greater appeal in robot design for humans and is actually preferred to an actual human.

In summary, there are no universal agreements about what the aesthetic is. Furthermore, even though the discussion about aesthetics is a century old, it cannot conclude why aesthetics is valuable. Yet, it is unimaginable how creative endeavour could be measured, approached, or even understood without this concept. In a search for meaning in creative work, aesthetics is a guiding principle that helps to make appreciation of beauty more tangible. Or, to put it simply, the concept of aesthetics is necessary to provide context for invoked emotional experience.

4.2 Aesthetics in Animation: Theory, Philosophy, and Critical Concepts

Aesthetics is an essential part of animation, whether it be the illusion of life through movement, elements of composition, the overall style of the work, or the ability to convince the viewer of the believability of the animated world. However, aesthetics is a vague term for the desired creative outcome in most written works. Sometimes, that desired creative outcome is perceived as the result of specific professional skills, certain knowledge, and the ability to create an image that best expresses narrative emotion. Aesthetics, in most cases, is (i) a pleasurable experience from artistic results or (ii) stylistic uniqueness.

In the previous section, it was established that the overall trend in scholarly works is to refer to animation aesthetics superficially. However, there are a few animation scholars such as Scott Bukatman, Esther Leslie, Eric Herhuth, Maureen Furniss, and Paul Wells who more closely examine the aesthetic aspects of animation media. For example, Furniss (2008) states that to assess animation's aesthetics, it is essential to first have a solid knowledge of history, drawing, painting, photography, sculpture, music, acting, and dance, and understand the live-action filmmaking process, for a start. Furniss argues that to experience authentic aesthetic experience requires

objective knowledge; this cognitive approach is required to assess an animated work (research or criticise it) and create one.

For Furniss, key aspects for an aesthetic result in animated work are image design (characters and background designs), colour, line, movement, kinetics, and sound – the overall *mise-en-scène* of animated work. However, she also notices that the audience's taste heavily influences animation aesthetics. Because taste affects animated content's regulation (censorship), aesthetics should never be analysed without the historical context, especially without understanding what was permitted by the local censorship apparatus at any given time and place.

Herhuth, in his book *Pixar and the Aesthetic Imagination: Animation, Storytelling, and Digital Culture* (2017), shows his approach to the aesthetics in animation is more in line with the philosophy of aesthetics. He uses such aesthetic concepts as *uncanny*, *the sublime*, *the fantastic*, *sensations of taste*, and *becoming* to analyse various Pixar feature-length films. He provides fascinating insights into modern audiences' desire to explore the world differently or to experience a different world, and animation's ability to fulfil this demand. Pixar's ability to masterly use such traditional aesthetic concepts as the uncanny, the sublime, the fantastic, and the taste to create believable (instead of realistic) worlds together with emotionally compelling characters is a foundation for this studio's approach to every animation project.

It is worth noticing that Pixar's approach to animated filmmaking was taken from the Disney studio, where Disney established directions for all his feature-length films – hyper-realistic animated characters with plausible motivations. Not surprisingly, Disney studio films have for many years been perceived not only as a standard of animation quality, but also aesthetics, and its ability to delight the audience with animated worlds has been unmatched for a long time.

In his *Understanding Animation* (2002), Wells points out that animation is especially persuasive in depicting such states of consciousness as memory, fantasy, and dream because it can easily resist the conventions and rules of the real world. Reality itself in animation, in Wells' opinion (2002:28), can only be a 'comparative and relative form, half-dedicated to representational authenticity, half-dedicated to the narrational forms which heighten and exhibit conditions of the real world'. A pleasurable aesthetic experience comes from witnessing an animated world that can excite the audience and make them wonder. However, at the same time, those worlds must follow established rules.

Herhuth agrees with this statement and observes one phenomenon about the audience's unfavourable judgement of photorealistic animation. This dissatisfaction with photorealism could be illustrated by the presentation of Brad Bird, Ed Catmull, Alvy Ray Smith, Andrew Stanton, and Michael Rubin (Computer History Museum, 2005) discussing the early process of creating *Finding Nemo* (2003). They noticed that back then, they managed to recreate shots of a whale and reef and made it look very realistic, but at the same time, everybody had problems believing that fish could talk. Pixar decided to change the stylistic approach and go from *photo-real* to *hyper-real*.

Herhuth distinguishes two concepts – styled realism and photorealism. The former is when Pixar simulates the look of some natural phenomenon, such as flowing water, in combination with stylised characters. The latter is when animation seeks to produce the image as realistically as if it would be captured with a (photo or video) camera; Herhuth states that the audience judges animated worlds differently from live action.

This notion of the audience's unwillingness to ignore imperfections in the animated world when it claims the realistic depiction is the central question in Sobchack's essay (in Buchan, 2007). In that, she tackles this aesthetical problem that is unique for the animation medium – why animations that aim to look more 'real', more often than not, fail in the audience's judgement as opposed to highly stylised animated worlds, it simply does not break the suspension of disbelief. This aesthetical problem encourages formulating another, but no less important, question – *what do we want from animation?*

Sobchack's analysis of the animated movie reviews on the IMDB platform allowed her to conclude that animated works, in the viewers' minds, always balance in a hard-to-be-tangible space between the real and the believable. The animation may claim to provide aesthetic 'realism', but the viewer's subconscious judges the image to be incompatible with their personal experience. Then, the cinematic aesthetical experience is not only distracted by the urge to identify why it is *wrong real* but, in many cases, the overall cinematic experience is judged to be disappointing. On the other hand, when the animated image is stylised yet grounded on believable emotions, the imperfections that the audience finds are not judged as shortcomings, but as stimulation to be filled from personal imagination. Aesthetic judgement in animation should always encapsulate style, narrative, characterisation, and audience expectations (Herhuth, 2017).

The problem of realism is also revealed in one of the most discussed aspects of animation – movement. There is no shortage of famous quotes that embody the importance of movement in animation, therefore it is worth bypassing the discussions about the importance of well-executed movement and focusing on the uncanny valley phenomenon in animation character motion.

This displeasurable aesthetical experience comes from two sources in the CGI animation technique. First, is when a photorealistic character delivers a performance that is not in sync with the emotive qualities of the character's speech or the conflict of the scene in which the character was placed (Tinwell, 2015; Crigger, 2010; Doerr, 2007; Engländer, 2014). Photorealistic characters that could not deliver believable performances not only did not evoke empathy but succeeded in quite the opposite – to evoke the perception of psychopathic traits within a character (Tinwell et al., 2013). Then, the way the photorealistic character looks – without a realistic performance of movement, facial expressions, or gestures – is simply unpleasant for the audience.

We can find similar unfavourable judgements even if motion capture technology brings realism to character motion. Human movement is not smooth and calculated. It has ticks, mannerisms, 'swaying', and even involuntary or spontaneous eye movements (Kunz, 2015). An uncanny valley can be reached not only with the lack of realistic movement in realistic-looking characters, but also in the opposite situation – when stylised characters portray highly realistic motion.

In the 2D technique, similar eerie results can be achieved with the rotoscoping method. Gottesman (2018) calls it a *rotoscopic uncanny*. While the rotoscope method can help produce aesthetically pleasing results, as with most of Disney studios' 2D feature-length animated films, the 2013 anime *Aku no Hana (The Flowers of Evil)* illustrates how the desire to create maximum movement realism causes aesthetic discomfort. However, in the case of *Aku no Hana*, the untamed rotoscope method was conscious, so uncanny aesthetics was employed to tell a story of perversion, postmodern malaise, and economic and social decay (Gottesman, 2018). As Fore (2007) notes, the rotoscope method can bring a heightened illusion of realism to an animated 2D scene, but it also can be 'too real' and become a distraction that spoils the experience.

There are two aspects of character animation which it is necessary to pay attention to – the animation principles of *exaggeration* and *appeal*. These two principles are the only ones that remind animators how to break from reality rather

than how to imitate reality better.

The exaggeration principle in animation aligns with the already discussed theory that realistic depictions in animation medium do not provide pleasant aesthetical experiences. However, the exaggeration principle requires animators to go the exact opposite way – not to subtract the depiction of the represented movement, but to look at how to bring an addition to it. As Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas explain in their book *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation* (1995), exaggeration could be easily misinterpreted as a request for wild and uncontrolled action, but it is a reminder that, although the action has to be based on realism, it also has to communicate clear intent and motivation for the action to the audience; the principal urges prioritising clear communication as a better illusion of reality. Clarke (2004) noticed that one of the key elements of Japanese animation aesthetics is the depiction of movement – character movements do not seek to accompany dialogue, but instead are directed towards goals or to express the state of mind.

It must be noted that the exaggeration principle is not only used for the movement of characters, but also is successfully used to create exaggerated designs. The character design (bodies) can become vehicles of meaning (Rooij, 2019). This aspect is generally attributed to the principle of *appeal*, but as can be seen, exaggeration plays a vital part. Johnston and Thomas reiterate that the principle of appeal can easily be misunderstood as an instruction to design cuddly bunnies and soft kittens. On the contrary, this principle is a reminder to design characters not only with clarity in mind but with a quality of charm, simplicity, and magnetism. The aesthetics of a character design, be it a heroic figure or repulsive, should draw the audience's gaze and never look awkward, clumsy, static, and unclear.

These *Disney* animators favour simplistically styled characters over ones with more details because, they argue, animation is a medium where clear communication is much more critical for aesthetic experience. In their words, delicate expressions can be easily misinterpreted and create confusion, which minimises the appeal. This aligns with MacGillivray's (2014) argument that our brains favour information that eliminates all non-important visual noise and amplifies only what is necessary to absorb. Rooij (2019) follows the discussed reasoning and argues that for this very reason *Disney*, *Pixar*, and *DreamWorks* studios share a specific simplified and more expressive character aesthetic (amplification through simplification).

Rooij dubs this stylised realism 'Pixar Peak' and argues that computer-animated

characters presented by *Pixar*, *Disney*, and *DreamWorks* generate equally high levels of empathy as real human actors. USA major animation studios follow this shared aesthetic to create believable characters and to avoid the uncanny valley. With this stylistic success formula, such major American animation studios as *Pixar*, *Disney*, *DreamWorks*, *Sony Pictures Animation*, *Warner Bros.*, and *Paramount Animation* hit the sweet spot on a scale of lifelikeness and abstraction, generating the highest levels of empathy from the audience.

Another great strength of the animation medium that needs to be mentioned and discussed is the ability to create the most fantastic worlds and allow the audience to immerse themselves in them fully. This ability is the result of two aspects of animation creation. The first aspect is the relative cheapness of animation in creating environments (worlds). Of course, in different animation techniques, creating environments may require different levels of financial investments, but in all cases, it will be considerably cheaper than creating backgrounds from scratch in the real world⁶.

The second aspect is ignoring the rules of the real world. It may be the rules of physics, biology, or physiology that animators choose to ignore or break, but as a result, in the medium of animation, you can create flying cities, various objects of nature that come to sentient life, or creatures that have the ability to undergo a magical transformation. Mak (2018) provides an interesting observation that encapsulates how animation can help to create even the most fantastical worlds: 'Cartoons are an ideal balance of storytelling and surrealism, able to bend situations to keep pace with a director's imagination and wit'. However, to be judged by the audience as aesthetically pleasant, those worlds have to be believable and not a limited presentation of the real. The environments in animation must be presented as functional worlds that the audience would believe result from, for example, historical, social, economic, technological, or magical development. Therefore, the aesthetics of animated world-building are interconnected with logic and rationality.

Rooij argues that CGI animation techniques have one important aesthetic advantage over 2D animation – the ability to use digital sets, virtual cameras, and perceptual cues to create believable, three-dimensional worlds. That, in turn, allows audiences to accept fantastic worlds and expressive characters as real and authentic.

⁶ It is necessary to clarify that this argument is untrue in one case – if the environment is created using CGI animation technique, and the aim is to depict everyday spaces that can be accessed with ease – for example, living room, supermarket, or street.

The rationale behind this statement is that audiences can (subconsciously) recognise conventional camera techniques, and that, in turn, stimulates empathy. While the factual statement that 2D animation techniques do not use 3D sets and virtual cameras is true, the author does not agree that the ability to simulate cinematic live-action aesthetic cues can create an automatic response of empathy from the audience. There are so many more aesthetic and communicative aspects at play to create believable worlds and lively characters that the statement that the ability to use a three-dimensional set and camera invokes an automatic response of empathy from the animation viewer simply has no ground.

In summary, the most crucial aesthetics-wise task for any new animation project is finding a balance between being much more than (our) reality, and less than reality. Therefore, style is one of animation's most important aesthetic tools. However, the main reasons to choose one or the other style must be to (a) avoid the uncanny valley and (b) support the story. Also, objective knowledge of filmmaking aesthetics is necessary not only to create an aesthetically pleasing sequence of images and scenes, but also to deliver a clear message to the animation audience. Animation content creators must fully understand how to use audiovisual cues (such as camera angles, editing, composition, colours, pacing, sound) to be able to find the best way to communicate the story in every single shot.

4.3 Aesthetics in Adult Animation

The great Soviet filmmaker and theorist Lev Kuleshov, in his lecture to animators in 1938, praised animation's ability to represent what is non-representable as photo-real, concluding that animation medium possibilities are endless (Blackledge, 2017). However, in those lectures, he also expressed his dissatisfaction with contemporary 'light', entertaining topics, and overall animation based on gags, arguing that animation can deal with more profound and, in his view, more important content. Therefore, from the medium's early days, there was recognition of the potential to tell adult stories uniquely.

Unfortunately, the cinema (and later TV) viewers' taste of that era has led to strict measures being taken to regulate what animation medium can show and what stories it can tell. When animators dared to employ crude gags, violence, sex, or murder in animation, it was meant to shake up the politically correct form and the

national ethos (Boivin, 2017), but these acts of defiance were rare and, very often – costly. Yet, with every animated work that aimed to break out from the confines of the perception that this medium is only suitable for children, the censorship apparatus would feel a blow to its ideological stand. Fortunately, animated film and TV creators succeeded in transforming the censorship apparatus from formal to a rating-based one, at least in Western democratic countries. However, the effect of censorship and later self-censorship on the development of the adult animation segment cannot be overlooked, and its influence on this segment’s aesthetics.

As was mentioned before, for the most extended period, adult animation came in three types – ‘irreverent (adult swim), family sitcoms (Fox), and Japanese anime’ (Evershed, 2020:6). These three genres also come with dominant style choices. So before exploring new and more diverse aesthetical decisions in the adult animation segment, it is worth looking at these three types of animation and how they influence the animation industry and the development of the adult animation segment.

4.3.1 Animation Aesthetics in Western Irreverent genres

It is fitting to start this sub-section with one quote (Mak, 2018):

Animation is perfect for comedy. Think about it: Peter Griffin’s absurdly violent, sprawling brawls with a giant chicken, Rick contemplating mortality with Morty while shooting through alternate reality versions of himself, the Roadrunner dropping an anvil on Coyote’s head. None of that could get the same look or LOLs in live action.

It would be hard not to agree with this observation. Animation provides perfect tools to try out even the most absurd comic setups, and is a far superior medium when comedic content creators want to portray aggressive humour or black and surreal comedy. It is simply much easier to provoke laughter when content creators can crank any situation up to eleven and, at the same time, provide audiences with the assurance that no one will be, or are, hurt.

When we start to analyse irreverent and comedy genres, it is hard not to notice the dominant use of traditional and 2D rigged animation techniques, a trend that has not changed for the last few decades. However, this trend can be easily explained:

- 2D (traditional and 2D rigged) animation techniques are relatively cheaper than CGI.
- In Western countries, very few animation studios specialise in production for the adult segment, and those that do mainly specialise in 2D.
- Sitcoms and irreverent genres are dialogue-driven so can ‘get away with’ limited animation. Also, the adult audience is more forgiving of low-quality animation.
- Content creators wanted to use established styles to parody contemporary social aspects and existing tropes.

This is a simplified overview of both genres and, therefore, every animated film or TV show should be analysed case by case to establish aesthetic reasons for choosing a particular animation technique and style. However, it is essential to note that not long ago, the adult animation concept (in Western mainstream media) had to be proven viable, especially from an economic point of view. Even today, US comedy is relatively unpopular in non-English markets (with the exception of Fox’s *The Simpsons* (1989–present)), and adult animation is not as merchandisable as children’s (Evershed, 2020). Not surprisingly, many of the early animated TV shows that now have a cult following started as animated sketches (*The Simpsons* in *The Tracey Ullman Show* (1987–1990); *Rick and Morty* (2013–present) on *Channel 101* (2002)), and, in the broader sense, *Family Guy* (1999–present) in *World Premiere Toons* (1995–1997)), or had to be purchased or syndicated from different networks and brought to the *Adult Swim*⁷ network to have a chance to reach its target audience (*Home Movies* (1999–2004), *Family Guy*, *American Dad!* (2005–present), *Futurama* (1999–present), *Fooly Cooly* (2000–2001), *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* (1994–1999), and others).

However, once the *Adult Swim* network proved that the market for adult animation existed, the next question the network had to tackle was: what new content should be produced? Many of this channel’s early programmes were aesthetically experimental, transgressive, improvised, and surrealist in nature, with a narrative that was motivated to invoke comedy aspects through absurdity and shock. Once the

⁷ *Adult Swim* is a programming block broadcast by *Cartoon Network* during the evening. The block is known for showing stylistically varied animated and live-action series targeting a young adult audience.

feedback from the viewers started to come in, thematic and stylistic experimentation started to improve. In later years, original programming expanded and included not only different genres (notability epic, action, and sci-fi) but it also experimented with other mature themes. *Adult Swim* not only proved that there is a market for animated content for adults, but also that it can be diverse.

Netflix took note of that; with the rise of *Netflix* comes its original adult content. For example, its most prized adult animation show, *BoJack Horseman* (2014–2020), proves that there is a demand for a ‘smart’ sitcom that can handle complex characters (where the protagonist is a morally bankrupt anti-hero) with the intelligent treatment of mature themes (Falvey, 2020). Not surprisingly, today, this animated TV show is often ranked as one of the top *Netflix* original content shows (Thrillist, 2019; Rowles, 2019; Saab & Haasbroek, 2023; de Semlyen et al., 2023).

Another great example is *Big Mouth* (2017–), an animated TV show that explores puberty and various sexual activities in the most awkward situations. However, what is most different about it is that it is not shy to talk about various challenges that come with puberty (and most importantly – the lack of sex education). Regarding aesthetics, the animated TV show is incomparably bolder with its approach to present that sexual activity graphically (see Figure 10). As the *Parents Television and Media Council* (2021:4) (PCT) put it:

[Big Mouth] depicts the genitals of 12 and 13-year-old children. It depicts 12 and 13-year-old children masturbating. It depicts 12 and 13-year-old children in sexual situations, engaging in sexual dialogue the likes of which the PTC has never documented on any television program or television distribution platform.

It is safe to say that *Big Mouth*’s approach to explicit nudity in the animation medium would be unimaginable just a few decades ago. It is still very controversial today, and such groups as *Parents Television and Media Council* are calling all ‘local, state and federal law enforcement to determine whether child pornography laws have been broken; and if they were, to levy criminal charges against those who produced and distributed the program’. Animation content creators who incorporate explicit nudity to tell their stories can’t be sure they won’t be attacked by extremist groups or movements, even when their content doesn’t violate any laws. In fact, quite the



Figure 10. Explicit male nudity in *Big Mouth*. © Netflix. Fair use.

opposite is more likely to happen.

Another critical aspect of the adult animation segment that increased with a new generation of comedy is hyperawareness of the value of intertextuality. As Falvey noticed, the creators of *Rick and Morty*, *BoJack Horseman*, and *Big Mouth* 'capitalise on the subcultural currency generated by a culturally literate audience keen on close reading' (2020:119). However, this approach to comedy content is not a new phenomenon. *South Park* (1997–present) is one example which, being able to make meta-theatrical gestures towards the audience to make fun of itself, has shown that viewers can appreciate it. Another example worth mentioning is *Archer* (2009–present), an animated TV show that parodies the spy genre and is packed with rapid-fire dialogue and meta-comedy. As Randell-Moon and Randell (2013:136) claim, *Archer* is another key adult animated series that 'makes creative use of the limited animation format to achieve a greater economy of visual humour and style with a focus on complex dialogue and characterisation, complemented by idiosyncratic intertextuality' (2013:136).

Western animated comedies use aesthetic solutions for efficient intertextuality coding, and because 'smart' comedies create their appeal to viewers through strong writing, they can get away with their relatively low-quality animation. The animation can be relatively static or even limited, and the backgrounds can be the most basic flat representations of various spaces. Of course, it should be noted that once animated TV series become popular, their quality (animation-wise) always increases. However, overall aesthetics do not change (with the notable exception of *The Simpsons*).

Finally, because comedies tend to push the limits of the status quo, this genre is often responsible for experiments that would test public attitudes about elements that, until recently, were considered immoral. Comedies and irreverent material have more leeway with graphic elements than other animated TV genres, because it is expected of them to aim to shock the public. However, the licence to shock does not convert to experimentation that seeks the best aesthetic way of execution. After all, animated comedies are not known for their high-quality animation.

4.3.2 Aesthetics in the Western Non-Comedy Animation Segment

There is a clear line of evolution between the Western comedy and irreverent genres and the rest of the adult animation segment. Without the success of animated comedy for adults, there simply would not be even consideration of other genres. But, once the gates were breached, an incredibly vast realm of possibilities for adult animation opened. However, as with Western irreverent and comedy genres, there were fears and uncertainties about what will work and what will not. This situation was aptly expressed by director Genndy Tartakovsky (Henerson, 2020):

We were seeing that there was a big audience for adult animation. We could finally get to the point where, yeah, we don't just have to do irreverent comedies. We could kind of do whatever we want (...) We even talked about it. I said, 'I don't know how this is going to look on the air,' but that's really not my concern.

The starting point for Western animated content that is targeted at adults (of non-comedy genres) was the knowledge that there is, in fact, a considerable audience. However, that also brought an aesthetic conundrum – low-quality animation most likely would not work with non-comedy genres, and it would be considerably problematic if animation content targeted at adults would use similar aesthetics as the ones used for content targeted at children. The reality was that the only animation aesthetics that proved to work (and was non-comedy genre) were found in anime.

Unsurprisingly, many Western non-comedy animation projects aimed to imitate anime style (e.g. *Exosquad* (1993-1994), *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005–2008), *The Legend of Korra* (2012–2014), *Castlevania* (2017-2021), *Teen Titans* (2003-2006), and others; Evershed identifies it as *Western anime*). It made sense – the style

already had a strong following, and not only among the audience but also among animation creators. However, because the anime segment will be discussed separately, this sub-section will focus on other genres and styles that do not consciously seek to imitate Japanese animation aesthetics.

If we aim to review the aesthetics of the Western non-comedy animated content segment targeted at adults, there is no better place to start than one of the most acclaimed animated TV series, *Primal* (2019–present; directed by Genndy Tartakovsky). *Primal* is an animated dialogue-free TV horror series with emotional depth rivalled only by a few other Western animated series. But, in the context of this thesis, this show is remarkable because of its use of colour, character, and background design, staging, editing, and sound.

Tartakovsky's approach to (animated) violence is almost in Quentin Tarantino's style – the ability to aestheticise violence and portray it in an art-like fashion is unparalleled in Western mainstream animation. *Primal* is not the first Tartakovsky attempt at adult animation – the last season of *Samurai Jack* (2001–2004, 2017) was developed with a clear goal to explore darker and more mature themes (Robinson 2017). However, *Primal* is a remarkable evolution in Tartakovsky's work (see Figure 11).

Primal arguably has the best case of animated *sublime* among Western-produced adult animation content. The visual approach that director Genndy Tartakovsky took works in perfect harmony with slow pacing that contemplates such emotions as tormented pain and the quiet ecstasy of existence. There are no better words to describe *Primal* than as a visual wonder, and a new standard of animated 2D aesthetics that mainstream TV can aspire to.

Interestingly, although *Primal* is stepping on the line that separates violence-heavy and ultraviolence content, it holds its distance from portraying any explicit nudity or sexual intercourse. This is very surprising not only for the clear aim at adults but also because the narrative setting provided a lot of opportunities for organic inclusion. Even though the director of *Primal* had stated in one of the interviews that 'I don't have any issue with nakedness. It's not filthy' (Kohn, 2017), it seems that there are inter taboos that hold the creator from fully employing explicit nudity and sexuality in his storytelling.

In the context of the superhero genre, *Warner* has been reigning with its *DC Animated Movie Universe* (DCAU) content for almost a decade. Stylistically, these



Figure 11. Art-like violence in *Primal*. © Adult Swim. Fair use.

animated movies follow comic book aesthetics to a more prominent or lesser degree. This is probably the main reason the CGI animation technique does not take root in adaptations of this genre (although there were attempts). Additionally, it must be noted that many DCAU animated films draw strong influence from probably the most influential animated adaptation – *Batman: The Animated Series* (BTAS; 1992–1995). As Sanders (2021) noticed, BTAS’ visual style, the ‘dark deco’ aesthetic and geometric expression at the expense of detail becomes a style associated with the DCAU.

Except for only a few movies out of 15 that belong to this dark side, the DCAU audience constantly faces segments with notably limited animations and other cheats that diminish overall animation quality and the pleasurable experience of aesthetics. It also creates an overall feeling that the epic setting creators aimed for was simply not matched by economic backing. Finally, the scenes that portray any violence or suggestive nudity create a feeling that it has been added to create a shock effect for the audience, not because of the need to tell a solid story. Today, the concept of animated superhero content for mature audiences is still just an ambition that is simply not supported by the required storytelling skills and financial investment. On the other hand, it is just a matter of time before solid superhero genre content appears in the mainstream, which will prove what kind of animation filmmakers are required to fully utilise the genre, the medium, and the mature themes.

That being said, in March 2021, a new superhero genre animated TV series, *Invincible* (2021–), debuted on *Amazon Prime*, and the first season is extremely promising. The solid story works with characters grounded with a clear moral stand

when dealing with mature problems and actions that always have consequences (mostly bloody). This animated TV show won the praise of critics and casual viewers. So far, it is an auspicious addition to the genre targeted at adult audiences about the price of superpowers, but it is too early to judge when only one season has aired.

In Europe, adult animation has a long history of feature-length animation films for adults and can primarily be characterised by its stylistic diversity; this can be considered the main strength of the continent. The drawback, however, is that the audience, distributors, and cinemas do not have previous experience with particular visual and narrative styles, so are much more cautious. This is not to mention an ongoing challenge with the still strong misconception that animation is a genre and only suitable for children. These aspects are the key reasons why most mainstream adult animations follow established animation style patterns – they have proved to be successful with the target audience.

Another reason for such vast artistic experimentation could be that adult-themed projects, on average, have much smaller budgets (Jokinen, 2017). This motivates animators and producers to take creative risks to stand out among the competition. Therefore, unsurprisingly, finding two stylistically similar feature-length films would be hard. Summarising the visual approach of European animation targeted at a mature audience is genuinely an impossible task. However, it is difficult to underestimate how these animated experiments in the adult segment help the media move forward and with some luck, Europe could carve its niche in the global animation market.

Regarding explicit nudity in European animated content, it is almost non-existent. This outcome is quite surprising, considering how the continent is more lenient towards the display of nudity both in the creation of feature cinema and in its censorship. Most animation cases that employ nudity in their animation were created in the last century. This suggests that the European animation community, for unknown reasons, moved towards greater self-censorship over time; this is in a different direction than the live-action filmmakers' community.

In summary, the Western non-comedy mainstream segment has different approaches to aesthetics. Still, almost all of them have to fight for their right to exist, as the very concept is suspicious to investors and broadcasters, even though existing animated content for adults clearly showcases the animation medium's strengths when telling mature stories. There is evidence of an audience for this kind of mature content, but adult audiences judge narrative and cinematic execution significantly

more harshly. Therefore, animated content (compared to live-action content for the same age group) is considerably more expensive so it is natural that projects that don't have known names or IPs behind them would be considered a particularly risky investment.

4.3.3 Aesthetics in Animated Non-Fiction

Animated non-fiction and documentary⁸ stories, although a somewhat controversial cinematic concept, did not have any trouble being perceived as created exclusively for adult audiences. As Roe (2016) notes, many scholars, popular press, and film critics positively react to using animation to show non-fictional stories. However, Roe immediately adds that the concept of the animated documentary is still not universally accepted. Although the discussion of whether animation can truly be used to tell non-fictional stories (and therefore can be labelled as a documentary) is fascinating, in the context of this thesis, the author will address only the aspect of this fascinating and controversial hybrid cinematic storytelling technique – when animation is a better tool to tell particular stories (with the emphasis on *why*).

It is critical to state that the animation medium is not always the right tool to tell stories, whether fictional or non-fictional. For example, Keith Maitland, director and producer of the animated documentary *Tower* (2016), shared his experience that after the success of his and a few other animated documentaries, at least a dozen filmmakers approached him to discuss how animation could be used in their projects. However, as he notices, only half of all projects 'were thematically appropriate, but the other half wanted it as a band-aid to cover up a weakness in the movie' (Miller, 2018). It is important to start with identifying reasons why the animation medium is, if not the best tool to tell the story, then at least better than the live-action alternative. Most scholars, film critics and journalists describe these circumstances:

- When photo-based material could be out of reach; however, as stated previously, the absence of photo-based footage is not a self-evident argument for using an animation medium. This is especially the case when an animated medium can be chosen to tell a non-

⁸ It is critical to address that while non-fiction and documentary are antonyms to fictional storytelling, they are not synonyms. However, in this sub-section, they will be used interchangeably because (i) much of earlier research did not make the distinction between the terms, and (ii) in the context of this thesis, there is no principal difference between these types of non-fictional cinematic works.

fictional story when there is a technical ability to produce live-action material (for example, it cannot be shown to the audience for ethical reasons). This aspect, at its core, is therefore trivial.

- When there are ethical aspects. For example, when subjects need to relive their trauma to tell the story (Piotrowska, 2011) or capturing witness accounts about the given event on camera could put subjects at physical risk (Beckman, 2011).
- When witnesses' traumatic experiences overwhelm their ability to speak about the event (Piotrowska, 2011).
- When an important aspect of the story is subjective, animation allows metaphorical representation of things, situations, memories, or traumatic experiences (Jallageas, 2019; Beckman, 2011; Landesman & Bendor, 2011; Roe, 2011), 'when experienced lived on the emotional, psychological, or physical plane that may have no obvious visible manifestation, such as love, depression, or pain' (Beckman, 2011:262).
- When a surrealistic approach can emphasise the message, concept, or previously unimaginable states that could be lost or unpersuasive in a live-action context (Ward, 2005; Beckman, 2011).
- When the information is easier to understand and retain, and factual information is communicated more effectually if presented in animated form instead of spoken word (Roe, 2011). For example, military movement and political maps, diagrams, high concepts, or a factual change of objects over time.

Quite a few reasons can motivate documentarians to use an animation medium to better express their non-fictional stories in a cinematic way. However, even if the motivation to choose animation to tell a non-fictional narrative is sound, that does not mean that the aesthetical experience of animated segments will invoke emotion in the audience that filmmakers were hoping for. But before exploring in depth how aesthetics unique to the animation medium can enrich the viewing of non-fictional audio-visual work, it is necessary to define how animated non-fiction differs from animated film.

Roe (2011:217) argues that audiovisual work could be considered an animated

documentary if it (a) is an animation that depicts our world rather than a world imagined by an animator and (b) 'has been presented as a documentary by its producers and/or received as a documentary by audiences, festivals, or critics'. The former condition means that animation is required to enhance our knowledge of a particular world aspect. Roe argues (2011:221), without animation, 'documentary is either impossible or would render the meaning of the film incomprehensible'.

The second condition to formally label audiovisual work as non-fictional is fundamental to invoking the wanted aesthetical experience from the audience. Because, as will be discussed in depth later, for animated documentary work to resonate with the audience, it has to have the *trust* of the viewer that the animated images on screen represent truth (Landesman & Bendor, 2011; Strøm, 2003; Beckman, 2011; Ehrlich, 2020). In the context of animated documentaries, the aesthetics of animation is never about the conventional beauty of design and motion, but about the ability to achieve trustworthiness.

This is interesting from an aesthetical point of view because once the audience member trusts that the image on the screen represents the truth about our world, the viewer no longer applies the usual animation quality demands that they would to fictional animated work. This phenomenon can be seen in such animated documentaries as *Tower* (2016) or *Stranger Comes to Town* (2007), the first documentary to use the rotoscoping method to create animated segments in the audiovisual work. If the aesthetics of animated segments in 'Tower' were analysed separately from the narrative content, it would be hard not to spot the jitter of the lines, the constant unsteadiness of shapes and the overall proximity to the uncanny valley. Yet when animated audiovisual work is perceived as documentary animation, segments are praised by IMDB users (IMDB Tower, 2021) in the review section, for example:

- 'This film is an extraordinary achievement, in both the animation genre and the documentary genre' (Red_Identity, 19 December 2016).
- '(...) the use of animation to continue the story (where footage is not available) is also very effective' (proud_luddite, 24 April 2018).

- 'The rotoscoped faces keep the past at a safe distance, and it's almost easy for the audience to distance themselves from the horror that actually happened here' (artmania90, 16 January 2017).
- 'At the onset, it might seem insensitive to tell the story of a deadly mass shooting using rotoscope animation, but after you settle into the style of filmmaker Keith Maitland's *Tower*, you realise how useful (and even powerful) a tool animation can be to tell a story that largely exists in fragments of witnesses' memories. (...) Again, it might seem like rotoscoping would work counter to this objective by obscuring the film's subjects in portraying them as 'cartoons' with professional actors' voices, yet Maitland navigates that creatively as well and shows us that authenticity doesn't only come from the way someone looks or sounds, but that their 'voice' is their story. The rotoscoping actually forces us to focus on their story and only their story. It allows us to live in those moments, rather than the person's recollection of those moments' (Movie_Muse_Reviews, 29 January 2017).
- 'The animation brought the bits and pieces of a splintered story into a very cohesive and powerful movie' (santadog-36240, 1 April 2017).
- 'This movie, while still being a compelling true story, would lose lots of its tension and dehumanise many of its victims without the animated sections' (reid-hawk, 4 January 2017).
- 'The animation takes a little getting used to initially but is skilfully done in a near-lifelike manner which gradually draws the viewer into the action' (Lejink, 13 February 2017).
- 'Given the use of animation, it's more of a reconstruction than a re-enactment, and it's incredibly intense as we are transported to the day a lone gunman shattered more than the peacefulness of a sunny, hot August day in Austin' (ferguson-6, 6 May 2016).
- 'The documentary recreates the events of that day, using a combination of news footage and high level animation' (Hitchcoc, 14 February 2017).

As the reviews state, animated segments are perceived as a cinematic solution that enriches the aesthetic experience of documentary work rather than being

distracting or unpleasant. Reviewers tend to contribute additional meaning to the animation in a documentary context – the technique, style, and even the low quality of animation in documentary works can be perceived as additional information that reinforces the story's emotional state or meaning. It could be argued that if an audience is captivated by the narrative content, it will actively look for additional meaning in animation execution that could enlarge their aesthetical experience.

Documentarian and scholar Agnieszka Piotrowska (2011:349), when summarising her experience in the animated documentary *Running for Freedom* (2003/4), noticed that animated segments 'made it both possible to tell the stories in visual terms without invading their intimate, painful spaces'. With a similar notion, Ari Folman, the director of the animated non-fictional story *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), stated that only animation could capture the surreal aspect of war (Abeel, 2009). The animation medium allowed Ari Folman to show what is difficult or impossible to represent in non-animated, non-fictional stories and foster a new relationship between the audience and the documentary text (Landesman & Bendor, 2011).

It is necessary to address the aesthetics of generally unpleasant imagery. As Berleant (2019) points out, aesthetic value can be negative, not only positive (pleasant); there could be aesthetical value in the experience that can be identified as offensive, demeaning, repugnant, or even painful. Especially in the context of documentaries, the visual experience of events that we, as collective humanity, consider reprehensible can help prevent these events from occurring again. At least it can start a discussion about how it started in the first place, as opposed to documentaries on the same topics but without shocking imagery.

The claim that shocking imagery has a more substantial effect on the audience is supported by research done in the context of social advertising. The shock caused by unexpected exposure to real-life traumatic images is extremely efficient (Banytè et al., 2014; Bennett, 1996; Dahl et al., 2003). However, Banytè et al. (2014:35) notice 'that for shock advertising not only to attract consumers' attention but also to change their thinking, the strong emotional reaction should be evoked'. Although shocking imagery is an important tool for documentarians to have a greater effect when addressing social issues and provoke debate or change in society, aesthetics plays an extremely important role in achieving those goals.

The animation medium is proving to be an important asset when telling sensitive stories involving events that most would consider as shocking. Murray (2017) argues

that animated documentaries, at their best, can be even more image-driven than their live-action counterparts, using ink and paint to leave a deeper impression. This animation aspect in the documentary context should be explored from different angles.

The first angle to discuss is animation's ability to amplify through the reduction of details. That means that once documentary subjects are shown to the audience as animated versions of themselves, although they lose details that make them recognisable or even unique, for the viewer it becomes much easier to feel empathy for the subjects. As Roe (2016:23) argues, 'animation allows a more universal level of identification by more easily enabling us to imagine ourselves into a scenario'.

The second angle that needs to be addressed is animation's ability to amortise the shock that is experienced by seeing horrific or tragic images without losing the emotional impact of the witnessed event. To illustrate this phenomenon, we can take one scene from the animated documentary *A Minor Genocide* (2018). Around the 20th minute of the documentary, the viewer witnesses an extremely disturbing animated segment where Nazi German soldiers cold-bloodedly kill the father of a family of five. Then, a few moments later, the mother is shot while she is holding a toddler in her arms (see Figure 12). This tragic event is witnessed by all three children, who are left to wonder afterwards.

Any emotionally stable person witnessing a tragedy of this kind (even if it is on screen) should invoke strong negative emotional shock and distress. However, animation somehow dampens the emotional stressing effects without affecting the



Figure 12. Still from 2018 animated documentary *A minor genocide*. © Eureka Studio

emotional essence of that scene. If an audience witnessed the same scene but in a live-action format, images of the event could be too traumatic for the viewer. Bennett's (1996) research on the effects of horrific fear appeals on public attitudes shows that warning labels with shocking images had a positive effect (motivation to change attitude) unless the images were too horrific for the viewers, in which case the effect was annulled. Choosing to depict a horrific event involving three children in live action instead of animation could have been too horrific and repulsive for the viewer and, therefore, lead to significantly greater emotional discomfort and distract the viewer from the message.

Strangely, the author of this doctoral thesis could not find any research on the animation violence amortisation phenomenon (the vast majority of research on violence in animation focuses only on its effects on children), yet this phenomenon is often mentioned in viewers' comments and critics' reviews about animations for adults that portray violence (IMDB Tower, 2021; Chapman, 2018; Frank, 2018). Viewers from different cultural and professional backgrounds have identified this animation aspect and presented it as a medium advantage over live action.

Therefore, the author would argue that, although this phenomenon is not established in scholarly works, animators (and even live-action and documentary filmmakers) intuitively feel this medium effect for the audience and successfully use it in their animated (and animated non-fictional) works. However, this argument does not mean that every scene in a non-fictional work that needs to address violence, abuse, or death visually should be done in animated imagery. Even if, thematically and logically, the animation is the right fit for the story, there is still a question about the right aesthetics.

Non-fictional stories that deal with sexual themes use animation quite often, but only in a non-sexual⁹ manner. For example, in such a TV mini-series as *The Principles of Pleasure* (2022), animation is used quite frequently, but never in a way that would be perceived as sexual in any matter. Most of the animation segments in *The Principles of Pleasure* are suggestive, and on rare occasions that the naked human body is presented to the viewer in animation form, it is highly stylised. It feels that even the content that mainly talks about sexual arousal and sexuality must uphold non-sexual decorum to be taken seriously and prove educational value.

⁹ A detailed definition of *non-sexual animation* is provided in the next chapter.

Sex, Explained (2020) is another non-fictional TV mini-series that employs animation to explain or illustrate some sex-related topics or concepts (i.e. sexual fantasies, attraction, birth control, fertility, and childbirth). However, in this case, what differs from the previously mentioned non-fictional TV series is that *Sex, Explained* shows much more explicit live-action nudity (although there is no penetration). Here, animation takes a back seat and is used only as (i) a filler, (ii) a surrealistic approach to emphasise the message or concept, or (iii) to provide factual information in an aesthetically pleasing manner. So, while animation can be an extremely valuable visual tool to communicate elements integral to understanding various aspects of sexuality, a non-sexual approach to imagery is still the only acceptable decorum. In addition, the assumption cannot be ruled out that if non-fictional content creators decide to show sexually charged imagery, it is significantly cheaper to do so by showing live-action content. This raises an important question – under what circumstances is sexualised animated imagery more useful communication-wise in non-fictional content?

In summarising the segment on animated documentaries, it should be noted that there is a mostly positive attitude towards the convergence of the animated medium and documentary impulse. This includes praise for how animation helps to present certain concepts, emotions, and feelings visually, and states of mind (Roe, 2011), but the use of animation should be done only if it thematically appropriate and aesthetically in harmony with the narrative. Yet, in the context of documentaries, animation quality (smooth motion, character appeal, and other objective aesthetic characteristics) is not as important to the viewer as, in comparison, audiovisual works intended for entertainment. But this phenomenon is triggered only if the audience perceives animated images as the truth.

Finally, animation is a tremendous cinematic tool for documentarians and non-fictional story filmmakers to present subjective material and explore sensitive topics that the audience could perceive as too traumatic, immoral, or repulsive. In addition, animation's ability to create analytical distance from the story can be the best or even the only approach for some documentary storytellers.

4.3.4 Animation Aesthetics in Anime

In short, anime is all animated content (regardless of format) originating from Japan (although, in Japan, it is a term that refers to the medium of animation). It is a \$20.47

billion global industry with over 600 animation studios in Japan (GVR, 2019), and 60 per cent of all TV animation worldwide is anime (Napier, 2016). It is a vast industry that produces animation in various formats, genres, techniques, styles, and quality (as in the flow of motion), and for different age groups. What is arguably even more impressive is that anime simultaneously managed to carve an aesthetic niche in the global market. Therefore, although care is needed not to overgeneralise this vast and diverse animation segment, it is possible to notice some trends and distinctions.

Before starting to explore those trends, it is essential to state that the ongoing heated discussion about ‘Can anime-influenced animation of non-Japanese origin be called anime?’ is not important in the context of this thesis. Therefore, the author will not analyse the question in depth and simply refer to animation produced in Japan as anime, and animation that stylistically similar to anime but produced outside Japan will be referred as *Western anime* or *anime-influenced animation*. The distinction is purely geographical and not philosophical.

The first important characteristic common in anime is the thematic approach to the narrative. A general presence of serious and challenging topics (such as violence, family abandonment, and death) immediately distinguishes Japanese animation from Western animation. Euron (2020) argues that one distinctive feature of anime is that it does not attempt to gather the largest audience by trying to appeal to everybody’s taste. Price (1996) agrees with this notion and notes that anime is not Disney animation with overused fairy-tale settings, manufactured happy endings and token animal sidekicks. What is different about anime is that its audience is (rightfully) afraid of the protagonist because it is not an American, danger-free type of animation. Napier (2016) adds that anime often uses complex storylines that challenge the viewer, especially if the audience is used to the predictability of Disney (or Hollywood in general). This dark-tone approach to narrative can also be found even in content that otherwise would be considered light-hearted; the story is grounded in the sense that not even the youngest audience is guaranteed the mandatory Western happy ending.

Then, there is a trend of otherworldly settings. However, this statement does not argue that Western animation is unimaginable. On the contrary, Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks studios can prove that their animators can create fantastic worlds on more than one occasion. But, as Price (1996) noticed, in anime, any imaginable subject, setting, or theme can find itself represented in the name of entertainment.

What is also different from Western animation is that Japanese animation

creators are not afraid to portray non-traditional gender roles or even members of the LGBT+ community (the 2003 movie *Tokyo Godfathers* is a great example). In fact, many anime works present worlds where LGBT is normal (Padilla, 2018; Baron, 2018). This is intriguing, as there are a number of cultural and legal constraints for members of the LGBT+ community in Japan (Bennett, 2018; Amnesty International, 2017). Although Japan may not be the best example of treating its LGBT+ community, the animation industry had never perceived LGBT+ as incompatible with animation (or even the children's animation segment). As Padilla (2018) notes, the representation of the community in the anime is not always free of negative stereotypes (for example, male gay characters are presented as predators or feminised for comedic effect), and the representation quality needs to increase in the near future, but at least anime had a representation of LGBT+ characters, while Western animation actively fights against any non-traditional depiction of sexual representations and genders¹⁰.

The other trend in anime is a sexualisation of young female characters. Although there are plenty of anime cases that depict strong and independent female characters (especially in the *shojo* genre; Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012), the trend of dependant, submissive, sexual, emotional (hysterical), and incompetent female anime characters is clearly visible. The decision to hyper-sexualise anime characters (mostly female) in anime is called *fan service*, although the term could mean different things depending on the context. In the Western cultural area, this trope of women's hypersexualisation is increasingly discussed, with many raising the issue of normalising objectification of women or even sexual assault (Winston & Trinidad, 2021; Grant, 2019; Brazier, 2015).

There is also opposition to this criticism with counterarguments that (a) anime never followed Western moral guidelines and (b) when sexual themes are done right, anime can produce narratives that cannot be found in Western animation (Iyashikei, 2017). Furthermore, as Orsini (2016) argues, fan service, after all, is 'the act of giving the fans exactly what they want', so sometimes, anime simply provides entertainment that can be labelled as a 'guilty pleasure'.

Simple censorship of fan service scenes based on Western taste (especially if it

¹⁰ In recent years LGBT+ representation in mainstream animation content is apparent to some degree. However, in most cases, the creators of animated content do publicly express the challenges that came with the decision to incorporate LGBT+ characters, making the representation possible only if content creators are prepared to risk conflict with investors, distributors, and broadcasters.

is based on a moral stand) has been done in the past, and it is clear that it is not the answer. But, as Winston and Trinidad (2021) notice, plenty of anime examples can develop exciting plots without sexualising female characters. Going for the sexual fan service technique to manipulate fans to continue to watch the series proves that it is the writers who are lacking, and not the genre.

The contradictive use of fluidity of motion is also an important visual trend in anime. Anime is an animated work where some of the most amazing fighting scenes can be found featuring the highest quality choreography of movements and witness extremely limited animation (or even stillness) in the very next scene. We will start discussing motion in anime from the latter aspect of motion. This selective use of limited animation can be found in the first anime (as we understand it today; Richey, 2014; Ishioka, 2020) – Osamu Tezuka's *Astro Boy* (1963–1965). Tezuka is not only credited as the 'father of anime' but also as a person who popularised 'limited animation techniques' – a visual expression trend that anime heavily relies on today (Lamarre, 2020). But as Hui (2007) argues, 'limited animation techniques' are not only a budgetary tool to considerably cut animation expenses. If executed thoughtfully, it can also be an effective technique that can convey inner ideas and enrich the emotional state of the scene, achieving certain effects which cannot be done in live action. Rich (2015) agrees with this notion and adds that 'full animation can be beautiful and breathtaking, limited animation thrills viewers with stylised editing, bold still-shots, cool poses, and dramatic effects'.

Then, just as the scene that is heavy with character-driven dialogue and extremely limited animation is over, the audience is presented with the most incredible spectacle of fluid action and motion. This incredibly fluid motion in Japan is referred to as *sakuga*. The term in Japanese has a literal meaning of 'working drawing', but in the context of anime, it usually refers to a segment of extremely high-quality animation. It is hard to underestimate how aesthetically impressive that animated spectacle can be in anime. As Marzo (2021) argues, 'there's no doubt that excellent animation is the backbone of action anime'.

As Cirugeda (2015) noticed, production values tend to be anything but consistent when it comes to long-running TV anime, but when it reaches a climactic moment, they seem to go all out. The segment of high-quality animation is usually just a small part of all anime episodes or even a movie, but its impression on the audience is more than enough to compensate for the vast amount of limited animation. These action

segments (coupled with strong storytelling) are the foundation that creates a pleasant aesthetic experience for the anime audience. Anime is a cinematic experience where the quality of animation goes from limited to spectacular. However, Ruddell (2008) notes that the anime approach to this mix of limited (even static) and fluid animation only works because it is backed by intriguing characters with psychological and bodily depth.

Next, the topic of much debate in the Western sphere – explicit violence in anime. As Ruddell (2013) notes, the image of violence, or death, in anime can be produced in the form of swordplay, gunplay, fusions with technology, or encounters with supernatural and fantastical elements. Violence can come in all forms and shapes across various genres and styles. But, as Bee (2020) noticed, violence is not common in all anime – the romantic genre will have little to no violence, while the horror genre may test the boundaries of audience acceptance of gore on screen. Much controversy about violence in anime comes from the Western perception of what is acceptable in animation (Napier, 2016). Much could be written about the position and argumentation of people who are actively pleading that anime is not acceptable in Western culture (and beyond) and that its access should be strictly regulated. However, this aspect will not be addressed further because the discussion of minors' access to the content intended for mature audiences is irrelevant to the research aims of this thesis.

When analysing the aesthetics of violence in anime, it is critical to come back to the overall animated violence-numbing effect on the audience. The recent anime series *Devilman Crybaby* (2018) is a great example of animated content that is packed with ultra-violence, but, as anime reviewers pointed out, an orgy of violence and gore is easier to consume because it is presented in an animated version (Chapman, 2018; Frank, 2018). It could be argued that anime uses violence for thematic purposes (and, to be frank, sometimes as fan service) because the animation medium allows for consuming imagery of violence, which would be a much more stressful experience for the audience if it were the live-action medium. As for violence as an anime trend – it seems that it would be more accurate to perceive anime not as an animation segment (within adult animation) that has a lot of violence, but simply as an animation segment that is not afraid to use violence as a pillar supporting development of the main characters (Bee, 2020; Ruddell, 2013). It is hard to call it a trend if everybody else actively avoids using violence as a story device.

It is important to stress that anime artists employ many distinct visual styles.

Bendazzi (2016b) argues that for anime studios to emerge and survive, they must follow one of two roads – to adopt a recognisable style, or to adapt popular manga (or other work with name recognition). Therefore, anime aesthetics is more than 2D visual style and some tropes. It is an approach to the narrative, to settings, to characters, and to action scenes. The audience's aesthetical pleasure comes from knowing that Japanese animation creators can take the most fantastic, the most bizarre setting, populate it with the most incredible and outlandish characters, and treat it with the most respect – unless it is a young female character.

Not surprisingly, the absence of such medium treatment in Western animation industries made a lot of fans, not only among the viewers but also among would-be animators (Sevakis, 2016; Serrao, 2021; Animation Obsessive, 2021). Today, we have a wave of *Western anime* (or *anime-influenced animation*) that tries to promise visual tropes and design approaches of Japanese anime mixed with the Western approach to narrative structure, tempo, and humour. Results are mixed: examples include *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005–2008) and its sequel, *The Legend of Korra* (2012–2014), which was commercially successful, acclaimed by audiences and critics during its run, and now has a cult following. However, many cases prove that the imitation of visual tropes of anime is left with only shallow content.

Finally, it is worth exploring the stereotypical perception of anime as only a 2D animation. This misconception is quite intriguing because it argues that anime is a style that can be executed only with traditional animation technique. The core argument is that if Japanese animators employ a 3D look, animation loses some essential part of aesthetics that creates a wanted pleasurable experience. On the one hand, Japanese animators prefer traditional animation techniques to tell their stories. Or, as Swale (2015:121) notes, 'It is clear that anime is not an art form that prioritises photo-real representation nor embraces the possibilities of 3D design at the expense of pre-cinematic graphic techniques'.

The CGI animation technique is becoming more popular in the Japanese animation industry, and many aspects of 2D 'flat' anime aesthetics are adapted to 3D animated films and TV series (Denison, 2015). Today, we have such better-known examples of CGI anime series and films as *Land of the Lustrous* (2017), *Beastars* (2019–), *Dorohedoro* (2020), *Stand by Me Doraemon* (2014), and *Blame!* (2017), and many others. Many anime animations produced today that are perceived as 'flat 2D' are created by mixing traditional and CGI animation techniques and then, with the help

of rotoscoping or 2D flat rendering methods, are composed to create the final (2D) look. Therefore, while we can have stylistic preferences to choose 2D animation style over 3D (because even in anime, it will have different aesthetic outcomes), the notion that anime segments can be captured only with one animation technique simply has no ground especially when we have already established that anime is, first and foremost, an approach to the story and not simply a sum of visual tropes.

The CGI animation technique is criticised for failing to deliver the aesthetical experience that the anime audience expects (see Ashford, 2022; McDonald, 2023; Limmer, 2023). The most common complaint is the uncanny look of 2D (flat) anime characters' designs once they can be seen in three dimensions (Basile, 2016; Cirugeda, 2015; Silvercrowv1, 2020). The plain face, huge eyes, small nose, and semi-defined lips are extremely difficult to translate on to a 3D model without finding characters in an uncanny valley. Another observation about the 3D's inability to capture 2D anime style is made by Tommy Oliver (2018). He argues that because 2D anime style is largely about faking shapes and forms, it can create believable yet distinctive character designs that simply do not work in a 3D format where every shape must stay to its actual model. Therefore, 3D shapes cannot be cheated for aesthetical purposes when perspective shifts.

Additionally, many anime reviewers emphasise unpleasant character movements, overuse of camera movement and considerable lack of facial expressions. Most of these aspects not only do not result in a rejection from the audience in 2D format, but are even an important part of the anime aesthetic. However, these aesthetic failures are not insurmountable challenges. With time, experimentation, and experience, these are solvable design problems.

As Cirugeda (2015) aptly observes, most anime viewers are not fundamentally against CGI but against aesthetical experience, which, more often than not, is subpar. However, almost unanimously, everyone agrees that CGI is a superior technique when it comes to displaying a dynamic camera view of the environment and depicting mechanical beings (or mecha). CGI is still a tool that has yet to discover its aesthetic applications that would allow moving the anime experience into a three-dimensional space. As Denison (2015) noticed, once animators working with CGI animation technique work out how to use the strengths of 3D animation – to create that anime aesthetical experience that the audience is craving for – it will create a new wave of scholarly discussion about the very concept of anime and its aesthetics.

To summarise anime in the context of aesthetics for a mature audience, we need to start with Japanese animators' approach to the animation narrative. Many aesthetic tropes that anime is known for today come from the fact that Western mainstream animation simply does not experiment with storylines that involve violence and sexual elements. Secondly, many visual tropes that are common in anime may start because of economic motives. Still, they become cinematic techniques that, if used wisely, can be very effective tools to tell character arcs or focus on narrative themes.

Therefore, it is more accurate to perceive anime not as a style and definitely not as a genre but as a brand. The brand that promises (a) to present narratives and characters that have depth and (b) to please the viewer with segments of the most incredible *sakuga*. If anime breaks any of those promises from the audience's perspective, it deserves all the criticism and dissatisfaction from them.

4.4 The Conclusions of Chapter Four

Analysis of different adult animation sub-segments and genres revealed not only the different aesthetic demands from the audience for various animated content, but also the possibilities and strengths of animation when telling mature narratives to adults. There is much space to grow for adult animation content. However, it does require a solid understanding of the audience's demands for a particular segment and/or genre and, arguably more importantly, to exercise internal demons in the global industries about what stories can be told in animation medium. The bias perception simply will not change without evidence to the contrary.

Animation aesthetics can be divided into objective (taste) and subjective (beauty is in the eye of the beholder). The first group involves design quality aspects (such as character and background proportion, shape and function, the uncanny valley, colour, movement, composition). There is a common understanding in the professional field of what is considered high- and low-quality artistic execution in the context of the animation medium. The second group involves aesthetics such as technique, style, and other specific design executions that audience members may judge based on personal preferences. The literature review suggests that the audience's pleasurable aesthetical experience comes from witnessing an animated world that can provide the audience with excitement and wonder. Finally, the choice of aesthetics can only be judged in the narrative context; aesthetics is chosen based on the narrative.

Exploration of aesthetics in the adult animation segment revealed thought-provoking insights. First, animation (especially 2D) dampens the audience when depicting imagery that, in a live-action case, could be perceived as too traumatic or repulsive by the viewers. This ability to create analytical distance from the story can be the best or even the only approach for some animated documentary storytellers.

There is a mostly positive attitude towards the convergence of the animated medium and non-fictional impulse. However, animation should be used only if it is thematically appropriate and aesthetically harmonious with the narrative. Findings suggest that animation as a tool to tell non-fiction stories better should be used only if there is a strong narrative – it should not be perceived as a substitute for the story. However, when the documentary does have a strong foundation, animation has one superpower that can greatly help to deliver a strong message – the medium's ability to amplify through simplification. Animation is a cinematic tool that can provide clarity and focus. It is a tremendous cinematic tool for documentarians not only to present subjective material, but also to explore topics that are sensitive or could be perceived as too traumatic or repulsive by the audience. Animation's ability to create analytical distance from the story can be the best or even the only approach for some documentary storytellers.

In fictional stories, the anime segment demonstrated how violence and erotica could be successfully used to tell mature stories. Violence and erotica elements in animation work are used as an integral element to the overall narrative and, in turn, help to create depth to characters and story. While the sexual fan service technique to manipulate fans in the anime segment is also quite popular, it is regarded as a cheap marketing trick to mask the story's shortcomings rather than an integral element of the segment.

Today, a wave of Western anime (or anime-influenced animation) tries to promise visual tropes and design approaches of Japanese anime mixed with the Western approach to narrative structure, tempo, and humour, and results are mixed. Examples include *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005–2008) and its sequel, *The Legend of Korra* (2012–2014), which was commercially successful, acclaimed by audiences and critics during its run, and now has a cult following. However, many cases prove that the imitation of visual tropes of anime is left with only shallow content. To summarise this section about aesthetics in adult animation, it is necessary to start with the overwhelming use of 2D when it comes to adult animation. While this choice comes

for various reasons (and financial motivation in most cases plays an important role), there is something about 2D aesthetics that allows telling mature stories in the animation medium. It could be that 2D, in many aspects, handles the uncanny valley much better than its 3D counterparts. Or it could be that 2D allows animators to relatively easily cheat shape and form and so aesthetically break characters and objects to emphasise particular (character) traits or overall messages. Not least important is that 2D animators can get away with limited animation (or even still images) as long as the narrative stimulates the viewer.

5. AESTHETICS OF ANIMATED EXPLICIT IMAGERY

Sexual intercourse, erotica, and sexual excitement (or arousal) are not the same, although these concepts blend into each other. The act of sex is a biological process to produce offspring, so it is safe to say that the act of sex has been an integral part of humanity throughout its evolution. However, sexual intercourse is not only carried out with the goal of reproduction. Arguably, humans often initiate sexual intercourse because two or more individuals have achieved physical intimacy and want to achieve physical or emotional pleasure, so coitus is an important contributor to human bonding.

Although there are plenty of different views about what can be constituted healthy sexual activity, in the context of this thesis, there are only two important aspects of all and any sexual activity (be it for reproduction or pleasure). First, sexual activity plays an important role in personal life from physical, psychological, cultural, social, and religious points of view. As Reichert and Lambiase (2012b:2) put it, 'Sexuality is a fundamental characteristic of people that influences their thoughts and behaviours, their orientations toward others, and life in general'. Sex could create a bond between different people or, quite the opposite – can cause strong and lasting traumatising effects on a person. Sexual activity (or even lack of it) is an important part of every single person's quality of life (albeit to a different degree), and therefore, the potentially important part for filmmakers is that it portrays the lives of adults.

The second aspect of sexual activity that is important in the context of this research is that the display of any type of sexual activity (or even visual and aural implications of it) in audiovisual format is, by law, allowed to be consumed only by legal adults. Therefore, live-action and animation filmmakers technically have all the means to portray sexual activity (or just nudity) if they choose to. Yet, as established in the earlier part of this written work, it is extremely rare to see any sexual activity in animated mainstream content, as opposed to live action.

Animation is an art form that can embrace an incredibly vast range of stories, themes, ideas, and perspectives, and present it in a form that goes far beyond the limits of the live-action medium. So, self-enforced limitations upon the medium's storytelling possibilities are not only unproductive but also harmful. In this chapter, the

author seeks to explore the aesthetics of explicit non-sexual, erotic, and pornographic imagery, examine the artistic choices of the best creative examples in each area, and investigate how stylistic approaches contribute to the creation and interpretation of such content.

Investigation of the aesthetics of animated non-sexual, erotic, and pornographic imagery requires a broad examination of various factors and an understanding of the contextual relationship between various causes and results. To get insights into how to use visual (and aural) elements best to create the best viewer experience, there is a need to understand why specific visual (and aural) elements were used in the past, and question if the same emotional responses in the audience would be invoked today.

Throughout this chapter, the author will explore the relationship between art and explicit sexual content, examine the cultural, historical, and political influences on the aesthetics of nudity and (non)sexuality, and discuss the visual techniques employed to convey discomfort, arousal, and sexual titillation. The analysis will focus on the artistic aspects of each category and will not aim to present one approach as morally superior to others. The researcher strongly believes that each artist has the right to explore any genre and produce any kind of explicit imagery they choose.

Finally, this chapter presents scholarly examinations and key findings regarding overall adult animation aesthetics. In turn, it presents the author's key contributions to

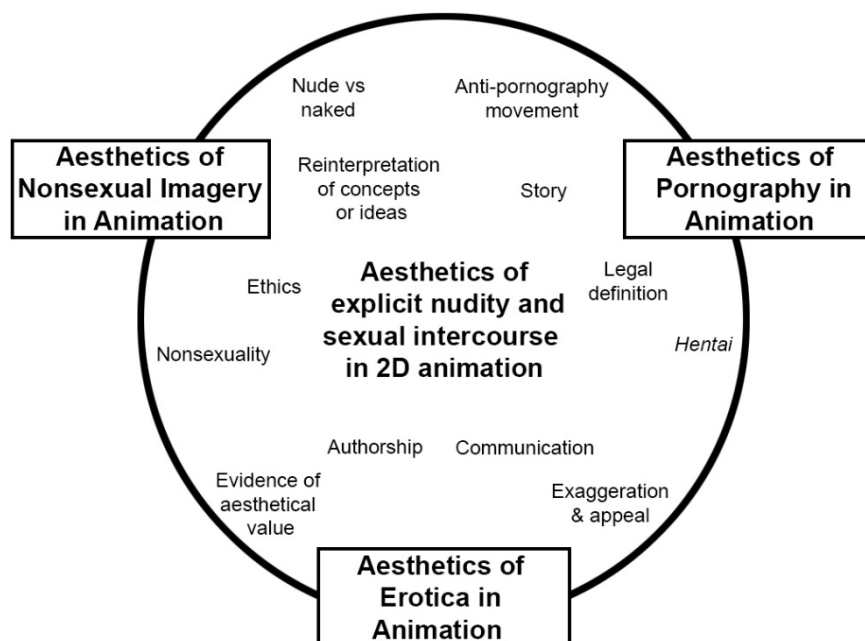


Figure 13. A conceptual map showing intertwining relationships regarding aesthetics of explicit nudity and sexual intercourse in 2D animation adult animation. Compiled by the author.

general animation theory. Findings and insights gathered from the examination presented in this chapter were the foundation for autoethnographic investigations conducted in this doctoral research. Only thanks to the literature, cases, and other data analysis carried out in this chapter was it possible to formulate an autoethnographic investigation and answer the main research question.

Figure 13 shows a subjective network of domains related to the aesthetics of explicit nudity and sexual intercourse in 2D animation.

5.1 Aesthetics of Animated Explicit Non-sexual Imagery

Non-sexual nudity is imagery that, although it has all traits of what otherwise would be considered (at the very least) erotic and (in some cases) pornographic, invokes no 'lust lure' from the viewer. There is imagery in visual and audiovisual media that, although it presents explicit nudity or sexual intercourse, does not initiate sexual arousal¹¹.

Interestingly, there are many examples of imagery of explicit nudity or even sexual intercourse that will not invoke sexual excitement in the viewer. For example, medical pictures of naked subjects (imagery that is consumed for informational purposes), paintings of naked slaves in a slave market, pictures of nude infants, naked people with severe illness, dead people, naked prisoners in Nazi gas chambers, visual documentation of rape or other types of sexual abuse and torture (see Figure 14: A–D). In some cases, even a healthy nude person (who is in a dire situation) would not invoke sexual arousal due to the cultural values of the community (see Figure 14: E). Although all mentioned examples are non-sexual for slightly different reasons, the fact is that in some cases, explicit imagery of nudity and sexual intercourse would not result in sexual arousal. Further in this section, the researcher will aim to identify in what context and why pictures would be perceived as non-sexual and what is arguably even more important – how non-sexual imagery of explicit nudity and sexual intercourse can help to tell stories.

This analysis of the aesthetics of non-sexual imagery must start with the

¹¹ In this thesis, the researcher considers that there can be no absolutism regarding people's sexual desires. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account various fetishes and sexual disorders. However, since in the context of the thesis, only aesthetic solutions that cause sexual arousal to a group of people who do not have specific fetishes or sexual disorders are investigated, the researcher – unless stated otherwise – will form all statements and arguments excluding the latter two groups.

exploration of two different English words – *nude* and *naked*. There is no better starting point than Clark's (1956:1) statement:

To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word nude, on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone.

The English language has distinguished two very different states that describe the mode of a person without clothing. One word describes the feeling of vulnerability and even shame, while the other word has positive associations with the beauty of the human body (Carr-Gomm, 2013).

Doing so helps us to grasp the divide between two types of non-sexual nakedness. First, nudity is a term that most often, at least in the context of aesthetics, is used to describe a genre of art. As a visual art form, the nude celebrates perfect (or near-perfect) body appearance. Or as Clark (1956:4) argues, 'We are immediately disturbed by wrinkles, pouches, and other small imperfections which, in the classical scheme, are eliminated. By long habit we do not judge it as a living organism, but as a design'. The nude is something to be admired in the arts. We cannot admire a body that is weak, old, shameful, or deformed but, on the other hand, we equally cannot admire a naked body if we feel lust for the subject.

In fact, the judgement of beauty should be based on a feeling of disinterested pleasure is arguably the most central idea of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Although the author will discuss the possibility of pornographic art at length in the following sections of this chapter, at least in the context of non-sexual nudity, the concept can explain the phenomenon. Although Kant's approach to the admiration of beauty does not explain why (explicit) nudity can be non-sexual, it argues that such perception where nakedness is devoid of sexuality not only exists but is also the genre's aim.

The idea that nudity in arts can be non-erotic was supported by even the most conservative philosophers (Maes, 2013). For example, Schopenhauer (1969), a German philosopher who built his aesthetic ideas on Kant's beauty concept, does not object to depicting the nude figure. However, he objects if the nude is designed in such a way that it excites a lustful feeling in the beholder. In Schopenhauer's opinion, because there cannot be such a thing as erotic art, the beauty of the nude in art can

be achieved only through non-sexual presentation.

Nead (1992) noticed that the modern *art vs. pornography* differentiation system follows Clark's (1956) established concepts and adheres to the principles that an image of the nude to be perceived as art cannot become 'an incentive to action'. Therefore, it is critical to identify what non-verbal cues the nude needs to express to be non-sexual, or in what exact situations does human nakedness not provoke 'action'?

Clark (1956) observes that nudes usually depict communal bathing in Japanese prints. Japanese nudes are perceived as non-sexual imagery because they depict just another social activity. This approach to non-sexual presentation is practised by other cultures, too. For example, ancient Greeks would depict naked athletes competing in sports events, female bathing, religious celebrations, and deities (Sorabella, 2008;

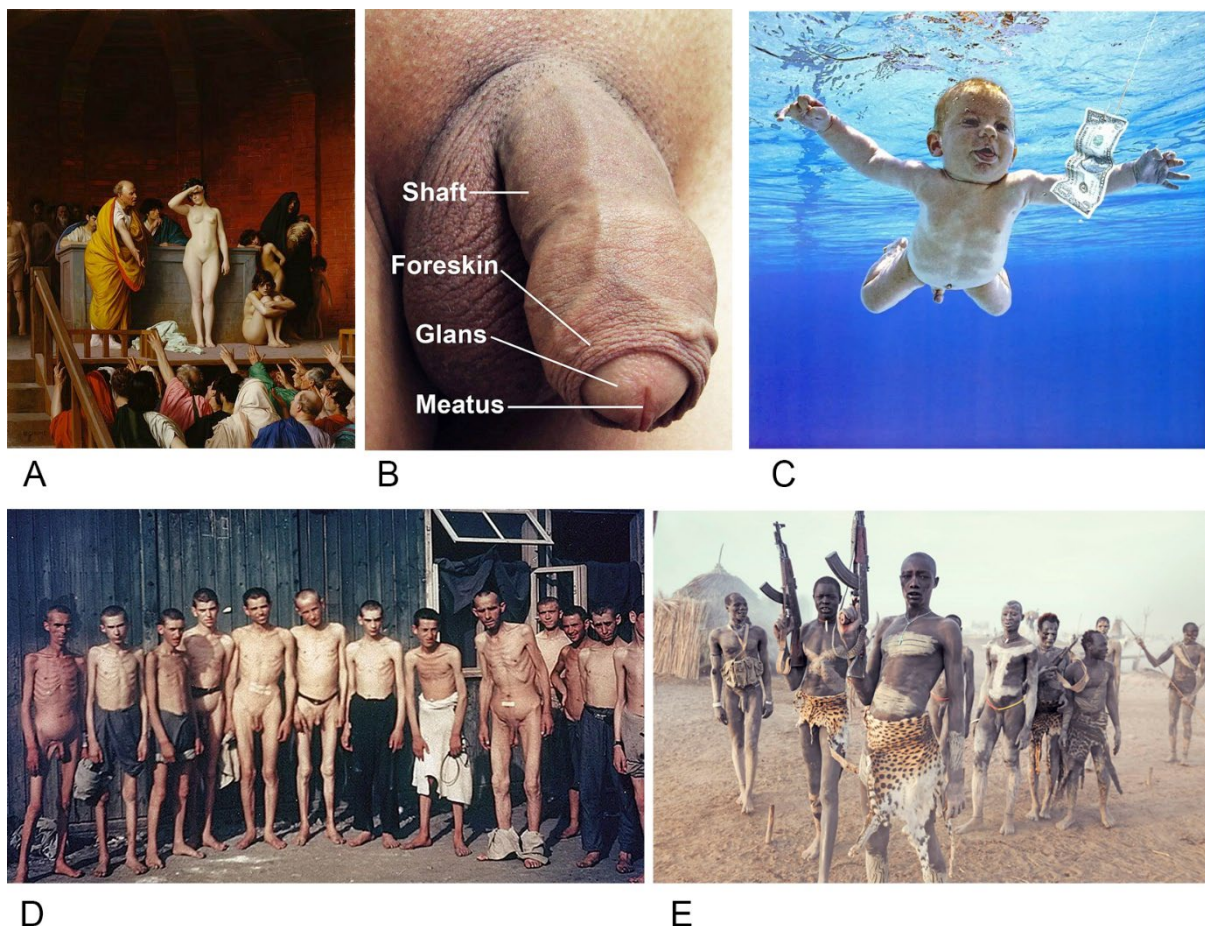


Figure 14. Various types of non-sexual imagery. (A) *Slave Market in Ancient Rome* (1884), painting, Jean-Leon Gerome. Public domain. (B) *Penis with Labels*, (2012) Unknown author, Creative Commons. (C) *Nevermind* album cover (1991), © Nirvana. Fair use. (D) A group portrait of naked survivors of Mauthausen concentration camp, (1945), © Arolsen Archives. Fair use. (E) Mundari, Mayong, South Sudan, Africa, (2016), © Jimmy Nelson. Fair use.

Sutton, 2009). Even in the case of Turkey, as it transformed from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic and the genre was slowly accepted into mostly conservative society, there were recurring themes such as sunbathing, caique excursions, and sea baths (Fowler, 2016). Therefore, the ability to perceive nude people in the surroundings or an activity that is evidently not a part of sexual activities (prior, during, or after) is one way of ensuring that the nudes would be perceived as non-sexual.

Another aspect of nakedness that is perceived as completely devoid of any sexuality is anatomical studies. In Western Europe, after the fall of the Roman empire, only in the eighteenth century were art academies brave enough to introduce nude model studies into their curriculum. Until then, most academies were very uncomfortable with the idea of nude females in front of male art students (Vabre, 2020). However, the great work with the genre of the masters of the past and the self-evident benefits of anatomical studies were a never-ending push for the legitimisation of the practice. Academies had no choice but to provide nudes for anatomical studies, however, making it that the life class was the culmination of the academic training (Borzello, 2012; Wickham, 2018). Interestingly, the fact that academies had the right to employ the practice of nude life drawings made it even more prestigious (Wickham, 2018).

Although anatomic studies are usually perceived as non-sexual imagery, there are a few situations that may complicate this desirable outcome of perception. First, unquestionably, anatomical studies involve the portraiture of explicit sexual intercourse. One example of where even such a renowned artist as Betty Tompkins can be censored by *Twitter* for presenting a photograph of her photorealistic artwork that shows genitalia (*Fuck Painting #1*; 1969) in a collection album of The Centre Pompidou in Paris. As the artist herself notices, *Twitter*¹², by banning her account, has failed to follow its own guidelines for art as it states that 'Nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK, too' (Goldstein, 2019). As this case illustrates, as soon as attitudes in artwork can be interpreted as those that can excite a lustful feeling in the viewer, it will invoke the anger of certain groups.

The usage of sexual themes in any artwork is not acceptable to everyone. Religious and pseudo-religious groups condemn any usage of sexual themes (even non-sexual explicit nudity) on morality and decency grounds. The 2006 American

¹² As of July 2023, Twitter was rebranded and now has officially changed to 'X'.

documentary film *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* analysed the *Motion Picture Association of America's rating system* practice and found out that the board seems to treat homosexual material much more harshly than heterosexual material, as well as some non-traditional sexual activities. So, in the context of the US film industry, some sexual themes are still heavily stigmatised. There are even academic papers that address the perception of the scientific community about sex-related research as 'inferior or less worthy of academic attention' (Pilcher, 2017:xvi) and that research itself is seen as a form of 'dirty' work due to its field of enquiry (Irvine, 2014). As Sigel (2005) notices, any scholarly work on this topic was done at their own risk.

There are also other than religious groups and movements that are against any presentation of explicit nudity or sexual intercourse. But of course, in this particular case, these groups aim to label any nudity as pornography; they do not accept the conceptual distinction between erotica and pornography. For example, anti-pornography activist Andrea Dworkin (2016) argues that 'Erotica is simply high-class pornography: better produced, better conceived, better executed, better packaged, designed for a better class of consumer'. The Dworkin antipornography activism is founded on a belief that pornography (and, to an extent, erotica) encourages men to eroticise women's humiliation and abuse. While her work on this issue brought to light a great many cases of genuinely criminal activity against women in the pornography industry, it is important to state that in this thesis, the author does not agree with Dworkin (or any other spokesman or spokeswoman) that argues for any type of formal censorship under obscenity laws, sexually related or otherwise.

That does not mean there are no problems or issues related to depicting nudity or sexual activities on the screen. For that matter, the degrading or exploitative treatment of workers in live-action industries is still present in some parts of the world, especially in the pornography genre. However, there is no direct correlation between the genre as a means to tell a specific story and men and women who will always search for ways to exploit and abuse others for their gain. It is necessary to acknowledge issues that come with all industries that employ sex to produce products or services because it is unrelated to research questions, so it will not be addressed further in this research.

Returning to the topic of nudity, it is necessary to address the final categories where nakedness could be perceived as non-sexual. First, when it is educational or informational nudity. This type of explicit nakedness can be used as educational

material for medical or art students, and as an educational tool in the sexual education process. Nudity is part of the content that is targeted at a specific group and with a specific (non-sexual) goal in mind. However, it could be argued that even in this category, explicit nudity (including visual presentation of sexual intercourse) has to present a perception of non-sexuality.

The next category of nudes is ethnographic imagery. This category usually depicts nudity that is culturally appropriate in a particular group. In modern times, this will most commonly be photography or video content of African and Oceania tribes. However, as the 2023 Estonian documentary *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood* showed, ethnographic investigation can be conducted even in societies that do not practise nudity in everyday life, just when a specific event or activity involves public nudity. As long as ethnographic investigation documents activities that aim to understand or preserve unique cultural elements outside sexual activities, it could be perceived as non-sexual.

The final category of non-sexual nudity is the imagery of children. However, even though this type of nudity has a long historical precedent, and it would be hard to present an argument that naked infants or toddlers call to 'action', imagery of naked children and minors today is extremely controversial. Of course, on one side, it is hard to defend the ongoing trend of the sexualisation of children which, for the last few decades, has reached incredible scope and truly problematic effects (Lamb & Koven, 2019; APA, 2007), not to mention the fear that children's nudity can be used as a supplement for child pornography. In the case of photography, there are strong implications that subjects may have experienced psychological harm during or after their creation (Gordon, 1996).

As Isaacs and Isaacs (2010) argue, all-inclusive censorship is not an answer – yes, the censorship laws regarding the depiction of children in the art are needed, but only to protect children from exploitation, not to protect the public from being corrupted by viewing allegedly pornographic material. Another argument against all-inclusive censorship against children's nudity in arts (which has no sexual overtones) is that it would indirectly promote body shaming. However, in the Western cultural sphere, the moral panic surrounding child sexual abuse and child pornography is evident (Powell, 2010). Therefore, the very nature of non-sexuality in children's nudes does not guarantee that the viewer's fears or moral convictions would not group the nudes with the pornography genre and, what is even worse, label the artist as a child

pornographer.

So far, in this section, we have investigated what makes nudity non-sexual. Thus, it is now time to look at nakedness. If we choose to follow Clark's (1956) distinction between nudity and nakedness in arts, the former is about admiration, and the latter is about witnessing emotional or physical discomfort. Therefore when we, as an audience, witness a person in distress, the emotion that is invoked first is empathic distress and not lust.

Different factors invoke a non-sexual perception of a naked person. Suppose a naked person is unhealthy or deformed in any way. In that case, the feeling of the uncanny diminishes any possible sexual attractiveness to the naked human body. If the naked body is healthy but is presented in a situation that causes severe emotional or physical harm, it is emotions such as empathy, grief, and even distress that annul any sexual arousal that the naked body could invoke otherwise.

While the researcher could not find any studies that would directly analyse how empathic distress affects sexual arousal (likely due to it being a very specific scenario), some studies identify stress's negative effect on sexual activity (Bodenmann et al., 2010; Hamilton & Julian, 2014). One study identified extremely different sexual arousal patterns between rapists and non-rapists (Rice et al., 1994). While listening to rape stories, non-rapists empathise with the rape victim and their sexual arousal is inhibited by the victim's suffering. In the same experiment, the rapist revealed opposite results. These findings correlate with another study identifying that sexual offenders lack empathy (Simons et al., 2002). Therefore, there is enough empirical evidence to argue that nakedness (the way the term is used in this thesis) is non-sexual.

A more interesting question is how nakedness can be used in the arts; the answer to this question is highly related to the question of ethics. In Wilson and Crowder-Taraborrelli's (2012) book *Film and Genocide*, there is a large part dedicated to continuous discussion about whether filmmakers should be allowed to employ genocide in movies. The central argument against it is that it is unethical – not only that no one without personal experience can truly understand the atrocities of the phenomenon, but it is also systematically 'softened for the public palate' and allowed to 'move to the centre of public awareness' (Mintz, 2001). This is putting a filmmaker in an ethical dilemma – which is worse, to show the uncensored reality of violence and death, and potentially deter or traumatise the viewer, or to show a milder version, but in this way distort the historical reality?

On this note, the author would like to move to quite a different genre – superheroes – that somehow present a similar ethical dilemma in portraying violence in popular culture products. Heimerl aptly observes that *DC* and *Marvel* superhero genre movies are packed with violence (in fact, it is a central element in these comic book adaptations). However, it is a ‘presentation of violence that is relatively free of bloody and physical injury’ (Heimerl, 2017:47). It is aesthetically pleasant violence, that removes any hyper-realistic portrayal of deformative effects of violence on the body such as open wounds, severed body limbs, or from explosion-shattered human bodies (see Figure 15). So ‘superheroes’, like no other American movie genre, proposes the notion that violence is not only the most effective way to defeat the truest form of evil but is also integral to the sublime spectacle.

Of course, the superhero genre’s ethical dilemma is not the same as one with cinematic works that include a genocide theme. Still, it is built on the same ethical foundation – does sterilised violence depicted in popular cultural works (especially in mainstream cinema and TV), on any level, distort our understanding of violence? Does it create (or at least stimulate) a global culture glorifying violence?

Although violence and nakedness are not synonymous, both phenomena represent unpleasant situations to some extent. Therefore, as with violence, artistic content creators must always ask if the application of nakedness in the story can be presented ethically. If an artist wants to tell a story involving rape, torture, or (sexual) abuse, it is necessary to solve the already mentioned emerging ethical dilemma – to



Figure 15. *The Avengers* (2012). The superhero genre proposes the notion that great destruction can happen without any loss of human life. This sterile portrayal of destruction is adopted by mainstream studios because a realistic portrayal of events would both lead to a higher age rating and potentially ruin the entertainment experience. © Marvel Studios. Fair use.

present the uncensored reality, or to display a sterilised and non-offensive version.

Finally, it is necessary to review non-sexual nudity and nakedness in the animation medium. The approach to this examination can be made from a few equally important angles. For example, to explore how the medium treats non-sexual nudity and second, to identify when animation is a better medium to tell stories with non-sexual nudity and nakedness.

As established in previous chapters, due to self-censorship in the Western cultural sphere, there are very few cases where non-sexual nudity would be portrayed in mainstream animation. However, many non-sexual nudities involve portraying children with clearly visible genitalia. For example, in *The Simpsons Movie* (2007), when Bart Simpson rides a skateboard naked, there is a short sequence where the audience can clearly see the boy's penis. Another famous example is in *South Park* (1997–present; Season 8, Episode 1) when one of the main characters, Eric Cartman, gets completely naked because the character believes he is invisible to others when undressed. Of course, there is surprisingly a lot of non-sexual child nudity in *Big Mouth* (2017–present), given that this TV show is about children's sexual exploration and frustration.

Even with transnational-level of concern surrounding the modern depiction of nude children (Sigel, 2005), the animation medium, in those rare cases when creators choose to portray nude children, manages to get away with that much easier than photorealistic media. The reason why this medium can get away with a relatively mild reaction towards animated child nudity is most likely due to the stylisation phenomenon – even though the audience can read that a nude child exposes his genitalia to the audience, it is represented only with a few lines. It is as much penis as one long and two round vegetables placed together. Therefore, it has the ability to read that the animated character is nude is enough to understand the contextual situation (and, most often, to make the audience laugh), yet with not enough details to believe that this could be perceived as child pornography.

In Japan, animated children's nudity is much more common. Still, what is truly different from Western mainstream animation is that Japanese animators are not afraid to show child nudity in content targeted at children. This brings us to one of the most infamous cases of non-sexual child nudity in mainstream TV animation – *Dragon Ball* (1986–1989; Season 1 Episode 1) where protagonist Goku is skinny dipping in the river (see Figure 16). Every shot showing the protagonist's penis was digitally

altered in the episode adapted for the USA audience. This suggests that non-sexual child nudity in the Western cultural sphere is only acceptable in adult animation. At least in the USA, there is very little reliable information on how this TV show was censored in Europe¹³. However, the very situation that animated non-sexual child nudity is acceptable only to exclusively adult audiences and not appropriate in content for children (where, it could be argued, there is very little chance to find paedophiles) hints that controversy around animated non-sexual child nudity is happening because the phenomenon is perceived through emotional lenses. This makes it very unpredictable, censorship-wise.

Animated non-sexual nudity that depicts adults in mainstream media is surprisingly rare. It seems that if animated content creators included scenes in the narrative that require a person to be nude (such as changing clothes or bathing), they would go in one of two ways: (a) censor the animation by strategically placing camera angles or objects, so that viewer is never exposed to explicit nudity or, (b) go in the opposite direction and make the nudity sexually charged, as if explicit nudity is already pushing boundaries, and to stop at non-sexual nudity is to miss some sort of opportunity. Animated non-sexual nudity of adult characters is risky on its own but somehow not raunchy enough.

However, there are great examples that showcase how animated non-sexual



Figure 16. *Dragon Ball*. Example of censorship in the USA (right still) vs original Japanese broadcasting © FNS.
Fair use.

¹³ In Lithuania, *Dragon Ball* episodes were broadcast uncensored. However, since this broadcast took place at the dawn of the country's independence, it is difficult to say whether this decision was made for moral or economic reasons. Arguably more importantly, would the same decision be made today?

nudity can help to tell the story. What is important in the context of this thesis is that there are great animated works that showcase how animated content can create a wonderful aesthetic experience for the audience. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–1996) is an excellent example of how the nude body can be disassociated from sexual overtones. In the animated TV series shown, nudity is primarily a tool to communicate the character's vulnerability, not intimacy. Although at the beginning of the series, some scenes aim to shock and attract attention through sexualised nudity, further in the series, nudity is used as a cinematic tool to reveal the protagonists' emotional status. In most cases, it was used to highlight characters' traumas or emphasise certain aspects of the human condition.

Another example of Japanese animation that employs non-sexual nudity to tell something about the protagonist is Mamuro Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995). In this anime, for the protagonist, becoming nude is necessary to achieve her job – her skin is thermo-optic camouflage, rendering her essentially invisible. Not once in the entire film is the protagonist shown to use her nude body in a sexual manner (to seduce or to obtain sexual pleasure), only as a weapon. Therefore, although it could always be argued that the male gaze can sexualise her nude body, the protagonist never perceives her android body as something sexual, only as a tool to achieve her (non-sexual) goals.

Animation content from Western studios also has some cases that portray sexual activities and nudity to telegraph to the audience about the characters or settings rather than to provide sexual excitement, although with mixed aesthetical results. One of the oldest European animations that uses nudity to set the stage for a genuinely alien world is *Fantastic Planet* (1973). However, it is truly a phantasmagorical animated work that employs non-sexual nudity to express such aspects as savagery, otherness, and intimacy. However, the strongest part of this animated work is its style, which is significantly superior to the quality of the animation and plot.

Another example that employs non-sexual nudity (although with mixed aesthetical results) is Michel Ocelot's *Kirikou and the Sorceress* (1998). This France, Belgium, and Luxembourg-produced film is a story that is based on a West African folktale and follows the saga of a small boy named Kirikou. The nudity in the animated film reflects the non-sexualised view of the human body in West African culture (see Figure 17). However, while the movie presents a refreshing representation of non-white animated characters and colourful design direction, an overall stylistic approach

and clunky animation create an aesthetic experience that does not allow complete immersion into the narrative. It is necessary to note that the animated film was a commercial success, which led to two sequels. This suggests that for the target audience, the cultural representation in *Kirikou and the Sorceress* was enough reason not only to pay for a movie admission ticket but also to recommend this cinematic experience to others.

The final example of animated non-sexual nudity, which is worth mentioning in this analysis, is *The Witcher: Nightmare of the Wolf* (2021). In this animated movie, in a split-second shot, the viewer can see a fully nude mutated elf female character. Even though this is shown just for a second, animated non-sexual nudity helps to telegraph to the audience that the character is not only mutated but also that her mindset is now closer to wild beasts than to civilised society. However, the author has to note that although the creators of this animation greatly utilised non-sexual nudity to visually provide information about the female character, the same approach, unfortunately, was not repeated with a male character. In a scene where the protagonist is bathing in a small-town bathhouse, the creators of the animated film used every camera angle just so the viewer would not be exposed to his genitalia, hinting that female and male nudity is just not at the same level, even when the animated content is created explicitly for the adult audience (see Figure 18).



Figure 17. *Kirikou and the Sorceress*. An animated film that showcases the non-sexualised view of the human body in the West African culture. © Gébéka Films. Fair use.

It is necessary to investigate examples of animated non-sexual nakedness, and the best place to start is the 1973 Japanese animated film *Belladonna of Sadness* – an incredible artwork that tells a powerful, heartbreaking, and phantasmagorical story. This animated film is not only a great example of how to use animated non-sexual nakedness, but also one of the oldest animated examples illustrating how the animation medium can tell a story involving rape and tell it in such a visual way that a live-action film cannot replicate.

Hui (2006:79) even argues that director Eiichi Yamamoto's *Belladonna of Sadness* alongside *One Thousand and One Nights* (1969) and *Cleopatra* (1971) are not only the first feature-length adult-oriented theatrical animations in Japan, but also 'established a foundation for the later development of the adult animation genre in today's Japanese animation'. *Belladonna of Sadness* showcases how animation can aesthetically approach themes involving nakedness.

Although we could list more animated examples that tell stories with explicit



Figure 18. *The Witcher: Nightmare of the Wolf* (2021). Although the animated movie creators dared to show the explicit nudity of the animated female character to the viewers, male nudity, unfortunately, was a line that they would not dare to cross. © Netflix. Fair use.

nakedness (for example, *Paprika* (2006), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–1996) or *Perfect Blue* (1997)), it is significantly more useful to discuss why the animation medium is suitable to tell these kinds of stories. Arguably, the most important reason is that animation does not require live actors to perform. If storytellers choose to tell their story in an animation medium, that automatically means that cinematic projects do not need to put the actor in a stressful or even humiliating work environment (for hours or even days) and later display captured results to global audiences.

There is a reason why the *Screen Actors Guild – American Federation of Television and Radio Artists* (SAGAFTRA) strictly regulates every aspect of nudity and (stimulated) sex. As SAGAFTRA argues, it is to maintain ‘their personal and professional dignity’ (Pulver, 2023). Pulver (2023) noticed that intimacy coordinators are in high demand due to growing awareness of sexual misconduct in the industry. Intimacy coordinators (in live-action media) today are necessary not only to protect the studio from liability, but also to protect actors from coercion (Steinrock, 2023).

Intimacy coordinators are not unique to the US film industry. For example, the UK organisation BECTU has an intimacy coordinators branch founded in 2020 (BECTU, 2023), while in Lithuania, at the moment, there are only guidelines on how to conduct a ‘safe work environment properly’ (LKC, 2023). However, in Lithuania, a stimulus to reglement overall filmmaking practice was kick-started by a 2019 study that revealed that actors (43 per cent) experience sexual harassment (LKC, 2019). What is vital to add is that this study revealed that of all professions in the film industry, actors are the ones who most often face sexual harassment.

To fight this terrible situation, in the last few years there has been a strong movement in global cinematic industries to formally admit that actors performing without clothes are vulnerable on set and often targeted for sexual harassment (and other sexual misconduct). Therefore, various codes of conduct are implemented to fight and eliminate previously conducted horrible practices in live-action film industries.

The second reason why storytellers should consider animation for narratives that involve non-sexual nakedness is aesthetics. Animation creators can explore themes that go beyond the boundaries of live-action filmmakers, using a wide variety of styles that can also reinterpret the laws of physical (e.g. gravity, weight, solidity) and biology (e.g. anatomy and physiology) without breaking suspension of disbelief (White 2013; Wells 2002; Furniss 2014). However, although animation has a much wider choice of aesthetic options, that is not all of the medium’s advantages.

As discussed in the previous chapter, animation can employ aesthetics that allow the metaphorical representation of things, situations, memories, or traumatic experiences (Jallageas, 2019; Beckman, 2011; Landesman & Bendor, 2011; Roe, 2011). Animation allows the portrayal of the audience's subjective experience of characters that visually manifests such concepts as love, depression, or pain (Beckman, 2011). With this surrealistic approach, storytellers can emphasise the message, concept, or previously unimaginable states that could be lost or unpersuasive in a live-action context (Ward, 2005; Beckman, 2011).

Yet, it is vital to state again that animation is not automatically a better cinematic medium to tell stories (including the ones that involve non-sexual nudity and nakedness). However, the animation medium does have a substantial number of advantages. It is surprising that so few movies and TV series would employ animation for narratives that show explicit non-sexual nudity and nakedness. Additionally, it is worth noticing that Japanese animated content creators employ animated non-sexual nudity or nakedness considerably more often than animators from the Western cultural sphere. Non-sexual nudity or nakedness in anime often provides aesthetically more interesting solutions, while in Western-produced mainstream animated content, the go-to approach is to stylise genitalia heavily.

In conclusion, it should be noted that non-sexual imagery in mainstream animated content is still incredibly rare. This result is very likely the outcome of a combination of several equally important aspects, such as the still low genre diversity in the animated adult segment, existing quasi-taboos in animation industries regarding nudity (especially industries that belong to the Western cultural sphere), and explicit non-sexual nudity being perceived as overall risky content element yet not as appealing to the audience as nudity with sexual overtones. On the other hand, this means that animators who want to tell stories that involve nudity or nakedness are faced with great opportunities to stand out aesthetically.

5.2 Aesthetics of Animated Erotica

Erotica is a genre where, unlike non-sexual nudity, sexual overtones are intended companions with the imagery of explicit bareness or sexual intercourse. In this genre, nudity is presented in such a way that it invokes sexual stimulation or arousal. In erotic stories, sexual sensations are pursued as beauty in aesthetics – as something pure

and ethereal (Seltzer, 2011). However, before the aesthetics of erotica can be discussed, it is necessary to establish how erotica is different from pornography.

Although most politicians, content creators, and scholars agree that erotica and pornography are not synonyms, there are difficulties in defining pornography and erotica (Cameron, 2005; Rea, 2001; Slade, 2001; Pope et al., 2007; Sigel, 2005). Everyone concurs that both genres have recognisable differences, even if a person would like to ban both genres. It seems that the key problem lies with the ability to create easily applicable criteria to clearly identify to which genre the (art)work belongs.

It is vital to address this challenge to determine which genre the audiovisual content would be assigned to is extremely important for creators who aim to create content with nudity. Depending on which label – erotic or pornographic – the audiovisual work will determine what distribution opportunities the content creators will receive. In some cases, the ability of content creators to be able to distinguish erotica from pornography also can help to avoid jail time. For example, in such European countries as Lithuania, producing erotica is completely acceptable. However, if someone aims to produce pornography (with the aim to distribute it), that person would face up to one year in prison. Therefore, there are situations when having a fundamental understanding of the difference between these two genres is more than trivial.

The very word *pornography* comes from the Greek words *graphos* (writing or description) and *pornei* (prostitutes). Hence, pornography – writings about prostitutes. At the same time, the term *erotica* comes from the Greek word *eros* (love). The genre has its name not only from the phenomenon that poets and musicians claim is the most rewarding of life goals, but also from the name of the Greek god of love and sex. It is fascinating how two genres that tell stories about fundamentally the same subject can be named by identifying one with prostitutes and another with a deity. In all things related to sex, those two cannot be more distant from each other. Yet, American and European courts have yet to define the difference between these two terms (Blackwing, 2015).

While this segment is about erotica, it is easier to define this genre by establishing what pornography is first. Therefore, the author will present definitions of pornography as follows.

A proposed definition	Country	Source
'An incentive to action' expels nudity from the realm of art and creativity.	UK	Nead (1992)
'Representation, without aesthetic or sociological justification, of sexual acts with an intrusive vividness, which offends commonly accepted standards of decency.'	UK	Webb (1975:1)
'I know it when I see it' (Justice Potter Stewart on how he distinguishes pornography; <i>Jacobellis v. Ohaio</i> , 1964).	USA	Tarrant (2016:3)
'Pornographic information – information that openly and in detail shows real or simulated sexual intercourse, genitals, defecation, masturbation, or sexual perversions (paedophilia, sadism, masochism, zoophilia, necrophilia, etc.), and this is the main purpose of such information.'	Lithuania	Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Public Information (LR VII, 2006)
'(...) pornography representation is one that combines two features: it has a certain function or intention, to arouse its audience sexually, and also has a certain content, explicit representation of sexual material (organs, postures, activity, etc.). A work has to have both this function and this content to be a piece of pornography.'	UK	The Committee Report on Obscenity and Film Censorship (1979)
[Pornography can be recognised by] 'that it was produced solely or principally for the purposes of sexual arousal.'	UK	Digital Economy Act 2017
'Pornography is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words which includes one or more of the following – women presented as dehumanised objects; enjoying humiliation and pain; tied up, cut, or mutilated; shown with severed body parts; penetrated by object or animal.'	UK	Campaign against Pornography and Censorship (CPC, 1989)
[Legal pornography is everything except] 'any publication [with] a dominant characteristic of which is the undue exploitation of sex, or of sex and any one or more of the following subjects, namely crime, horror, cruelty and violence, shall be deemed to be obscene.'	Canada	Canada Criminal Code (RSC, 1985, c. C-46)
'professionally produced or user-generated pictures or videos (clips) intended to arouse the viewer sexually. These videos and pictures typically depict sexual activities, such as masturbation and oral sex, as well as vaginal and anal penetration, in an unconcealed way, often with a close-up on genitals.'	Netherlands	Peter & Valkenburg (2016:510)

'pornographic artefacts typically have certain features: they are sexually explicit; contain nudity and scenes of a sexual nature; they have the potential to arouse sexually their viewers; and they are often used as "masturbation material".'	UK	Mikkola (in Maes, 2013)
[Pornography is] 'the material supplied by adult entertainment corporations, made available on pornography websites, and consumed by individuals looking for pornography.'	Netherlands	Cawston (2019:626)
'pornography's being principally a money-making venture, the very word pornography (or better, porn) almost invariably connotes a certain exploitation – at times degradation or desecration – of human sexuality.'	USA	Seltzer (2011)
'Pornography, (...) is viewed and used alone, not in the company of others.'	Australia	Pope et al. (2007)
'Pornography is not merely nude pictures. It is the depiction of erotic behaviour designed primarily to cause sexual excitement. (...) It desensitises one's emotions so that explicit pornography is needed to find satisfaction, and it conditions readers to deviancy. It demeans and degrades women and children.'	USA	Peacock (1997; White Ribbons Anti-Porn Campaign)
"pornography" means a manner of representation in which sexual acts are brought to the foreground in a vulgar and intrusive manner and other human relations are disregarded or relegated to the background.'	Estonia	Act to Regulate Dissemination of Works which Contain Pornography or Promote Violence or Cruelty (2015)

As seen from the given examples, there is an enormous variety of definitions. However, it is easy to notice that the definition of pornography depends on the context in which it is used (research, medicine, law, psychiatry, criminology, politics, etc.) and for what purpose. The given definition of pornography will shift in its formulation towards the goals the definition author wants to achieve – to understand, control, or censor.

Yet, it is possible to establish some patterns that definitions of pornography emphasise: (i) pornography is primarily designed to produce sexual arousal in its viewers, (ii) it is sexually explicit material, (iii) it has very little or no aesthetical value, and (iv) the term also includes sexual perversions. The last one is very unfortunate for the genre, as it means that pornography, as a term, can be simultaneously used to label legal and criminal material. Therefore, it can be concluded that erotica is a genre

where (i) sexual arousal is not the primary goal, (ii) it is not explicit material, (iii) it has strong aesthetical value, and (iv) it does not include any sexual perversions. It is a genre where sexual themes are used in given artwork (sculpture, painting, film, photography, animation, etc.) and are an integral part of the narrative development.

As Scarlett (2018) states about erotica as a literature genre, 'Erotica is not just a book with lots of explicit sex in it'. Yes, sexual themes (or even explicit sex) should be found in a book (or any other medium for that matter) that is labelled as erotica, but these scenes need to be integral to the story because, without them, the character's journey would not make sense. As Suraiya (2004) sums up, 'Erotica represents the complex cartography of desire, full of hazard and mystery, inviting endless exploration', while pornography 'is a dumbed-down diagram leading to a *cul-de-sac* whose only destination is libidinal claustrophobia'.

Similar perception is extended to audiovisual media. Erotica, as Gehrke (1997) argues, is not the same as pornography, as the genre is first mostly about the characters' inner journey:

The pornographic film has as its primary purpose the graphic depiction of sexually explicit scenes. It generally depicts these scenes in a way that is degrading to women or, less frequently, to men. (...) Erotica, on the other hand, seeks to tell a story that involves sexual themes. Sexually explicit scenes in these films serve a secondary role to the plot. Erotic film displays sexually explicit scenes in a more realistic and equal fashion that is not degrading to either gender.

This notion is supported by Filmsite (2023), which argues that erotic 'films often appeal to the viewer's emotions, emphasising pleasure, physical desire, and human companionship'. The ability of erotic art to move its observer emotionally is an essential element of the genre. Because erotic scenes cannot succeed without successfully telegraphing to the audience that two characters are passionate about each other, it is necessary to explore the concept of sexual excitement next – or, to be exact, how to invoke the emotion of sexual excitement in the viewer.

Robert Stoller (2018:6), one of the leading researchers on the dynamics of sexual excitement, argues that:

(...) excitement – any, not just sexual – is a dialectic, a rapid oscillation between two possibilities (and their effects). One we tell ourselves has positive, the other a negative outcome: pleasure/pain, relief/trauma, success/failure, danger/safety. Between the two lies risk. The synthesis is the creative product: daydream, pornography, painting, symphony, religious ritual, and drama.

Stoller continues that to create erotic excitement a person needs, to begin with, a key process of fetishisation. Or, as Stoller argues, it is best to call it dehumanisation. The sexually exciting fetish can be any living or inanimate object. But in the case of the former, humans are not perceived as unique individuals but rather as abstractions or representatives of the group – not a person in their own right. Therefore, the most important aspect of Stoller's studies on sexual excitement in the context of this thesis is that sexual excitement depends on the scenario of any given person (Stoller, 1976). The aesthetics of sexuality is always in the eyes of the beholder.

This notion that sexual excitement (or just plain turn-ons) is extremely personal in the context of the erotic genre is important in two aspects. First, as inner narrative logic – although creators would not be too wrong to say that in most cases, a person can be aroused by just seeing nude bodies of the opposite sex. But if sexual themes are crucial for the narrative, it should reflect the fact that most people have some sort of sexual fantasy that they are drawn to.

The second aspect is what we could call a *fan service*. This is a scene in animation that is primarily intended to cause mild sexual arousal for the audience, or is produced just because of the simple goal of creating shock value and attracting an audience (see Figure 19). While the author has a strong opinion about the need to use fan service content (so invoking audience sexual arousal when the narrative does not require it at all) for marketing purposes, it is necessary to state that if the animated content is only available to an adult audience, the animation creators do not technically violate any laws. They have a right to employ this (marketing) tool if they choose to; ethical issues in this aspect are the prerogative of creators and producers.

This is especially because studies support the cliché notion that *sex sells*, and as Reichert and Lambiase (2012a: xiii) argue, 'obvious sexual availability serves as both attention-getter and deal-maker, and it is as old as our species'. The author would encourage the use of sexual themes in animation and live action only when it is an

integral part of the character development or the plot. However, it is impossible to dispute that the marketing aspect has a strong say in deciding whether a sexual activity will be portrayed in the audiovisual content.

There is a need to explore how sexualised content can help sell an animated product and what mistakes to avoid. When using sex as a marketing tool, context matters a lot (Reichert & Lambiase, 2012a, 2012b; Bongiorno et al., 2013; Blair et al., 2006). It is vital to note that while sexual content catches people's attention, it does not always bring positive outcomes. Sexualised content that can be easily accessed by children or used in an area where the population has strict moral views on standards of conduct can create more harm to content creators than the benefits brought by increased awareness. This also applies when sexual content evokes racial or gender stereotypes (Reichert and Lambiase, 2012a), as well as when it is used in ethical campaigns (Bongiorno et al., 2013). Research also shows that while marketing that uses sexual content often successfully elicits positive responses from male consumers, it often evokes negative responses from female consumers, especially if sexualised female models are perceived as lacking agency (Keller et al., 2020).

Again, there are clear benefits to using sexual content for marketing because there is overwhelming evidence that the audience is enjoying titillation in the mainstream media landscape. This is even when sexual content is limited to character hypersexuality, as opposed to sexual behaviour or other sexual indications. Using sex or sexualised nudity appeal for mainstream animated content to stand out is more than



Figure 19. *High School of the Dead* (2010). The infamous bath scene. While the *anime* enjoyed success and popularity for its mature yet over-the-top approach to the zombie genre, the fan service scenes are constantly criticised for objectifying female characters that are otherwise portrayed as strong and independent individuals. © Geneon Universal Entertainment. Fair use.

a sound marketing strategy, at least for content creators with flexible ethical views.

In addition, there are also clear signs that sexual appeal can be damaging if animated content is targeted for (or may easily be accessed by) a younger audience as well as if animated content tackles some mature themes. For example, in the cult anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–1996), director Hideaki Anno, at the start of the series, promised that every episode would give ‘something for the fans to drool over’ (Galbraith, 2009:69) but as the series became recognised for tackling serious and mature themes the fan service imagery became less displayed. Nudity was used only in juxtaposition with some sort of emotional trauma. Or, as Redmond (2007) argues (later in the series), ‘service shots’ were reappropriated. A similar situation is with the Shinichirō Watanabe anime series *Cowboy Bebop* (1998). Although the animated series received unanimous acclaim, the only element that received some criticism is the female characters’ hypersexuality, which serves no other point but a gratuitous display for the male audience gaze.

Yet there are cases when marketing based on sexual appeal is not in conflict with serious topics in animated content. The best case illustrating this is *Peepodo & The Super Fuck Friends* (2018–), an animated TV series that pushed the boundaries of sexual content in mainstream animation and is on the borderline of being pornographic. In fact, as the creators of *Peepodo & The Super Fuck Friends* admitted in many countries, from the legal point of view, *Peepodo* is considered pornographic (Bobbypills, 2020; see Figure 20). Yet almost every episode tackles some sex-related topics and issues often stigmatised or ignored altogether, and provides some strong messages. Although, from a content point of view, the series is rightfully labelled as an educational show for adults, the audience draw came from the sex appeal approach. The audience came for animated, extremely graphic erotic imagery but stayed for the message.

Finally, as Merck (2013) noticed, there is one more interesting difference between erotica and pornography – authorship. In erotic films, the author is clearly identified, while creators of pornographic content tend to hide their identity under a *nom de plume*. This trend in pornography for creators to actively avoid being credited for their work works against them in the argument that pornography cannot contain any artistic merit because (among other reasons) it does not have an artist behind it. While the discussion ‘can pornography be art?’ will be carried out in the next section, the artist (or, more precisely – artistic vision) is necessary for the erotica genre, and

even more so in the animation medium.

As the researcher argues previously in this thesis, animation provides various aesthetic solutions. Therefore, it is necessary to explore in depth how animated content creators approach sexuality in animated imagery to understand the medium's key strengths. As already stated, if animated content creators cannot soundly explain why a particular story must be produced in animation rather than live action, then it is very likely that that story should be produced in live action. Animation must always bring to the table something that live action cannot and, therefore, produce a better story in audio visual format.

While in this segment, quite a few examples of mainstream animation were analysed, but unfortunately, the most explorative and experimental animated works in the erotica genre can be found in short film format. There are simple explanations for that. Since the early 1960s, short films have taken on a new purpose – the format has established itself as the primary means for young and less experienced film professionals to prove their worth (Cooper & Dancyger, 2005). Short films are a very convenient compromise – filmmakers can try to prove that they have a unique creative



Figure 20. *PeepoDo & The Super Fuck Friends*. Although being an educative series for adults, the explicit nudity and sexual themes in the series resulted in the perception that this is pornography. © Bobby-pills. Fair use.

vision while spending much less money than feature-length film projects, and investors have the opportunity to see the potential of an inexperienced film specialist.

It should be noted that many US and European filmmakers have become famous in this way, and many short films of various genres, styles, or content have been regarded as works of art (Johnson, 2005). However, shorts' most significant strength is also their weakness. The short format means animators can focus on just one concept or even mould the entire narrative around a single gag or concept. The creators of the animated short can create a successful cinematic artwork without worrying about the narrative themes or character growth arcs. In some cases, an animation short can simply be an aesthetical experimentation that does not follow any narrative. This type of approach would not work with mainstream animated content. For this reason, short animations up to this point were excluded from the aesthetical analysis in this thesis.

However, due to extremely low number of examples of mainstream erotic animations (outside Japanese content), in this section the author of the thesis will expand the field of analysis and review short-length animated works. However, since the aim of this thesis is to identify the aesthetic possibilities of 2D animation, only 2D stylistic works will be reviewed. It is necessary to add that since 2D stylistics can be achieved not exclusively with traditional animation techniques, CGI animations can also fall under this exploration if the short's aesthetic result imitates a 2D flatness.

The first 2D animation style's aesthetical advantage is the ability to use colour to become the most critical information element in the scene, to exaggerate colour in a composition without ever breaking the suspense of disbelief (see Figure 21). By exaggerating colours, animators can create any emotional effect – dramatic, sombre, joyous, or otherwise (Furniss, 2008). In erotica, colour can be a potent tool to create the mood of sexual desire, passion, lust, adventure, discovery, or excitement.

Animated shorts that extensively use colour to telegraph sexual excitement are *Christopher at Sea* (2022), *Hot Tea* (2018), *Fol'Amor* (2013), and *Havana Heat* (2013), to name a few. These shorts use colour in various ways – it could be the change in the overall colour pallet of the scene, or limited to the character's skin, or the lighting. Or it could be the change in the animation style and reduction of the information in the animated scene only to two colours – the silhouettes of characters and the background. But, most importantly, these shorts showcase how important colour is to the genre.

The second sort of superpower of animation (especially in 2D style) is the ability to create believable character designs of any form or shape. Animators can push particular physiological elements to the extreme in animated character design and still create physically attractive 2D individuals. Sexually attractive animated characters can be mystical, magical, alien, or anthropomorphic creatures. Due to a lower threshold for believability in 2D style, animators can create stylised creatures that have (sexual) appeal and can telegraph their unique character traits. On a side note, 2D style illustrations are very popular in such erotica subgenres as monster (this subgenre can further be divided into stories about werewolves, vampires, dragons, orcs, etc.) and tentacle (in Japanese this subgenre is called *shokushu goukan* and is also very popular in Japan in animation format).

2D animations' aesthetic superiority over shape and form has already been discussed earlier in the thesis. However, what is truly fascinating is how 2D animation can bypass Stoller's (1976) voiced challenge of the erotic genre – each person has specific needs that trigger their sexual excitement. For one person (strongest), sexual arousal is all about feet, while for another person, it is the particular outfit that does the trick. While specific fetishes can be fulfilled well by experiencing those specific scenarios, for less specific sexual fantasies (2D), the animation is exceptionally well suited. This statement is based on McCloud's (1993) claim that through image simplification, the viewer is (unconsciously) inserting wanted details that are most aesthetically pleasing for the person. Because 2D animations usually are not too detailed, humans can recognise and extend themselves to become/relate to the animated characters. However, as McCloud notices, the more complexity that is integrated into a 2D character, the more linked it is to our reality and, therefore, the

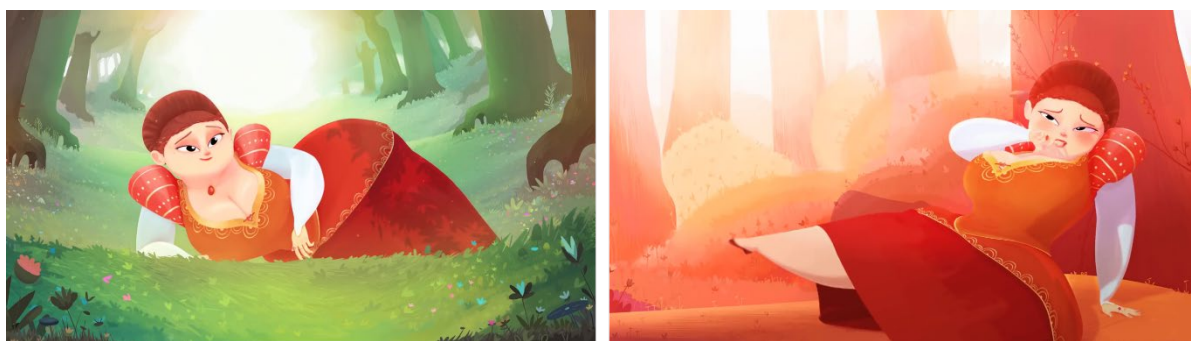


Figure 21. This perfectly illustrates how in animation, you can drastically change the colour of the environment to communicate sexual arousal, but the change itself does not affect the viewer's suspense of disbelief © Gobelins. Fair use.

less universal it becomes.

A great example of how even an anthropomorphic (2D) bunny can invoke sexual desire from animated content viewers is Lola Bunny from 1996's *Space Jam* (see Figure 22). But it is not only the character design (exaggerated hourglass figure, short shorts and a crop top, big eyes, small lips, etc.) that is sexually attractive to the male audience but also her extremely feminine body and voice acting. With the addition of a no-nonsense personality, she became one of the most recognisable cinematic sex objects in the 1990s (Wittmer, 2021; Cole, 2021). Quite an impressive achievement for not only a non-erotic animated film, but also one targeted at a children's audience.

This hypersexualisation of Lola Bunny's character results from Hollywood culture, where female characters are created '*from the male gaze for the male gaze*' (Wittmer, 2021). The decision to create an animated character with the prime objective of being a sex object in content targeted at children raises ethical concerns. However, Lola Bunny's case illustrates how effectively the animation medium can produce sexually attractive characters of any kind, even in the non-erotica genre. Other animated feature films, TV series, and shorts that showcase how animation medium can create sexually attractive characters of various kinds are *Helluva Boss* (2019–present), *Manivald* (2017), *Drawn Together* (2004–2007), *Archer* (2009–present), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988). What is essential to add is that most of the named

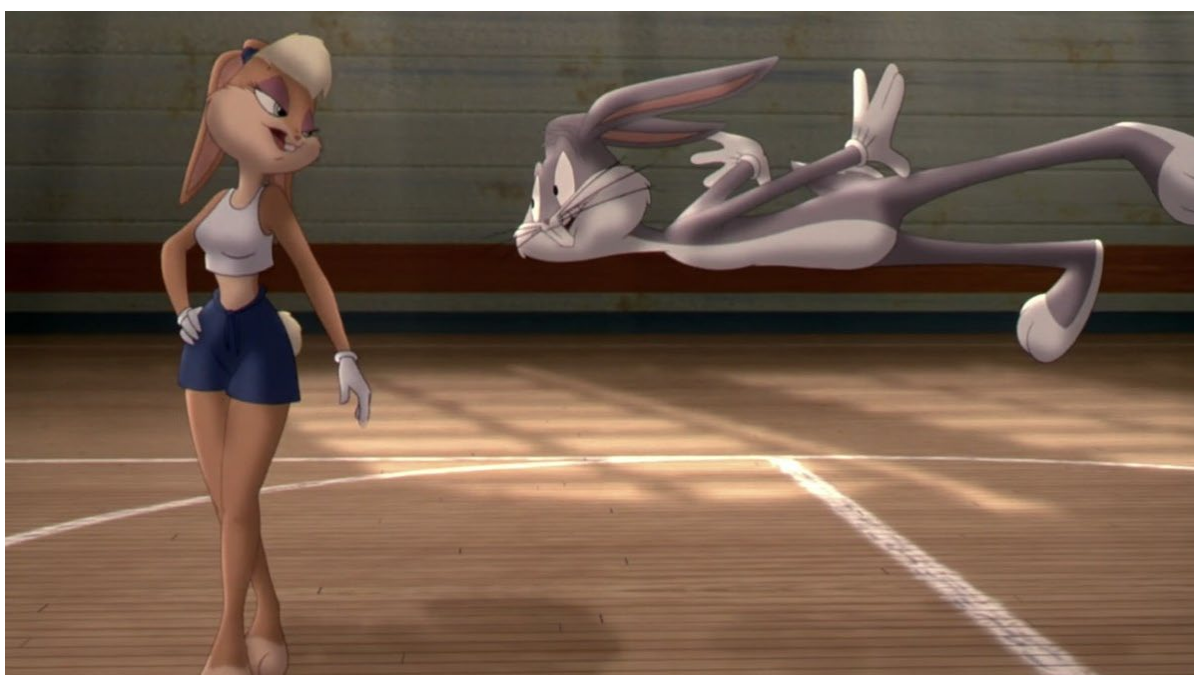


Figure 22. *Space Jam*. Lola Bunny – hypersexualised female character in an animated content targeted at children. © Warner Bros. Fair use.

animations are not of the erotic genre. This illustrates that what animated characters make sexually attractive has very little to do with explicit nudity.

It is necessary to address one more time that the lack of body shape diversity is notable even in animated erotica content that tackles serious topics. However, to be fair, lack of diversity when portraying the female body is a noticeable problem in Western animated content (Rowe, 2019; Brown, 2015; Cheu, 2013), especially among female protagonists (Rowe, 2019; Edelman, 2015; Zwiebel, Chirico & Epstein, 2014; Zeilinger, 2015). Although most scholars and critics agree that the situation is slowly improving, animation is still considered lacking in this aspect. Ramsawakh (2018) argues, 'we know how important representation is in movies and TV shows, so why aren't we demanding the same thing in erotica?'

Finally, it is interesting to observe that while there are plenty of 'hottest', 'sexiest', or 'most attractive' animated female character lists, there are only a few that involve or are specifically devoted to 'hot' animated male characters. However, after reviewing a few of these lists (Milakovic, 2021; Haley, 2014; Cartoon District, 2015; Jones, 2014), it can be noted that common traits that appear in all sexually attractive animated male characters that repeatedly appear throughout these lists (for example Sterling Archer (*Archer*, 2009–present), Aladdin (*Aladdin*, 1992), Li Shang (*Mulan*, 1998), Flynn Rider (*Tangled*, 2010)) is their inner character qualities. Of course, all of them are also physically fit and have broad shoulders and square jaws. Still, it is their confidence, charisma, articulation, and professional competence that make these animated men sexually attractive to human viewers. This notion that female viewers can find the male body attractive (erotic) only if it belongs to the (story-wise) fleshed-out individual is supported by studies conducted by Smith (2007, 2008).

The third aspect that acts as a sort of superpower for 2D animation (in the context of erotica) is motion. There are quite a few elements that work really well aesthetically regarding animated motion. The first element is based on the stretch and squash principle. Because in animation medium, every frame is made and not recorded, animators have complete control over what physiological aspect of the character's body motion to emphasise. Be it fat or muscle – animators can choose to animate it in a way that the motion will highlight aspects that are sexually attractive to humans (and hide or minimise aspects that are not).

Another motion element that works well for animated erotica is indirectly related to arc animation principles. Although this animation principle was concocted as a

means for new animators to understand better and imitate how real humans move, it is the ability of motion that moves in an arc to look smooth and aesthetically pleasing (Thomas & Johnston, 1981) that is important for the animated erotica genre. MacGillivray's (2014) argument that human brains prefer conveniently presented visual information could provide another explanation for why animated erotica can invoke greater aesthetic satisfaction.

As already discussed in an earlier chapter, the 2013 anime *Aku no Hana* perfectly illustrates how animated motion, as opposed to real human motion, cannot be too realistic or it will invoke *rotoscopic uncanny* (Gottesman, 2018). Similar problems with the aesthetics of animated motion can be found in the animated film *Chico and Rita* (2010). Although sex and the following nudity scene should demonstrate to the audience the achieved intimacy of the protagonists, choppy animation and weird camera work with disharmonious use of 2D and CGI animation techniques make the experience a bit awkward. This is especially in the morning scene, where the rotoscoping (or 2D style rendering – it is unclear which method was used for this particular scene) of a clearly CGI background and female character create a somewhat uneasy feeling when the opposite should be achieved. The main aesthetic sinner is the placing of shadows – in 2D style, erratic movement of shadows between frames creates the illusion that a woman's body volume and shape are constantly (unnaturally) changing. As with many things in this medium, the animated motion must be aesthetically better versions of reality, or the illusion of life will unforgivingly burst.

It is always a great disappointment that researchers cannot (yet) introduce motion examples into the text's body, mainly because no still picture can capture and transfer the essence of motion to the reader. Examples of animated shorts that, in different ways, use motion that can only be produced in animation medium are *Teat Beat of Sex episodes* (2008), *Havana Heat* (2013), *Naked Love Appetizer* (2011), *Little Vulvah & Her Clitoral Awareness* (2013) to name only a few.

The fourth aspect is facial expressions. The ability to clearly telegraph facial expressions in 2D styles is an essential communicational tool in erotica. This is achieved due to two communicational elements. First, is a stylisation of facial features. Animators can amplify every expression by leaving only facial features needed to communicate animated characters' inner emotions.

The second communicational element is the animation medium's ability to exaggerate without breaking the suspense of disbelief. This means that animators can

push facial expressions to such limits that they are not only unavailable for actual humans but also look wrong or comical if live-action actors aim to replicate them (see Figure 23). However, when these exaggerated facial expressions are used in 2D animation, they speak (more accurately – yell) in volumes.

The ability to effectively communicate emotions through facial expressions is essential for animated erotica for one more reason. Ekman and Friesen (2003) are the first researchers to prove that facial expressions are a universal means of communication even between radically different cultures of the world (unlike other subgroups of non-verbals (gestures, postures, etc.)). However, further studies (such as the ‘Wizards Project’) found that only 0.25 per cent of people without prior training decode nuances at facial expressions with 80 per cent or better accuracy. At the same time, the rest of the population’s decoding reliability is compared to the ability to guess which side will come up on a coin toss (Macdonald, 2004). Research on facial expressions has revealed that an actual problem of non-verbal communication – having a common code between sender and receiver – does not guarantee successful decoding for an untrained message receiver. This communication problem is supported by the majority of non-verbal communication researchers (Birdwhistell, 1952, 1970; Efron, 1941; Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Exline & Winters, 1965; Hall, 1959, 1963, 1966; Kendon, 1967; Mehrabian, 1971, 1972; Schefflen, 1964, 1965, 1966;



Figure 23. *Tabook* (2016). Facial expressions in this 2D animation are pushed to extremes and, yet, still very clearly readable for the audience. © Studio Pupil. Fair use.

Sommer, 1969), who have come to the unanimous conclusion that the absolute majority of people, regardless of race, age, or gender, have minimal abilities to decode non-verbal messages successfully.

That is why exaggeration and stylisation are such advantageous attributes in 2D animation – redaction of details minimises communication noise, and hyperpolarisation of facial expressions highlights the message itself. The importance of taming the universal communication mode cannot be understated, especially in the erotica genre. Any information about characters' inner feelings (passion, lust, excitement, etc.) cannot be communicated verbally if non-verbal cues do not support it, and communication between characters (and the audience) can be completely non-verbal.

To sum up, for 2D animation content creators colour, motion, exaggeration, and facial expressions are critical aesthetic tools that allow erotic stories not only to engage with the audience on an emotional level but also to stand out from live-action content. In a genre that celebrates sexuality, 2D animation has aesthetical tools to truly provide a captivating depiction of naked sensuality and sensuous delight of excitement. The 2D animation style is as perfect for telling erotic stories as it is suited for telling fairy-tale, fantasy and sci-fi genre narratives. Animation is a great storytelling tool for storytellers, focusing on emotion and feeling in larger-than-life situations.

5.3 Aesthetics of Animated Pornography

As the concepts of non-sexual imagery and erotica have been explored, we can move to the aesthetics of pornography in 2D animation. But the very notion that there is such thing as aesthetics in pornography implies that there is pornographic art. However, the latter concept, for a great many people, is simply impossible. Pornography, for people who are offended by the very concept, is simply obscene explicit imagery that has no serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. Hence, there is a need for censorship to protect the community. Therefore, before exploring the aesthetics of pornography, we first must review pornography's relationship with censorship.

This relationship is indeed complicated and constantly changing. Williams (1999, 2008) and Nead (1992) argue that censorship of pornography happens because one dominant class or group does not want it to be in the hands of another, less dominant one. For example, in England in 1857, the *British Obscene Publication Act* – the very

first anti-porn legislation – was issued (Roberts, 1999; Nead, 1992). This act targeted young, middle-class women who read ‘pornographic’ romantic novels. From a responsible and powerful ‘gentlemen’s’ point of view (with encouragement from the head of the families; Roberts, 1999), women simply were too weak to resist pornography’s power of corruption (Williams, 1999). Interestingly, the men did not worry that pornography could corrupt them.

The situation completely turned around in the late twentieth century, as *Women Against Pornography* – a radical and influential feminist activist group – managed to gain widespread support in the anglophone world. From this group’s point of view, it is the men that need to be protected from the corruption of pornography. Because, in this group’s opinion, pornography directly causes men to rape and use violence against women (Cawston, 2019), for the safety of all women, pornography must be removed entirely from the community’s reach.

Many studies that examined the claim that there is a causal connection between pornography and rape concluded that (i) there is no decisive evidence that pornography directly causes rape and (ii) if it would have such an effect, it would, at best, be contributing factor among several others (Horvath et al., (2013); Hald et al., 2009). Various scientific experiments and studies have continuously proved that the claim has no ground. The outcome of these studies did not affect any of the various anti-porn movements, and the belief that pornography causes men to rape is still one of the tenets.

It is essential to note that this blind belief that pornography was existentially dangerous in the twentieth century started because feminist¹⁴ movements in the 1970s were in great need of a unifying cause. As Bronstein (2011) identified, the seeds of the movement started by groups who protested against the proliferation of advertisements, Hollywood films, and other mainstream media that glorified sexual violence. Only later, feminist leaders redirected the emphasis to violence in pornography because right-wing forces wanted to remove women from the workforce and place them back at home (Stern, 1982; Bronstein, 2011).

Pornography was the perfect choice for a feminist cause – not only because it

¹⁴ It is vital to note that not every feminist movement supported the anti-porn movement. Quite a few feminist groups saw the anti-porn movement as problematic and pushing ideologically ‘correct’ female fantasies (Stern, 1982; Merck, 1992). Additionally, the anti-porn movement was considered dangerous to the women’s sexual liberation cause.

provided a clear, tangible, and visible target (Merck, 1992), but also, who would (publicly) fight or argue that pornography has any positive aspects for society? Looking from a historical perspective, this anti-pornography movement was a success – it rallied the feminists for decades and provided considerable political power (Bronstein, 2011). However, the feminist movement's goal to completely ban pornography was hindered by the fact that the movement could not provide scientifically sound arguments for legal implementation.

Another movement's popular argument was that all pornography material is degrading to women. On this front, anti-pornography activism did help to shed light on many cases of genuinely criminal activity against women in the pornography industry, so the positive impact this movement has had on a significant number of women must be recognised.

Unfortunately, this argument was also flawed. Simply put, the problem with this argument was that it refused to accept that there can be explicit sexual material that does not include women's humiliation in the proposed narrative. This hypothesis cannot account for the gay porn phenomenon though, where women are completely removed from the equation. Although the argument does address serious ethical problems in pornography, the aim to present it as the default state in the genre was what undermined the argument itself.

The movement's aggressive claim that banning pornography would help all the women working in the adult industry led to a situation where pornography workers were suspicious of these radical feminists as they (in the name of protecting the sexual industry workers from 'harm') were threatening to eliminate the means of livelihood for legions of women (Kauffman, 1998). People (mostly women) that the anti-porn movement tried to 'save' were not welcoming of this outcome. Quite the opposite – the feminists proposed the ideology that sex can be the outcome only if romantic love is involved (Kauffman, 1998; Attwood & Smith; 2013), which seemed like a huge step back in women's rights.

To everyone's surprise, the key defenders of pornography were not representatives of the adult industry or feminists fighting for sexual liberation, but scholars and intellectuals concerned with the government's aim to enter their bedrooms and police the boundaries of sexual acceptability (Merck, 1992; Nead, 1992). Ironically, because the movement initiated numerous studies on the effects of pornography, suddenly, there was a lot of evidence that not only did not prove that the

genre can deprave or corrupt, but indicated the exact opposite (Webb, 1975). Therefore, in 1967 when Denmark became the first country to abolish restrictions on pornography (Buckley, 1970), to the great dismay of global anti-porn movements, it did not produce any tangible negative effects. The cry that pornography would affect children or that sex-related crime would increase did not come to fruition.

Denmark, by giving its citizens the freedom and agency to decide if pornography is needed in their lives, showcased how this right was removed from citizens of other Western democratic countries. Once the question about pornography shifted from 'Does pornography corrupt?' to 'Do adults have the right to consume pornography?' it became hard to gather political support for the anti-pornography sentiment. This was especially the case after a bold Danish experiment that empirically proved that free access to pornography not only did not produce pornography addicts but quite the opposite – it led to general disinterest in the explicit material (Webb, 1975).

Today, in most Western countries, censorship regarding pornography is mostly about restrictions on selling pornographic content to children and displaying any pornographic material publicly. Of course, pornographic content that in any shape or form abusive or non-consensual, is illegal and treated as a criminal offence. Additionally, it must be noted that while in most Western countries, pornography is accessible to legal adults, that does not mean it is legal to produce and distribute it. Technically, the ban on creating pornographic content also includes the ban on sending images of an erotic nature to one's spouse. The government considers that a husband and wife (who are legally adults and have the right to have sexual activity with each other) do not have the intellectual capacity to resist the negative influence of pornography. Therefore, the state feels obligated to enter and supervise sexual activities in the bedrooms to protect the moral values of its citizens.

It is necessary to state that although the author believes that restrictions of pornography to its citizens based on moral grounds have no desired effects and violate personal human liberties, pornography regulations regarding display, distribution, consent, and safety is necessary. Not only is pornography sensitive content that should be acceptable strictly to legal adults, but its production is also very susceptible to exploitation of various kinds. Therefore, there is no debate about the necessity to regulate the production and distribution of pornographic material to remove any possibility for exploitation and abuse of others for personal gain.

Later in this section, when discussing the processes and circumstances of the

production of pornographic content, it will always be kept in mind that it takes place in compliance with all the regulations adopted by the particular country or state¹⁵. It should be noted however, that some countries may treat the production and distribution of soft-core¹⁶ and hard-core pornography differently. Even if (from a particular government point of view) content is labelled as pornography, it can still be further divided into separate groups based on specific aspects and, therefore, have different production process regulations and divergent distribution opportunities. However, further in this section, we will analyse only the production of pornographic content that does not censor itself in any way or shape.

Although, in general, pornographic content is of (i) very low aesthetical value, (ii) has only basic narrative progression ('if you've seen one porn film, you've seen them all'; Williams, 1999:xvi), and (3) creates value through explicit sexual imagery, it still has an extremely high demand. In most cases, it provides a simple yet timeless utopian fantasy where women always want sex and men are always virile (Kauffman, 1998). The reason why the pornography industry not only survives but thrives is not because it provides unique and new experiences every time to the consumer, but because it provides a singular function. As Webb (1975:xxvii) notes, 'pornography, at least, makes no pretence to be art and fulfils a need for many people'.

But what makes some pornography films better than others? Every major pornography website, such as *XVideos*, *Pornhub*, *xHamster*, and *xnxx.com*, has rating systems that help users express their opinion towards particular content and filter out lower quality or less stimulating content. Once again, it is evident that the explicit imagery of nudity or sexual intercourse is not enough for sexual arousal, even in the pornography genre.

Steven Ziplow's book *The Film Maker's Guide to Pornography* (1977) provides great insights into how first-generation pornographers constructed adult content and approached the business side of filmmaking. This book claims that one of the key elements of (heterosexual) pornography is the 'come' or 'money' shot. Ziplow

¹⁵ For example, in California, USA, there is a state requirement to use condoms whenever pornography is produced (Abram, 2016). This requirement, however, is not issued in other states. In Australia, pornography that features small-breast females will not be allowed to be distributed because those women can be perceived as children.

¹⁶ According to Nead (1992), the difference between soft-core and hard-core is primarily aesthetic, as in soft-core, the view of sexual act is restricted and therefore implied, while in hard-core pornography, content creators obsessively seek to ensure maximum visibility. At the same time, Merck (1992) distinguishes soft-core and hard-core pornography as to whether real sex or simulated sex has been involved in creating pornographic content.

(1977:130) claims, 'if you don't have the come shots, you don't have a porno picture', arguing that pornographic content not only needs to have structure, but also a sequence of events to provide necessary stimulation for its target audience.

Williams (1999) observes that 'money' shots become vital for pornography as they represent the climax of heterosexual sexual acts. It is not only a spectacular element of the sexual process but also a necessary part of the sexual narrative. However, as Tarrant (2016) notices, this creates the perception that male ejaculation is the purpose of sex and relegates women to the role of pleasure providers – a trope largely contributes to the (rightfully) negative attitude towards the genre. However, Tarrant adds that hopefully, change is slowly arriving in the world of porn as more people in the adult industry choose to include new narratives rather than repeat traditional sexist and racist fantasies.

This leads to another essential element of the pornography genre that must be explored in depth – the audience's need for sexually titillating content to have a story. Hukku (2014) goes even further and argues that narrative plotting is currently the most fruitful way to express the juncture of the mind, the body, and desire. The excitement of watching sex acts or nudity is only as good as the story surrounding the imagery. This need for a story aligns nicely with Stoller's (2018) argument about the human's need for fantasies.

This need for the story (fantasy) in pornographic material to be sexually aroused is supported by official *Pornhub* statistics. For example, in 2022, the most searched terms around the globe were *Japanese*, *lesbian*, *MILF*, and *pinay* (Pornhub Insights, 2022). The number one search term for many years is, of course, *hentai*¹⁷. As *Pornhub* statistics showcase, humans are searching not for nudity or sexual act but for (sexual) stories that the search term represents. In most cases, the only aspect that connects the recorded sexual act with the search concept is the video's title. The same video content could be uploaded multiple times on the pornography platform with a title representing women (in a particular sexual pose or place) but changing the protagonist's nationality each time. Arguably, as long as there are no elements that could contradict the statement in the content, that could be enough to fulfil the viewer's

¹⁷ McLelland (2006) argues that the term *hentai* is not a Japanese but an English innovation. In Japanese, *hentai* usually references only extreme (abnormal or perverse) sexual material and is not a general category for pornographic content. In this thesis, the term *hentai* will refer to animated pornography in general (i.e. not only Japanese-produced content) rather than specific sub-genres or scenarios.

fantasy needs.

The need for the story to be in a pornographic act is captured in the *Netflix* TV series *The Naked Director* (2019–2021). A salesman, down on his luck, when he witnessed his friend having a side business selling illegal pornographic recordings, quickly realised that it is not enough to sell just sex. The salesman quickly grabs one of the videotapes with an ordinary recording of a client having sex with a prostitute and writes, 'Encyclopaedia salesman's wife and unknown man'. With a few lines, the protagonist elevated casual pornographic material into a story.

Additionally, Ziplow (1977) recommends that approximately 40 per cent of screen time utilises narrative to serve as a vehicle for sexual elements represented in the remaining 60 per cent. However, he does not explain why it is implied that narrative is important for the sexual parts in pornographic movies. In this regard, Williams (1999) makes a fascinating observation that the pornography genre has strong similarities with musicals. Both genres have (often) narratives that only act as an excuse to move from one episode of sex or song to another, again emphasising the important role narrative plays in evoking the desired emotion in its target audience.

But the narrative is only one side of any audiovisual content; there is also the quality of the imagery itself. American pornographic actress Gloria Leonard is attributed with a famous quote: 'The difference between pornography and erotica is lighting'. This quote suggests that one of the most noticeable attributes of pornography is low production quality and the absence of an overall cinematic look. However, it does not argue that pornography cannot look cinematic; this quote implies that by improving production quality, pornographic material can suddenly present itself as erotica.

Such choices as camera angles, framing, composition, and editing can enhance the explicit sexual content and create visually engaging scenes. As sexual acts are usually not dialogue-heavy, non-verbal communication becomes an extremely important visual storytelling tool; the ability to communicate it visually, clearly, and appealingly is one of the key cinematic challenges. It is hard to imagine more unappealing aspects of pornography than slow pacing and unrevealing (boring) angles, so to create sexually titillating imagery, pornographers must understand how to employ visual grammar to tell clearly formulated arousing fantasies.

Pornography genre employs very carnal, often visceral aesthetics with repetitive 'zooms in on human bodies, their parts, and excretions, as well as on their

interconnections driven by the quest for physical pleasure' (Paasonen, 2019:1). Thus, pornography at its core is a body genre (Williams, 1999). Furthermore, in many ways live-action pornography echoes aesthetic approaches that are employed in documentary form – through the anthropomorphic gaze of a single camera, the pornographer is placing emphasis on capturing expressive experiences, rather than seek to record carefully staged and scripted performance. Thus, as Paasonen (2019:10) aptly sums it up 'pornography operates in the oscillating registers of documentary realism, predictability, and hyper excess'.

The cinematic phenomenon includes not only visual but also aural experiences so all sound – whether music, sound effects, or speech – is essential to cinematographic aesthetics. For the pornography genre, music is vital to enhance the mood and establish rhythms to complement the movements of bodies, and sound effects give solidity and spatial dimension to the depiction of the diegetic world (Williams, 1999). It creates intimacy and closeness between the characters, the viewer, and the material. In the pornography genre, the feeling of intimacy is much more vital than an accurate representation of reality. Because, after all, this genre is all about providing a fantasy.

It is fascinating to note that pornography has its own specific musical style – *porn groove*. This style came into existence for two reasons. The first reason is that in the early days of pornography, filmmakers had budgets that could barely cover the minimal needs of the production. The second reason is that professional sound studios did not want to be associated with pornographers (Marke, 2015), so for music, pornographers had to turn to aural solutions that could be produced cheaply and fast (sometimes with only a few days' notice).

What is fascinating is that even though the pornography of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s did not produced any tangible cultural residue, the porn groove – titillating, tacky yet playful tunes in extremely cheap and low-value explicit sexual content – proved to be something that left a lasting impression. The phrase 'bow chicka wow wow' is used numerous times in popular culture by various film and TV characters to suggest to the audience that other characters are about to, or have recently, slept with each other.

However, not every pornography material employs music; especially today, music is employed almost only in feature-length format production. Thanks to technological innovations, relatively cheap video cameras not only significantly lower

pornography production costs but also made it possible to sell a feeling that the sexual act was captured by 'amateurs'. It provided the feeling of 'authenticity' to the explicit sexual content (Earp, 2020). This, and the abandonment of the feature film format in favour of short clips, resulted in the decline of music as a cinematic tool in the pornography genre.

William Margold, a composer who worked in the adult film industry for four decades, argues that music played a significant role – it not only would 'highlight the moods of specific scenes' but also helped 'to make the film come together as a whole' (Marke, 2015). Music in the pornography genre works as an essential storytelling tool to enhance sensory stimulation, set the mood or atmosphere, and bring separate explicit sexual scenes into one story. While the 'music-less' trend in pornography has been standing firm for the last few decades, it does not mean that big-budget, cinematic, story-driven (well, *-ish*), and even artistic pornography films will not return.

Finally, it is necessary to add that music can also play a very practical role in the genre. First, it can mask specific (unflattering) sounds to create a more aesthetically pleasing experience. Second, Margold (Marke, 2015) notices that masking all unnecessary sounds produced by the environment can help provide a better level of privacy for the audience. Finally, it can make the scene more vivid by emphasising certain movements or sensations.

Cinematic aesthetics, although often absent in the pornography genre, has its place and importance. With the right cinematic decisions, filmmakers can create extremely potent, titillating, provocative, erotic, or suggestive experiences. If there is a spectrum where on one side is a demonstration of ordinary explicit sexual acts and on the other side is an explicit sexual act but with a developed story, high production value, and even aesthetically pleasing visuals – does that mean that there can be such phenomenon as pornographic art?

To answer this question, there is a need first to explore the relationship between art and erotica as many arguments – for and against – were formulated in debates of the latter genre. Traditional Western philosophers (Kant, Shaftesbury, Schopenhauer, and others) argue that erotica and art just cannot mingle. However, it is not hard to notice that most traditional Western philosophers are claiming that erotica cannot be art. This is not because it is a logical conclusion after examining the question in depth, but rather because it is a wishful notion to shape the world to their liking. Therefore, unsurprisingly, once these philosophers are faced with great artwork that has strong

sexual overtones, there is always a desperate justification that if work is, in fact, art, then it is so *despite* its erotic content.

Luckily, today, there are very few modern philosophers who would deny the existence or legitimacy of erotic art. As Maes (2013) notices, ‘not only there so many outstanding works of erotica art, but the eroticism of these works is also more often than not an integral part of their status and value as art’. The very aspiration to deny the existence of genuinely erotic art is not only meaningless, but also contrary to aesthetics itself.

Pornography, unfortunately, today stands in a similar position as erotica just a few centuries ago. Today, there is a strong belief that pornography in itself cannot have any artistic value. The difference is that for erotica, the attraction to nakedness is *unwelcome*, but with pornography, the very masturbatory purpose of the genre is *bad* (West, 2022). How can any admiration for content whose sole purpose is to satisfy the body’s basic needs be justified, especially when discussions about pornography still revolve around ‘whether or not porn is good or bad for us?’ (Smith et al., 2015:282).

As is often the case, a lot comes down to attitude. What if the term pornography would not mean that the sexual content is in any form or shape worse than erotica (as it is often present) but simply that it is explicit and unstimulated? What if the difference between these two genres was not quality and acceptance but merely one aspect – how much is revealed to the audience? That’s it.

This brings us back to the question – what if pornography could be art? Maes (2013) thoroughly and comprehensively proves that all the arguments claiming that pornography cannot be artistic do not withstand a more serious logical analysis. Just like it was with erotica previously, the dichotomic stand that it can be art *or* pornography has no logical ground. While pornography can have sexual arousal as its *central* intent, it does not have to be the *sole* intent. Just because most pornography is ‘fast-food’ type, nothing could prevent it from being a ‘Michelin-star’ type of material.

Mikkola (in Maes, 2013) goes further and proposes the aims of pornographic art: first, (i) it should be pornography and not erotica, (ii) it should be intelligent, (iii) it should move away from mainstream tropes, and (iv) it should be aesthetically pleasing and having artistic values in mind. Mikkola argues that for pornography to be art, it should not aim to hide or downplay the pornographic part. Just as vodka and tomato juice, Mikkola argues, make up a new drink – *Bloody Mary* – pornography can be fused with art and create something new.

However, while Mikkola argues for the concept of pornographic (*not* erotic) art, it is impossible to ignore ongoing practice to label audiovisual content with artistic merit while displaying explicit sexual imagery as *erotic*. Bennett (in Maes, 2013) noticed that the middle class legitimise some content as ‘erotica’ for the purposes of their own consumption, while stigmatising other as ‘pornography’ due to ‘popular’ tastes. It is not the amount of sexual explicitly (or rather the lack of it) that grants the label of erotica, but such attributes as artistic merit or political statement. In the case of feminists – sexually explicit material is acceptable as long it depicts women as genuinely equal and consenting participants in sexual encounters (West, 2022).

This raises an intriguing question – *does the demonstration of an explicit sexual act make audiovisual work fundamentally pornographic? Or do other attributes (such as strong narrative, equal standing between sexes or high aesthetical value) of audiovisual work with explicit content elevate the material into the erotic genre?* It is vital to note that these questions are not philosophical in nature because, as discussed more than once in this chapter, there is a huge difference between these two genres from the legal point of view. Today, if audiovisual material with explicit sexual content can be produced and labelled as erotica there are substantial benefits, as opposed to labelling it as pornographic art and trying to convince the law that there is a difference – preferably while not being in jail.

To sum up the aesthetics of live-action pornographic films, it is necessary to start with the observation that there are many types of them. Some pornography movies hope to be labelled as ethical (also sometimes can be called ‘feminist porn’, although terms are not synonyms), artistic (or erotic), soft-core (so, also erotic), or in combination with some other (dominant) genre. Of course, there are plain pornography movies where the narrative is almost non-existent and is just an excuse to change surrounding sex partners or just to give a short break for the consumer. But the fact is that explicit sexual imagery is spilling over into other media and genres and, as a result, re-shaping the approaches to storytelling. Or, as Kerner and Knapp (2016) argue, conventions of what is acceptable regarding the treatment of sex and nudity on screen are constantly pushed, if not breached. Explicit (although simulated) sexual activity is not only displayed (and not implied) but also is a core element in such TV series as *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *Masters of Sex* (2013–2016) or *American Gods* (2017–2021); *Gen V* (2023–) (see Figure 24 and 25). This situation was almost unimaginable just three decades ago.

What we would call soft-core pornography and watch very late at night in the 1990s, today is a completely acceptable element of *prime-time* TV. Explicit sexual imagery from TV series and movies can often be found on pornography websites, proving that all explicit material can be used for masturbatory needs. But it is the filmmaker's ability to make sexually explicit scenes integral to the narrative that separates pornography with a singular function, with pornography as one of many storytelling tools at the filmmaker's disposal. Unsurprisingly, the former does not need high-quality aesthetics, a developed story, or an artistic statement. But in the latter's case, filmmakers can create some truly unique stories and unforgettable experiences.

While aspects of pornography have been investigated by various researchers and scholars, animated pornography (also cartoon pornography or hentai) has largely escaped analysis (Dahlquist & Vigilant, 2004). However, in this regard it is necessary to mention Paasonen's (2019) inquiry into animated pornography, that provides truly fascinating insights into the appeal of animated experience. First, Paasonen's (2019) article presents data gathered from an open-ended survey inquiring about porn preferences. These data strongly suggest that one of the key appeals of animated pornography is that the content provides the ability to enjoy scenes of submission, humiliation, or even abuse without ethical baggage; viewing live-action content that presents a forced sex storyline would much more likely invoke distress arousal. Thus,

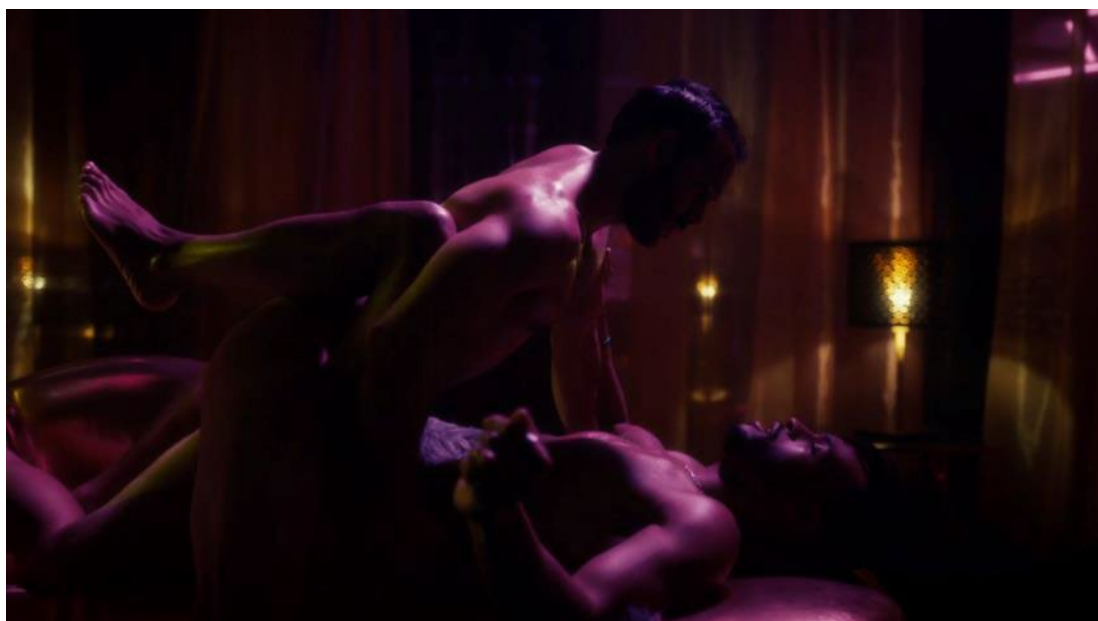


Figure 24. *American Gods* (2017–2021). As prestige television pushes the boundaries of how explicit sex can be portrayed on screens, society is forced to re-evaluate the boundaries of what is an artful and tasteful depiction of sexual intimacy in mainstream content. © Starz. Fair use.

as Paasonen (2019:6) argues, animated pornography allows the viewer to fantasise about scenarios that if experienced in real life, would be ‘among the worst things imaginable, and in no way desirable or acceptable’. This notion is also supported by Darkcrow (Hernandez, 2015), who argues, that ‘in live-action movies the viewer never really knows if the actresses are being exploited, especially in rape fantasies’. This suggests that the story (sexual fantasy) plays a very important role in the overall animated pornography experience.

This notion is also supported by data found in various reviews and comments that specifically address hard-core content in animation. It is interesting to note that while there are elements that can influence the viewer over what particular animated content to watch for masturbatory reasons (e.g. the intensity of the sexual content, soft-core or hard-core, how sex is portrayed, the story behind the sex, and even the level of immorality) the most important identified element that determines the recommendation of animations by commentators and reviewers (see Rizal, 2016; Katre, 2019; Yahoo! Answers, 2021; Mangafox, 2018) are elaborate story plots and the protagonist’s backstory. Or, as one anonymous commentator describes it’s needs: ‘I am searching for a *hentai* movie with good animation and decent plot’ (Yahoo! Answers, 2021). Another commentator named *Wrathful_Chicken* praises one particular *hentai* as ‘amazing art, dynamic animations, sufficient personality and a solid premise’ (My Anime list, 2017). As was already established in the analysis of live-



Figure 25. *Gen V* (2023–). Another SVOD-produced series that deliberately pushes the limits of what can be shown in mainstream content without crossing the line into the pornography genre. © Amazon Prime Video. Fair use.

action pornography, it is not enough for humans to witness naked bodies or sexual acts to achieve full sexual excitement.

In animated pornography, the context (or story) plays an equally important role as in live action. Gazing upon sexual acts in animated form is not arousing enough. This is quite a contradictory requirement for pornographic content because, as one *hentai* reviewer states, 'Remember: You don't watch porn for the story' (Rizal, 2016). Yet this debate about the need for a decent plot in *hentai* echoes through many internet discussion platforms and comment sections. It could be argued that great animated pornography is not about witnessing sexual activity but capturing some of the greatest fantasies and fetishes. As Stoller (2018) argues, because fetish is about the process of dehumanisation, the animation medium is highly suitable for this purpose.

The second aspect that is required from *hentai* or any other animated content is 'good animation' (Yahoo! Answers, 2021). For example, *YouTube* blogger *Animan* (Animan, 2020), in his video essay *Top 10 HENTAI Anime Series That Became Legendary*, when reviewing each *hentai* nomination on his list, always indicates whether the work contains 'smooth animation' or has noticeable flaws (such as 'clunky on the character movements'). In another case, while praising one *hentai* TV series, a commentator with the nickname *StickyFingers* on *My Anime list* complains that, 'All scenes are pretty well animated, though there is some obvious looping' (My Anime list, 2017). As far as can be judged from the various comments on the topic, poor animation is indeed a dealbreaker for animated pornography content. The demands for aesthetics in animated pornography are much higher than in live-action mediums.

The third aspect of *hentai* that requires further exploration is the aesthetics of character and setting designs. Dahlquist and Vigilant (2004) notice that *hentai* appeals to its viewers through a combination of the aesthetic world of everyday artistic creations and the world of erotic phantasms. Japanese animated pornographic content is always aesthetically pleasing, even when portraying the most common (boring?) places.

However, as far as character designs go, there are some aesthetical drawbacks. It is clear that the absolute majority of anime (including its pornographic genre, *hentai*) female characters are created with a *kawaii* aesthetic in mind. Characters (humans and non-humans) are designed to appeal as charming, vulnerable, shy, and childlike (Kerr, 2016) or simply *cute* (see Figure 26). Or, as Paasonen (2017:18) aptly observes, 'the female bodies are perfectly symmetrical, smooth, and fine-tuned as certain figures

of fantasy. They stretch, bounce back, and never fail'. In most cases, the only notable differences between female characters are the colour and shape of hair, outfit, and size of breasts.

it is no less important to mention the qualities of the animation itself (e.g. acting, movement, and form), which are excellent for telling pornographic stories. In this regard, it is very convenient to quote Capino (2004:54):

'animated bodies can perform every desire and fantasy that the human body cannot utter. Relentlessly and with impunity, the animated body's plastic genitalia and invulnerable orifices grow and multiply, mutate and mutilate, probe or are penetrated by every imaginable object and animal.'

Thus, the animation medium is extremely well suited to present 'hyperbolic scenarios of penetration, climax, and lust' (Paasonen, 2017:14). Furthermore, as it was established previously, because 2D animation can easily break shape and form, animated pornography can create aesthetically pleasing poses and body motions that can ignore the limitations of physics (e.g. gravity, lighting, and sound) and biology (e.g. proportion, body mass, anatomy, volume, the body's flexibility). Pornographers can stage each animation shot without any concerns of real-world constraints, as long as

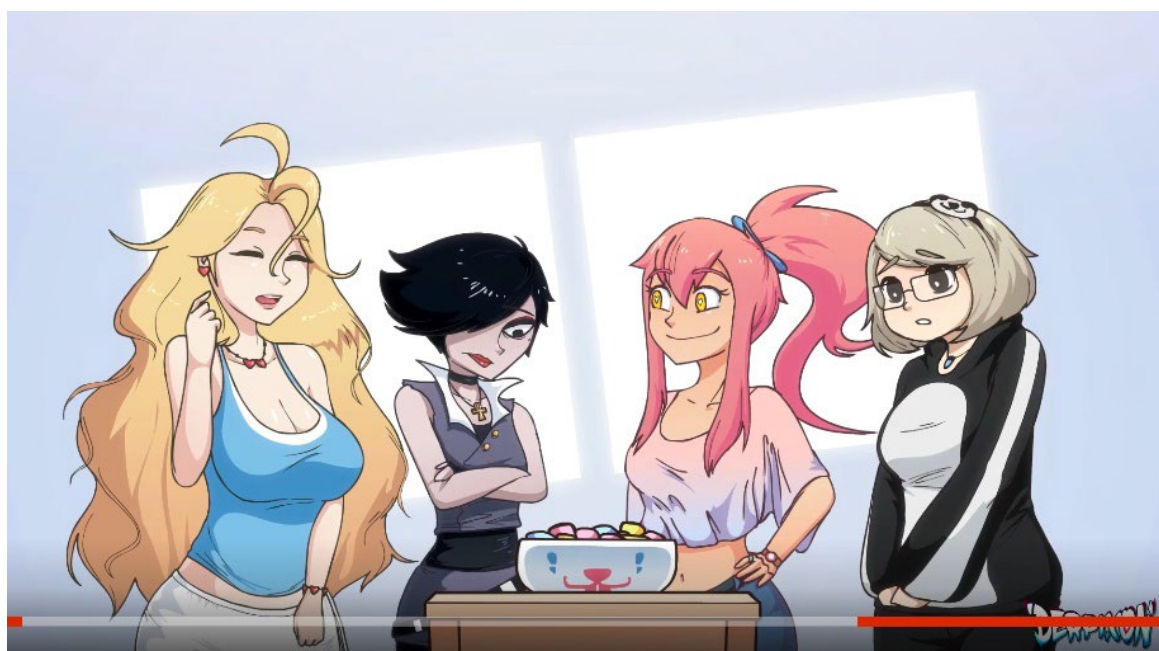


Figure 26. *Party Games* (2018). Even in Western made pornographic animated clip all the female characters are presented as cute and childlike to maximise their sexual appeal. © Derpixon. Fair use.

each animated shot can invoke sexual appeal and be perceived as believable (i.e. not breaking the rules established in animated world).

Interestingly, the hentai genre even has specific facial expressions for animated female characters that visually identify the moment the female's partner climaxes. Again, not when the female character is climaxing, but *her partner*. This expression is called *ahegao* (the term translates to 'weird face' or 'lewd face' in English) and has these visual characteristics (Rito, 2017; see Figure 27):

- The whites of the eyes are visible or are close to becoming visible. The focus of the eyes is not fixed.
- The mouth is open, and the tongue is sticking out.
- Saliva, mucus, sweat, and other bodily fluids are often present.

These *hentai* aesthetics are supposed to telegraph the breaking of the mind from the overwhelming sexual pleasure that the character just encountered, even though the male character has reached sexual ecstasy. This implies that sexual pleasure is forced upon female characters, and, as a result, females cannot suppress sexual enjoyment even when the act itself is without their consent. According to Rito (2017), this facial expression is used most in humiliation and rape stories, so to state that this facial expression has ethical issues would be to put it mildly.

However, as Paasonen (2017, 2019) argues, these hard-core animations with plots of submission, domination, and non-consent provides an opportunity for the viewers to experience scenarios without guilt and distress. Thus, according to Paasonen, the animation medium allows the viewer to fully immerse into sexual fantasies that would not be accessible in live-action format. However, the latter circumstance does not change the fact that a disproportionately large proportion of



Figure 27. *JK Bitch ni Shiboraretai* (2016). Different variations of *Ahegao*. © T-Rex. Fair use.

animated pornographic content purposefully and consistently chooses to come back to the portraiture of dehumanising, submissive, and broken female characters. This trend can be concerning, especially if it aids to normalise, glorify, or even romanticise rape and sexual abuse. Yet, it is necessary to circle back to the observation that bad taste, unethical behaviour, and misogyny in pornography are not a legal but an ethical issue.

It is necessary to address that the *ahegao* can also be applied to ethical sexual conduct; also, that this facial expression can be used on male characters. But why it is fascinating in the context of this thesis is that *ahegao* is a visual aid to pornographers to minimise or even completely remove any negative emotions that can be associated with an act of emotionally distressing situation (rape and humiliation). This facial expression was created (and later copied by other pornographers) due to the ability to clearly telegraph to the audience that the female character no longer experienced negative emotions. Quite the opposite, the animated character is now experiencing positive and pleasant emotions and actively participates in the sexual act.

It must be noted that *ahegao* today is a popular cultural phenomenon. Its high point in popularity can be linked to the ‘*ahegao* challenge’ that swept the USA in 2016 (Rito, 2017). However, today, *ahegao* is not only incorporated into *ahegao*-themed clothing or accessories but also is a popular internet *meme*, an *emoji*, and has even become an important aesthetic element in certain subcultures. It is evident that this sexualised facial expression suggesting pleasure or ecstasy has aesthetic appeal not only within animated pornographic content, but also far beyond; the communicative element of acute pleasure can also be applied in a non-sexualised context.

Lastly, *ahegao* popularity in the Western cultural sphere also impacted live-action pornography. *Ahegao* is now not only a popular search additional search term but also, in some cases, a core concept of pornographic content. However, after exploring pornographic content with the *ahegao* tag, it is apparent that the aesthetics of two-dimensional facial expression is transferring poorly to a live-action medium. In most cases, it feels severely unappealing, uncomfortable (for the performers), badly timed, and highly ‘unauthentic’. However, it must be noted that the *ahegao* expression on real humans does look better in photography than in a time-based medium.

This suggests that *ahegao* is another aesthetic solution that works significantly better in 2D stylistics, especially in time-based media. This is due to *ahegao*’s ability to highlight aesthetically attractive facial aspects in 2D style and manage to clearly

communicate inner emotions (pleasure) while presenting all this with strong staging and appealing motion. All these aspects are extremely hard to control in live action without breaking the suspense of disbelief. After all, this facial expression was created for a 2D medium.

It is necessary to go back to an existing and firmly held practice in *hentai* to dehumanise female characters and present them visually in basically one shape and form. While this may not be a problem *per se* for the pornography industry, which primarily targets the male audience, it presents an unavoidable ethical challenge if created pornographic art is wanted. It is tough to defend that pornography holds any artistic merit if a pornographer chooses to produce fantasy that requires dehumanising a person and degrading them into a tool for sexual satisfaction.

While animated female characters lack diversity, male characters come in various forms, shapes, and ages, further proving that this lack of character diversity is a by-product of the animation industry (Roe, 2020; daCosta, 2007; Dhugga, 2020; Brown, 2020). Animated male characters are designed to make the animated world more believable, and female characters are designed to make the animated world attractive.

When reviewing the aesthetics of character design in pornographic content, it is necessary to touch on AI, as it is clear now that AI will transform the pornography industry in the near future. In the context of this thesis, the most interesting aspect of AI-generated pornography is 2D content (see Figure 28); more precisely, the data of

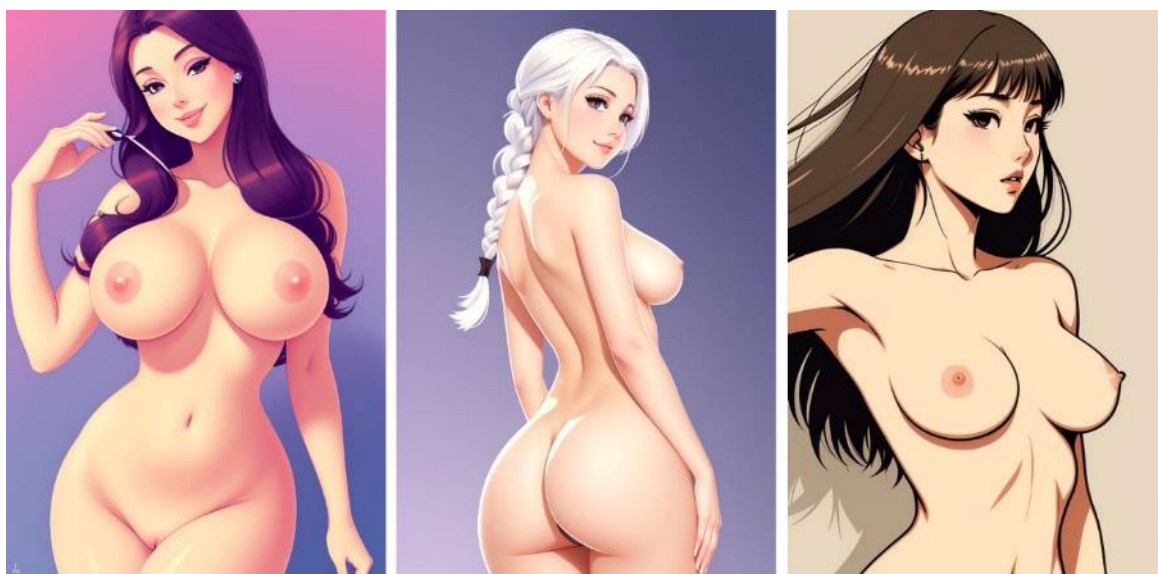


Figure 28. Images from *PornJoy.ai* gallery. A surprisingly high-quality AI-generated 2D imagery that can go anywhere between erotic to hard-core pornographic. © PornJoy.ai. Fair use.

AI-generated pornographic and erotic imagery will provide insights into humanity's sexual fantasies. However, as AI can generate new imagery only based on data that was fed to the image generators, it can end up being a tool to produce aesthetically unappealing results, as very few professional 2D artists work in the pornography genre.

After reviewing the phenomenon of pornography, it is necessary to note that the animation medium can produce a powerful aesthetic appeal for the content in this genre; of course, the viewers also have much higher demands for sexualised content. User reviews from *My Anime List* website suggest that hentai sub-genre viewers often care about artistic merit and a strong plot. Aspects of the pornography genre are almost never mentioned in a live-action format. Interestingly, when users are comparing how strong the plot is, they usually evaluate it by comparison with anime content that has critical acclaim for well-developed narrative and not with other *hentai* content.

Before finishing this section on the aesthetics of pornography in 2D animation, the author would like to share one last quote from a commentator regarding a discussion about whether there is '*hentai* that actually has a well-developed story and characters and isn't just fap material' (My Anime List, 2019). While most commentators in that discussion were making fun of this topic, one commentator had a thought-provoking opinion towards this desire to have developed a story with sexual themes:

I think the thing is, you ask for examples of hentai that isn't just 'fap material', but, for the most part, that's exactly what it is. And due to dumb laws based on prudish, jaded attitudes towards sexuality, this distinction between hentai and ecchi will continue. Sure, there is the odd hentai out there where the author clearly wanted to tell a good story and create engaging characters, too, but the environment isn't conducive to doing that.

If you're like me and you find ecchi anime doesn't quite go far enough with the sexual content, but hentai goes completely the other way and abandons story, and you find this frustrating, then I heavily advise looking into Visual Novels. There are a ton of extremely good VNs out there with great stories and characters, deep themes, and plenty of artistic depth and creativity, while also not being in the slightest bit shy about nudity and sex.
[YossaRedMage, August 16, 2019; text not edited]

The author would argue that even though the person who started a discussion about '*hentai* with a developed story' could not clearly articulate that they just wanted a mature narrative that is not shy to portray sexual activities (rather than asking animated pornography genre to tone down on sex and step up with the story). This would mean to have a similar content supply as would happen with live-action mature content. Yet, as YossaRedMage aptly observed, there is a significant gap in the animation between pornographic content and content that only touches sexual themes in its narrative. Unfortunately, today it is much easier for animation creators to portray extreme violence in mainstream content than to show fully naked non-sexual bodies.

But, on the other hand, it is possible to end this section on a hopeful note. By exploring different paths regarding animated pornography, the author determined that this medium is extremely well suited to infuse explicit sexual content with artistic vision and a strong dramatic story. Even the audience craves immersive plots, memorable characters, and high-quality animation from their animated 'fap material'. If a filmmaker wants to create ethical pornography where 'people watch it for the story', – the animation medium is the best starting point.

5.4 The Conclusions of Chapter Five

Non-sexual nudity is the depiction of an undressed person that does not evoke any sexual excitement in the viewer. Non-sexual nudity can be obtained in two ways. The first way is when nudity is depicted in a situation or cultural environment where the explicit imagery of the body is not associated with sexuality. For example, visual information for medical purposes, pictures of nude infants, as well as various illustrations that represent cultures where the display of nudity is absolutely acceptable within the community. The second way is when the depicted nakedness represents a character in a stressful or dangerous situation. Both ways of invoking non-sexual nudity represent important visual storytelling tools to the characters, their culture, and the situation they find themselves in.

The animation medium provides a significant advantage over live action when it comes to non-sexual, erotic, and pornographic explicit imagery. It is evident that even when live-action actors provide formal consent to capture their performance showing explicit nudity or nakedness, it is still perceived as an extremely stressful work

environment that can have a lasting effect on a person. The situation becomes significantly more complicated if the story requires minors to perform naked. As the USA Actors Guild representatives argue, the entertainment industry has several levers that can force actors to perform under unethical conditions that can have dire mental consequences. The animation medium completely eliminates this particular problem, as there is no need for real human actors to perform to present engaging non-sexual, erotic, or pornographic content to the viewer.

Animation is also a more ethical medium to present children's nudity. However, it must be noted that animated children's nudity is an extremely controversial phenomenon because it is perceived through emotional lenses. Therefore, censorship-wise, the creator's choice to include explicit animated child nudity would have unpredictable outcomes. However, in those rare cases when animated content creators choose to portray nude children, they manage to get away with it mostly because genitalia in 2D are represented only with few lines and, arguably, are too stylised to initiate sexual arousal.

Sexual activity is important to every person's quality of life; therefore, it should be a natural and important part of any fictional character's development. However, it is extremely rare to see a portrayal of any sexual activity or include even sexual themes in the general narrative structure in animated mainstream content. Erotica, as a genre, is still an infrequent phenomenon in the adult animation segment. This situation is strongly tied to morality – sexual themes are still heavily stigmatised and actively avoided among animation content creators. This creates dangerous situations where, essentially, most of the aesthetic decisions in animation are implemented in the genre of pornography. Most animation aesthetics on how best to present explicit nudity and sexual intercourse is produced in a genre that does not aim to present diversity, respect, or a healthy portrayal of relationships.

It is essential to note that animation (especially 2D) can somewhat alter the portrayal of sexual activity in such a way as to create new interpretable meanings but, at the same time, does not destroy the suspense of disbelief. This is important in a few ways. First, by creating new – additional – meanings, animated content creators can produce fresh and exciting ways to tell a story with sexual overtones. Second, this visual storytelling tool allows the creators to claim that their story has artistic merit – this aspect is essential to get the 'erotic' genre label.

Pornography is famously undefinable. Yet it is possible to establish some

patterns that most of the explored definitions of pornography emphasise: (i) pornography is primarily designed to produce sexual arousal in its viewers, (ii) it is sexually explicit material, (iii) it has very little or no aesthetic value, and (iv) the term also includes sexual perversions. However, most of these claims are factually not correct and are emphasised for political purposes. While it is true that most pornographic content is created primarily for masturbatory reasons and is of low aesthetic quality, it does not mean that pornography cannot have additional purposes and artistic value; it is possible to create pornographic art.

One of the most fascinating insights about the aesthetics of animated pornography comes from analysing *hentai* viewers' comments which showed that the audience craves a strong plot. Although the notion that it is not enough for humans to witness naked bodies or sexual acts to achieve full sexual excitement is somewhat evident with live-action pornography content, it is a surprisingly important element in the animated medium.

6. ANIMATED EROTICA AND THE ANIMATOR'S SHAME

This chapter, in one particular aspect, is quite different from the previous ones. The difference is that from this point forward, I am changing the way I am presenting my research. To be exact – in Chapter 6, I will not use third-person pronouns. Instead, I will embrace 'I' to present subjective interpretations and resist the temptation to produce authoritative accounts or interpretations that generalise. However, because I am a scholar shaped by more than a decade of conservative research practice I must be honest and clearly state that, at first, I disliked this change. It felt like I was purposefully going in a direction that I systematically avoided in all my scholarly pursuits. I am glad to state that I learned to appreciate this methodological approach by the end of my research journey. Furthermore, this change was absolutely necessary to produce insights about a subject I actively avoided for most of my research journey, and all my professional life.

Thus, the first five chapters of this thesis were written in a style that I am used to and comfortable with. However, because I am employing autoethnography to conduct research, I cannot ignore recommendations for conducting research with this methodology. If I really want to extract the maximum and most valuable data from the autoethnographic approach, I must step above my fears and fully embrace vulnerability. I really want not to just scratch the surface of this fascinating subject, but to fully explore it and create new knowledge.

This chapter begins with a review of the practice diary method used in this doctoral research. The purpose of reviewing this method is to evaluate the conditions under which the practice diary was used, and why it was the best research tool to answer the research questions presented in this doctoral research. The rationale is that the practice diary (as it was identified in the review of doctoral theses) is still a heavily underused research method in animation. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly establish this method's challenges and strengths within the scope of this research, especially when it is used by a practitioner who investigates real-world problems while exploring their relationship with the theory. Thus, it is to present the employed method not only as an appropriate autoethnographic approach to data selection and recording, but also as a method for analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008; Poulos, 2021).

Then, the chapter presents insights gathered through performing animation practice and reflecting on it during and after the experiments. Here, I present and

discuss in depth how I was able to end up focusing on the aesthetics of explicit nudity and, what is arguably much more critical, what conditions had to be created for me to be able to study this phenomenon (i.e. inner transformation due to a self-analytical process). This chapter also provides key insights into 2D aesthetics when producing imagery of explicit 2D animated nudity and sexual intercourse.

This is followed by an autoethnographic account that presents all the inner challenges that I had to face (and conquer) to be able to research a topic that involves explicit animated nudity and sexual intercourse. What was considerably harder was to produce animation tests that exhibit explicit nudity and sexual intercourse.

6.1 Reflecting on Practice – Approaching Explicit (Non)Sexuality in Animation

From the very start of the doctoral research, it was clear to me that I would employ animation practice as one of the data-gathering methods to produce new knowledge. I firmly knew that I didn't want this doctoral research to be purely a theoretical investigation into the adult animation phenomenon. I decided to embrace my worth as a practitioner as it brings a deeper understanding of the creative approach, the aesthetic solutions, and challenges and, of course, how shame affects the creative process.

In this section, I will present the development, findings, key insights, and thought process of the empirical part of the research.

6.1.1 Practice Diary for Animation Practitioners and Researchers

Before presenting the animation practice part, I would like to briefly discuss the relationship with the reflective diary method, as it was an extremely important part of my day-to-day research and, in many ways, shaped the overall research direction. It is crucial to admit that from the very beginning, I did not trust this data-gathering method. It felt that gathered data would be too subjective and unsuitable for constructing any argument acceptable in the academic field. Of course, there are a lot of elements that precondition distrust for the method.

First, there is a positivist stand that is suspicious of the subjective qualitative research approach in general (Hyers, 2018; Lapadat, 2017; Alaszewski, 2006). There are also ethical concerns (that were discussed in depth in the methodology chapter).

In addition, there is a misconception that a diary is a feminine and juvenile activity (Hyers, 2018). In this case, I had the perception that a diary is only suitable for little girls reflecting on their feelings and not for serious academic study. Although this perception was quickly shattered with a simple literature review, it did stick in my memory of how cultural programming can affect the rationale of choosing research design. I was mildly shocked that such a superficial attitude could influence my decisions.

Thankfully, my resistance to the practice diary was quickly overturned once a literature review was conducted. Additionally, the literature review helped me to realise that there are research questions that not only the diary method is the best method to gather data, but arguably, it is the only way to acquire answers. For example, for a considerable time, I was searching for how to collect data and analyse the self-censorship aspect in the adult animation segment. My first thought was to go with interview or case study approaches. Yet, with the mentioned approaches, I could not construct a research design that would go deeper into the research problem and provide conclusive data. Only when I decided to consider an inward approach, I realised that this method could provide conditions to truly grasp the phenomenon.

The autoethnographic practice diary approach is not only for data collection but, as it was discussed in the methodology chapter, a tool that encourages targeted data collection and evaluation of the ongoing progress. This method encourages autoethnographic researchers to conduct data interpretation and information transformation into a coherent and meaningful story of observed phenomena as the data are recorded in the practice diary.

As per recommendations, I established goals for the diary from the start and formatted how and what data would be documented in the diary. Although the course of the research did shift a few times, the diary format changed very little and fully met all my inquiry needs. By employing this method I could gather rich data and identify essential aspects of the aesthetics of explicit nudity that, in turn, could be transformed into text that provides culturally meaningful explanations of the phenomenon. For example:

- What psychological and physiological sensations are evoked by the desire to produce erotic and pornographic animated content?
- How long does it take to break away from the shame of producing erotic content?

- How do other animators react to the opportunity to produce erotic content?
- What is the difference in an emotional state when conducting (what could be called) academic study and when I am producing an erotic shot?

Finally, I want to address that the method provided me with a lot of valuable outcomes – from the ability to construct clear research goals to the capability to embrace failure. As it will be presented further in this section, the ability to practise, analyse, and interpret animated explicit sexual imagery is littered with mental blocks that must be climbed over to be able to recognise the beauty of the phenomena and be able to use it in storytelling. The practice diary method helped me to face those blocks and provided access to tools to comprehend this complicated element of aesthetics. It also gave me structure to look inwards for answers and was a research approach that was a complete mystery to me at the start of the journey.

6.1.2 First Attempts to Define Practice Goals, Scope, and Approach

I started his doctoral research with the intent to investigate the aesthetics of *sex, death, and violence* in 2D animation. However, it soon became evident that of all the mentioned aspects of adult animation, segment exploration into the aesthetics of explicit nudity was the most neglected by scholars and researchers. This situation should not come as a surprise since nudity in itself is a very controversial and sensitive topic, and even more so in the animation medium. I can frankly admit that I would never have reached the point where I could aim to analyse the aesthetics of explicit nudity in animation if I had not initially explored other, much *cooler* (and safer) topics, such as the aesthetics of animated death and violence (see Figure 29). The time I spent researching violence and death in animation was not a waste, as it gave me tools and an understanding of how to approach explicit sexuality in animation.

It is hard to overstate how unattractive the subject of explicit nudity (sexual and otherwise) is. There is some sort of repelling force that surrounds the subject of explicit sexuality in animation medium and it takes a great deal of time, energy, and will to penetrate that force field.

My animation practice followed this trajectory and started with animation experiments that were fully focused on the elements of violence and death until I slowly

moved towards the experiments that exclusively explored the aesthetic element of explicit nudity in 2D animation form. Establishing this line of events is important for two reasons. First, this explains why only this particular number of animation tests were implemented during doctoral studies (rather than, say, twice as many). Second, to implement the animation tests of erotic and pornographic genres, mental transformation was necessary. For me to reach the point where I could produce erotic (soft-core and hard-core) animated tests, I had to undergo a Campbell's hero's journey of sorts. I had to experience an adventure (i.e. to find myself in the unknown), be victorious in a decisive crisis (i.e. conquer my fears by using the knowledge and skills that I've acquired along the way), and then come back home (i.e. the starting point) spiritually and mentally transformed.

In late 2020, I started developing my first short film animation project, which was supposed to provide me with opportunities to experiment with various 2D aesthetic solutions and to test several preliminary hypotheses. An integral part of my approach to animation practice was the goal to fully produce animated shorts, although not necessary within the timeframe of the doctoral studies. It was essential for me that the practical animation research part would be part of an animated film that could be shown as a single artwork. This wish of mine was based on the literature review, which suggested that how the audience reacts to death and violence is highly related to the narrative. To create pathos out of animated death, the audience must believe there is some sort of loss (Flaig, 2013). A single shot¹⁸ animation test with a character dying



Figure 29. Illustration from my confirmation presentation. With this illustration, I was presenting the mental dilemma of choosing to research just a 'sex' topic rather than 'sex, death, and violence' – while one sounded cool, the other instantly invoked the feeling of shame. ¹

would be a frivolous examination of a phenomenon that could not provide needed data about how animated 2D aesthetics works.

The idea for the short story was quickly developed. For my animation short, I decided to adopt a historical event commonly referred to in Lithuanian as *Pilėnai*. The animation would be about the attack and the defence of the *Pilėnai* fortress in 1336 that, due to a hopeless situation, ended in mass suicide to deprive the Teutonic Order of prisoners and loot (scorched earth policy). This tragic historical event inspired generations of writers and creators to tell a legend of heroic defenders who chose death over submission to the enemy. The story that is publicly known and told today, as Baronas and Mačiulis (2010:593) sum up, is 'meant to convey the message about how heroic Lithuanians of old days were in defending their motherland and freedom'.

This story was chosen for two key reasons. First, because *Pilėnai* is an actual historical event that involves acts of violence that are difficult to comprehend today – it solves the issue of how much of the scale, count, and severity of violence to show in the animation. The problem is balancing the depiction of violence so that it does not become too overwhelming or underwhelming. This animation could also provide an opportunity for viewers (especially Lithuanians) to see an uncensored and non-sterile portrait of this historical event.

The second reason is particularly pragmatic. By choosing to animate a historical event perceived as important for modern Lithuanian culture and identity, I can create favourable conditions for receiving direct state support in the later stages of animation. Of course, this type of narrative does not automatically guarantee state support. However, because financial support would create considerably better creative conditions for implementing this animation project, the strategic decision was made to actively seek state support for implementing this animation project. It is interesting to note that seeking additional funding for implementing animation projects in the context of doctoral studies is an acceptable practice – Bliss (2016) and daCosta (2007) discuss their approach to additional funding and its necessity for doctoral studies in their theses. A clear goal was to seek state support for animation projects. However, I was considering option B in parallel – implementing a short animation of *Pilėnai* without state support.

Although I liked the concept of the short animation project, there were considerable challenges as I could not organically implement an explicit erotic scene without making it a distraction or creating a feeling like it was a fan service. My

approach of taking a well-known legend and remaking it by aggressively implementing erotic elements into the narrative repudiated the main theme of the story, the narrative rhythm, and structure. I concluded that without giving proper story arcs to the main characters, the erotic aspect simply could not work with that particular story and in a short film format. After a discussion with my supervisors, I decided to abandon this project (at least in the context of the doctoral research) and, without any delay, look for another idea.

It is important to address that at this stage, my autoethnographic approach was already able to provide insights into the phenomenon that might have been missed or ignored if I had employed different data-collection methods. Because the diary format requires the researcher to provide reasoning for any creative decisions, this means that even when an experiment fails, it still can produce rich data. This particular case forced me to examine what the narrative needs to implement erotic elements into the short story – how to make explicit animated nudity erotic rather than a fan service.

6.1.3 Refining Research and Solving Conceptual Issues

Based on the insights already gathered, this time, I decided to go the other way around. First, to decide what themes and aspects I wanted to incorporate and then look for an organic way to connect them into a story. Considering that a story that includes sex, death, and violence needs to be told in an animation medium, I concluded that the best approach would be through the sci-fi genre. By employing sci-fi settings, I can play with the animation medium's strengths and showcase the opportunities that 2D animation can provide when aiming at adult audiences. My new animation project – *Champion* – was born (see Figure 30).

Although starting a new project in itself meant that precious time was lost, previously gathered insights were extremely valuable in understanding how to approach a story with erotic elements. Furthermore, I could argue that without forcing myself to recognise why the previous concept could not work, I could not move forward with my research and gather insights about how best to use explicit imagery in mature stories. For example, this time I approached the sex scene in the animated project by asking what important information it could provide about the character.

Also, a previous short animation project allowed me to better understand how to approach death in an animated form. For example, at this point, I had a clear understanding that for the character's death to be emotionally impactful, I had to



Figure 30. An illustration representing the animated short project *Champion* (2022). Created by the author.

telegraph to the audience that it (i) had unique character traits and (ii) that the act of death stole its future potential; with the character's death, there is a feeling of loss.

In addition, even at the project's development stage, I could feel how the practice part helped me to address the theory/practice gap (Fonteyn, 2001; Hancock, 1999). Thus, this autoethnographic inquiry helped me to interpret personal experiences and, in turn, identify important study themes and causality relationships. 'Terms and conditions' were established for the animated project *Champion*:

- **Sci-fi genre.** How do we present sci-fi genre (alien anatomy, architecture, spacecraft, etc.) designs to showcase how some stories can be better told in the animation medium purely due to 2D aesthetics?
- **Erotica.** How do we (i) present explicit sex scenes so they would telegraph to the audience information about the protagonist and (ii) showcase how some explicit sex scenes can be better visually presented in animation medium due to 2D aesthetics?
- **Fight choreography.** How do we animate an engaging, violent fight sequence that is dynamic in action and intense in narrative stakes?
- **The design of physically and mentally strong female characters.** How do we present a strong female character who is an active agent without

using her sexuality in any capacity?

- **Death scene.** How do we invoke an emotion of loss in the audience when the character dies?

I decided to test how the project – full of explicit sexual activity, brutality, and violent death – would be perceived by my peers in the industry. In 2021, I submitted the project for a regional-level short film pitching forum where only three (still at the development-preproduction stage) projects per country were accepted. My *Champion* was selected. This was a great opportunity to measure how the industry evaluates my animation project, but as a pitching forum, it also provided extremely valuable project development and pitching training, as well as an opportunity to get feedback from a larger audience (see Figure 31).

This experience gave me quite a few insights that were unavailable otherwise. However, before presenting them, I want to note that the project was accepted by another international event in 2022 (soon after the first pitching forum event). This is important to state because it allowed the author to present a slightly more developed version of the project and get training and feedback from industry peers from across the Nordic region. The following are the most important points coming out of this reflection:

- **The sci-fi genre is not for everyone.** This was mentioned quite often in the feedback. A genre film (especially sci-fi) may have an established fan base. However, it also means that there is a large group audience that is simply not attracted to the particular narrative elements and aesthetics. Therefore, I always need to be particular about whom my animation should be presented to, and who I should seek the feedback from. If a person doesn't like animation with sci-fi elements (not to mention sex, death, and violence), data gathered from that person is of very little value. Lastly, I was pleasantly reassured that people who like the sci-fi genre are much more welcoming to erotic content.
- **It is better if a film with explicit sexual content had a female surname in the credits.** This is a quote from the feedback that the industry representatives provided. Another one that was given to the author at the second event (before the pitching session, at the training): 'How do we know that this animation is not directed to a boy-man that watches anime

with nude women?'. At that point I realised that being a man and aiming to produce an animated sex scene was an issue. The practice diary mentions that quite a few people in the first event emphasised that I needed to present my motivation for this project (which at that time was (i) to overcome the fear of the erotic genre and (ii) to portray the explicit scene as an integral part of the narrative). At first, I found this advice odd. It seemed that in a five-minute pitch, to provide an elaborate explanation of why I wanted to produce this project (the way I wanted) rather than focus on narrative and aesthetics was a bit wasteful and excessive. But after the second pitching event, it became clear that, in my peer's opinion, I needed to acquire validation from the audience that this was not (another) male gaze project. The easiest way to acquire that is to have a female surname in the credits. After this realisation, this was the entry in the diary: 'This realisation that, until proven otherwise, I – as a male – can't employ sexuality in any other form than to invoke sexual arousal, felt, at the very least, like I was just robbed of a creative agency'.

- ***The world does not evolve with me at the same pace.*** This insight was acquired because I had already conquered my fears regarding the genre when I presented the *Champion* project at the second pitching event. For some reason, I believed that if I am not afraid of the genre, others are not afraid of it either. I did not realise that presenting the project, which



Figure 31. Presentation of *Champion*, an animated short project in the pitching forum (2021). © Baltic Pitching Forum. Fair use.

included explicit content, could be uncomfortable for some audience members. Because this was an industry event, it provided me with a false perception that I did not need to justify why I wanted to employ erotic elements in my animated artwork. All this experience reminded me that while my doctoral research is important for the medium, it does not mean that all those elements that cause self-censorship will suddenly disappear at the end of my doctoral studies. Self-censorship is caused not because all animators come to this world with some preset misconceptions about sexuality in the animation medium but because it is firmly imprinted and reminded to them by the world around them.

The reflections from these two pitching events, especially the second and third, were incredibly important for this research, as they provided critical insights into the phenomenon's cultural aspects – insights that would be very hard to acquire without autoethnographic inquiry and, consequently, without combining practice with the reflection process. Thus, while providing unpleasant realisations about how the Western (at least European) film industry functions, these events provided unique and unparalleled autoethnographic data.

After the second event, I was confident about the new project and decided to apply for state funding (for pre-production stage work). I was lucky again and got the funding necessary to produce key art and storyboards. Again, the fact that I managed to get funding meant that the project got financial aid (which is always great) and that my peers from the industry deemed the project as having strong artistic merit. The latter aspect is important not only because – as already reviewed in the previous chapters – the industry's endorsement of artistic elements is critical to obtain the validation that animated content with explicit imagery belongs to the erotic genre (and not to pornographic one). It is also indirect proof that I can successfully and reasonably articulate why the erotic scene (and the vision of its implementation) in my short animation project is important to the overall narrative and cinematic vision. Thus, I was extremely happy that my doctoral studies already provided me with measurable knowledge and skills regarding my research topic.

However, there are four aspects regarding this funding that are important in the context of my thesis. First, when I presented the script to the first pitching forum, the intent to show explicit sex scenes and, later in the narrative, that the alien beast's

genitalia were visible during the ritualistic fights, was clearly stated. However, when I translated the script into Lithuanian, the alien genitalia part was deleted because I felt that it could be perceived as vulgar and could damage the project's chances of getting funding (see Figure 32).

To this day, I cannot clearly understand why I did this. Maybe because it is easier to be brave with foreign people. Maybe I really wanted validation for the project that would come with the funding. Or maybe without the ability to shout loudly that this animation is an integral part of my doctoral research, there was fear that the project could cause me to acquire the label of a pervert. In any case, I did not have the will to present true vision, even though it was planned to be implemented anyway (with or without state funding).

The second important aspect is that when I started to storyboard the sex scene, I realised that there are two stages of conquering the fear of the erotic genre in animation medium. The first one is when a person is not afraid to research it. The second stage is when a person is not afraid to produce the artwork; the second one is so *much* harder to conquer. Because, I believe, when researching erotica (or even pornography), there is still this semi-safe distance from the explicit art. There is plausible deniability that 'I am only doing it for mankind!'. When producing it ... well, there is no deniability there. Entries in my practice diary reflect on attempts to delay the artwork and mild discomfort while producing the boards. Yet, as my practice will show, storyboarding sex scenes is nothing compared to actual animation.



Figure 32. The fear that the national film community would consider any explicit elements of nudity to be automatically vulgar and unacceptable was (visually) expressed even at the time of confirmation.

The third aspect is my insights about one facet of creative work – search and analysis of references. In this particular case – erotic and pornographic references. I have put in the diary how this empirical approach to research would simply be impossible in the Lithuanian university where I work¹⁹ as a lecturer. I would get into serious trouble if I would look for erotic or pornographic references because it is against regulations to watch any material that can or is perceived as pornographic on the university grounds (it is a cause for disciplinary action). Even if I would explain to my superiors that this is integral part of my doctoral research, it is hard to imagine any other outcome than advice to do this type of research from home. I do not believe that research related to violence and death would cause even a fraction of the complications as with research into explicit imagery, if any at all.

The final aspects that the storyboarding exercise provided to me was the first indications of how shame can influence artistic decisions. As per usual animation practice, first, the storyboarding artist makes *key storyboards* – loose sketches that aim to test out possible compositions of the particular shot. Storyboards test out a few different aesthetic approaches to the narrative to find the best way to tell the story in cinematographic art form. This exercise was carried out precisely for this purpose – to experiment with different compositions in a quick manner.

As my notes in the diary indicate, after the first few sketches of the sex scene, I realised that my approach was not only boring (an aspect always one to avoid in a cinematic work) but also sterile (see Figure 33). The way I portrayed couples having sexual intercourse in the very first few storyboard sketches was the safe, unoffending, passionless and unrevealing form. As soon as I could identify this outcome, I decided to push for much more open and dynamic poses. But this came with a price – a noticeably higher level of stress and a repetitive feeling of shame every time I thought about what people would say if they saw it.

The most important part of this recorded reflection in a practice diary is that until the animator fully exorcises the feeling of shame, an extremely powerful subconscious force attempts to push the creator to take the most non-sexual approach. I can only speculate how to break free from this subconscious force without the motivation to study the phenomenon itself, and to employ a reflection diary to identify the creative (aesthetical) challenge.

¹⁹ It's a different university from the one where I conducted my doctoral studies.

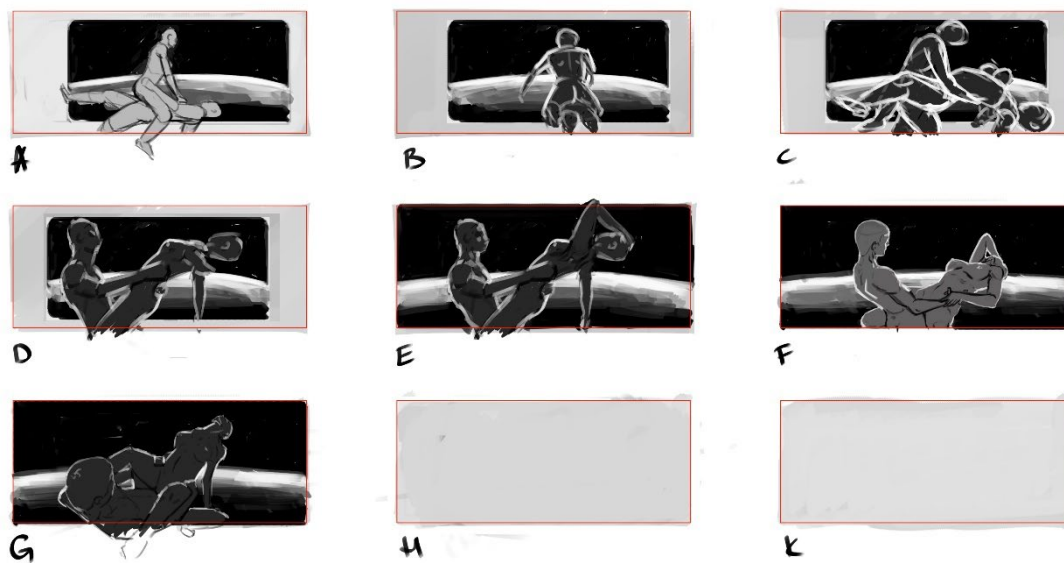


Figure 33. As can be seen from the presented illustration, the first few attempts to solve how to visually demonstrate a sexual intercourse in zero gravity are not only the most compositionally boring solutions, but also the least revealing and essentially non-sexual.

However, as practice diary notes indicate, with every new board, my understanding of what body language elements can transmit passion in sex acts has greatly improved. The approach to the body poses, and overall composition moved from trying to depict sexual intercourse to looking for a way to telegraph the sexual narrative and emotional intent. Therefore, I started looking for ways to make it appealing rather than just explicit. At this point, my diary notes: 'I realise that it is a skill that cannot manifest by itself. It is a skill (or maybe knowledge?) that can be achieved only by focus study'. It is clear that if hoping to unlock the secrets of erotic art, theory and practice must come to me in balance.

The *Champion* project was highly beneficial for my doctoral research – it provided important connections between theoretical research and practice that led to a better understanding of the aesthetic language needed to portray erotic content in the animation medium. Furthermore, *Champion* also generated external validation of its artistic merit. Also, to an extent, this includes my ability to communicate my creative vision to my industry peers that I can employ to tell mature stories.

However, at this point in my doctoral research, a tectonic shift starts. After one of the meetings with the my supervisors, at the very end of it (with fear in my heart), a careful inquiry was stated about if it would not be more logical to focus doctoral research only on the erotic element of 2D aesthetics since significantly more new

knowledge can be generated about it than about animated violence and death combined. To my complete horror, the supervisors agreed, and the reorientation of doctoral research began.

6.1.4 End of the Mental Transformation and Distillation of the Empirical Part

Per usual practice, when such a horrific event happens, the doctoral thesis restructuring means that the title and the formulation of the research aims and goals must be adjusted. A significant part of the study must be discarded. However, in this particular doctoral research the true horror and despair came with the realisation that the *Champion* project was no longer the best approach to conducting empirical research. *Champion* was constructed for a different PhD – the one that looks into violence, death, *and* sex. Without death and violence, it is too complicated and only on the borderline of the research question. As I addressed this change in the diary:

Champion is a behemoth of an animated project – the elements that I included in it are far more complicated than an average animated short, so to move to a considerably smaller scale project that does not require strong narrative is definitely a plus.

From this point, I had very limited time to rethink and redefine the aim for the practice part of the doctoral research, as the doctoral journey was approaching the final stages. As soon as research goals, questions, and objectives were adjusted, a list of animation tests was formulated that should have helped to verify the insights already captured in the reflection diary and help my doctoral research to move forward. The following are animation tests conducted (conducted in chronological order) and the most important insights that these experiments presented.

Animation test #1 – *Nude walk cycle*

Based on insights gathered through the *Pilénaï* and *Champion* projects, I hypothesised that animating the nude woman walking cycle will not evoke any emotional discomfort. This hypothesis was fully confirmed. Just like academic nude studies conducted in art schools, this exercise was utterly non-sexual. Therefore, I decided to alter the exercise and try to implement erotic elements into the character's walk (body language). Wider hip swings, more expressive breast bouncing motion, and more confident facial

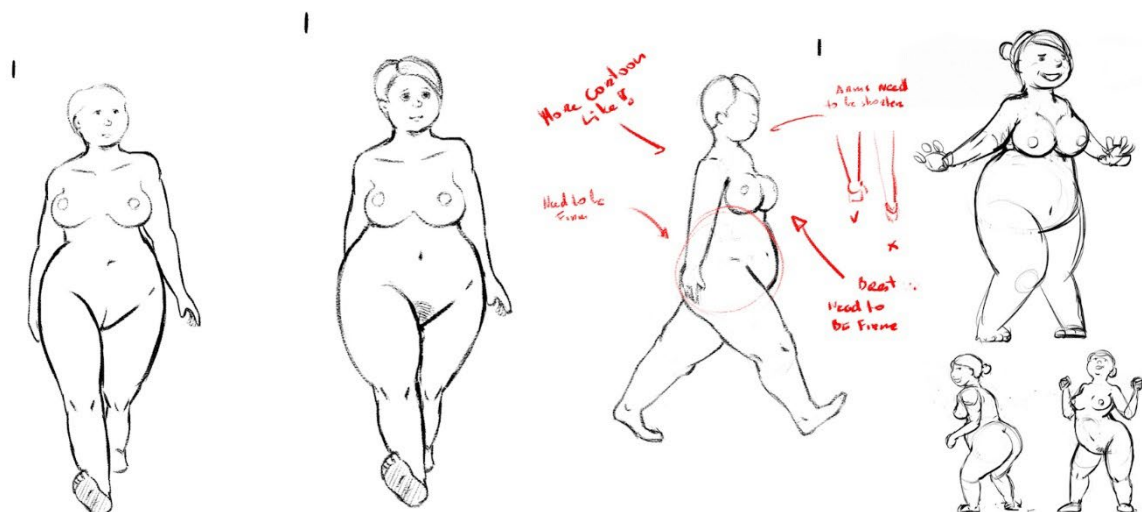


Figure 34. Animation test #1 – *Nude walk cycle*. On the left – two forward walking tests to see how different proportions affect 2D female character's appeal.

expressions (instead of neutral) were added. As a result, the character's sex appeal increased slightly (see Figure 34). However, the animation was still more non-sexual than erotic.

This is most likely because the animation has no erotically themed story that could sexually titillate the viewer – no fantasy that could be fulfilled (Stoller, 2018). However, the increased sexual appeal of the character due to changes in the body language suggests that non-verbal aesthetics need to be explored more to understand how to portray attraction in 2D animation.

Finally, while at the end of the test, I aimed to produce walking cycle content that would be perceived as erotic; all these additional aesthetical changes to the animation test did not affect me in any negative way.

Animation test #2 – *Couple having sex I*

This test aimed to produce erotic animated artwork that portray explicit sexual intercourse between heterosexual couple (see Figure 35). In my notes, I mark that I don't have any set goals, and it is an exploratory test in nature. The start of this test was much more nerve-racking than the previous one. For this test, I realised that there is a need to research some pornography videos to understand body motion, timing, etc., because initial blocking did not look appealing. Luckily, this research was conducted during the quarantine because I do not know how this would be possible in

a Lithuanian university environment.

During the research, I was looking for interesting movements to find more aesthetically pleasing examples rather than vulgar displays of sexual activity. At the end of reference research, I selected eight GIF files that portrayed the live-action sexual act of a couple in a *cowgirl* position. I chose the live-action reference and not animated because of the desire to understand how humans ‘originally’ move rather than to study the already stylised interpretation of the motion. The reason for choosing the cowgirl sexual position was because I was looking for a body arrangement that (i) would be easy to portray in a cycle and (ii) where character faces would be visible. Once the (pornography) research was done, I readjusted blocking and started animating.

After I produced the first rough animation version, I noticed that the sexiness of the shot does not come from technically correct motion but from the character’s appeal – correct motion is not enough. But again, this test is a straightforward stand-alone narrative that portrays a short segment of sexual intercourse; no other information could imply additional sexual themes or suggest an erotic fantasy – even the title of the test (for lack of a better word) is boring. This led me to think about an additional experiment, where two groups should be interviewed about how they evaluate erotic elements in animation. However, the essence of this experiment would be that although both groups would see the same animation, one group would be told that the name of the test was *Couple having sex I* and the other would be told that the test was called *A quicky before job interview, A good start of a new day or So while we are in quarantine*.

At this point, I decided to analyse animated erotic artworks because it becomes evident that although it is necessary for an animator to understand the mechanics of body movements correctly, it is only the first step. Of the examples I watched, the sex scenes from *Fritz the Cat* (1972; the first R-rated animated film in the USA) stuck out. The appealing thing about those sex scenes, I note in the diary, is that they are completely cartoonish. Sex is not a rotoscoped action but the sum of larger-than-live motions. The animation telegraphs the feeling of sexual activity rather than the motion of one; as with every other genre, it is vital to remember that erotic animation should not imitate life, but to invoke it.

Around the same time, I was conversing about my doctoral research with one of my friends, and the friend provided a stimulating observation:

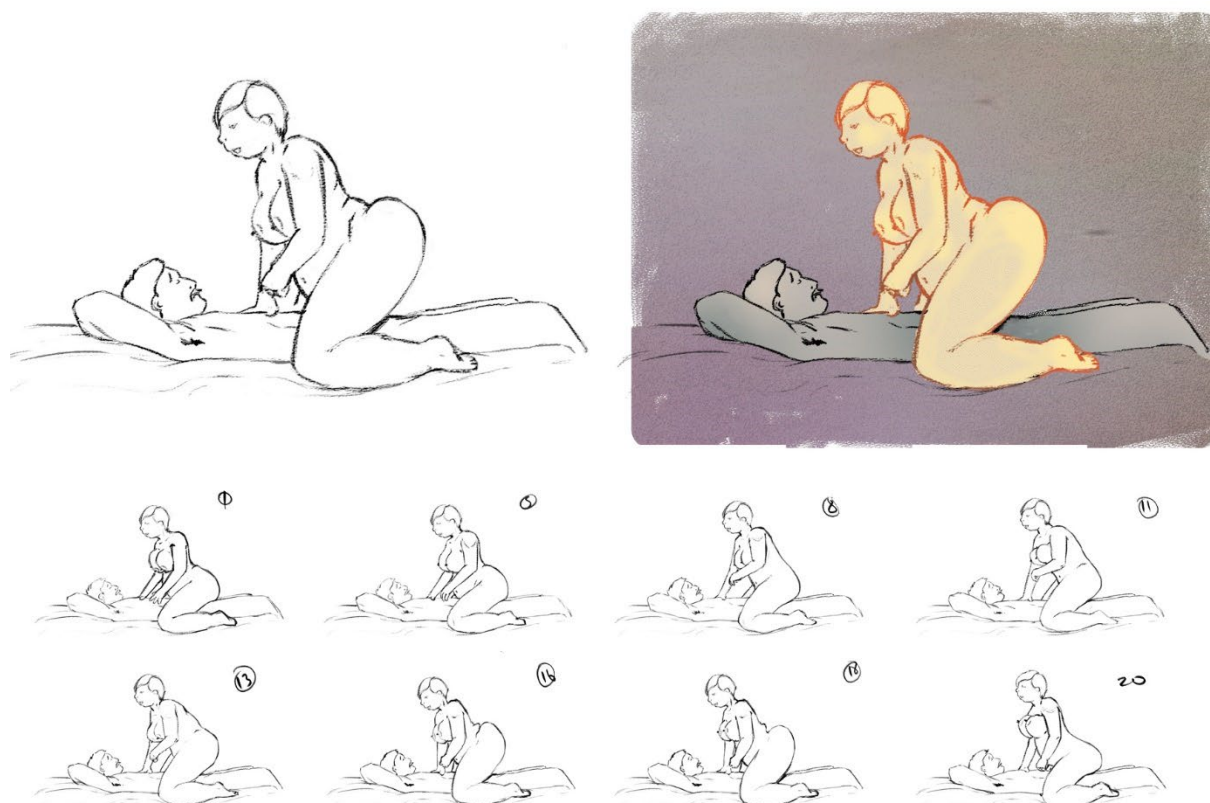


Figure 35. Animation test #2 – *Couple having sex I*. This test also includes experimentation with colours to determine whether the use of colour creates an erotic (rather than pornographic) feeling .

Maybe real sex is slower than we imagine? This got me thinking of sex aesthetics – although the motion has to be fast (or rather energetic), in animation, it also has to be impactful and able to make a statement.

So *slow in* and *slow out* is yet another animation principle appearing in this study. This brought thoughts to the semi-conclusion that any strong animated motion needs time to ‘breathe’. This is extremely important when the aim is to produce erotic content in an animation medium, because the way aesthetics works in this medium requires motion to be noticeable, readable, and impactful to invoke arousal in the audience.

From the start, I felt great discomfort and could not stop thinking that this was my first erotic/pornographic animation. I thought I was crossing a line from where I could not return. I recorded one thought in the diary: ‘I’m looking at the nicely animated bouncing tits and big flappy ass, and I feel like six years old because grownups do not do that kind of stuff’. This entry captures the feeling of shameful immaturity that was present almost throughout the exercise. I could not shake the feeling that this activity

was unsuitable for a mature and responsible person.

Finally, I had a critical moment at the end of the exercise because this scene was supposed to include a penis penetration animation. The angle that I chose to portray the couple (side view of couple having sex) made the penis part clearly visible if an anatomically correct approach were taken. However, I could not force myself to animate it. I simply did not have the willpower to conquer the fear. My notes state:

[the] second interesting thing I must write down is my inner fighting about penis animation. (...) and it is ridiculous that by animated explicit sex scenes, I still have one taboo that I cannot break, but it is a huge one. In my mind, I know that I should, no – must draw it, but it just feels like after that, there is no way back. I will come back to it, but at the moment, I will cave into my insecurities.

But I never did come back to it. My final notes:

Being able to animate penis penetration is the boss level in this game. Being able to work with the erotic genre is primarily a mental obstacle (...). It takes time and will. Support is also vital because the feeling that one is doing something wrong is overwhelming.

Although I have played with the notion of shame and its effect on animated content creators during this test, it was the first time I experienced it in full scope and first-hand. It is an incredibly disturbing and unpleasant feeling.

Animation test #3 – Couple having sex II

My notes from the diary before starting the third experiment:

This is it. PORN animation test. I have to do it. Even if I will not show it to anybody.

For this experiment, I was determined to animate an explicit sex scene (see Figure 36). It was important for me for two reasons. First, to (finally) break the mental taboo that I had; second – to push me to animate scenes that most viewers would formally

consider to be porn²⁰ so that I would compare how it differs from erotic exercise in emotional and aesthetical aspects. It is important to note that this was supposed to be the only hard-core test that I planned to do (in my life).

In addition, it is essential to note that it took me roughly two weeks to prepare to start animating this test mentally. Once I started, these were the notes I wrote down:

*So, I'm doing it. F**k²¹ how weird it feels. (...) took me months of mental preparations [from the start of the research project] (...) I can't imagine how I would feel if I had to work on a project that includes gay sex – somehow, it is even more unsettling than just drawing animated explicit sex scenes.*

It would be an understatement to say that this creation of animated pornographic content was emotionally distressful. There were moments when emotional distress could be felt physically (such as a racing heart and high blood pressure). This test was the first time I could empirically conclude that it is one thing to study animated erotica (and pornography) and entirely another thing to produce it. I can firmly state that if not for this research (and the sort of protective aura that academia provides), I would never undertake to implement hard-core animated content.

From an aesthetical point of view, I employed insights gathered from the previous tests and used live-action references for timing purposes, but from the start, I was looking for ways to exaggerate the key poses and motion. Based on the insight gathered from the previous test, I was keen not forget to allow for the action to breathe. The notes reveal that I redid the animation a few times, intending to push exaggeration more.

With this animation test, I noticed one more interesting aspect regarding the animated movement in explicit sexual action – an incredible appeal of fluid motion. In the literature review, I address the superpower of 2D animation to emphasise aesthetically pleasing elements of the character and its movement, but my reflection from this animation test suggests that it is not an ability but a necessity. For erotic 2D

²⁰ It is important to note that in this context, the label 'pornography' is given only because of the explicit nature of animation, not because its sole purpose is to provide sexual arousal and be distributed, as most legal terms define the genre.

²¹ The irony that in my doctoral thesis that researches the portrayal of explicit sexual intercourse, the most common word used in the English language to verbally designate sexual intercourse is not lost on me – especially when this word already was presented in this thesis without censoring it.

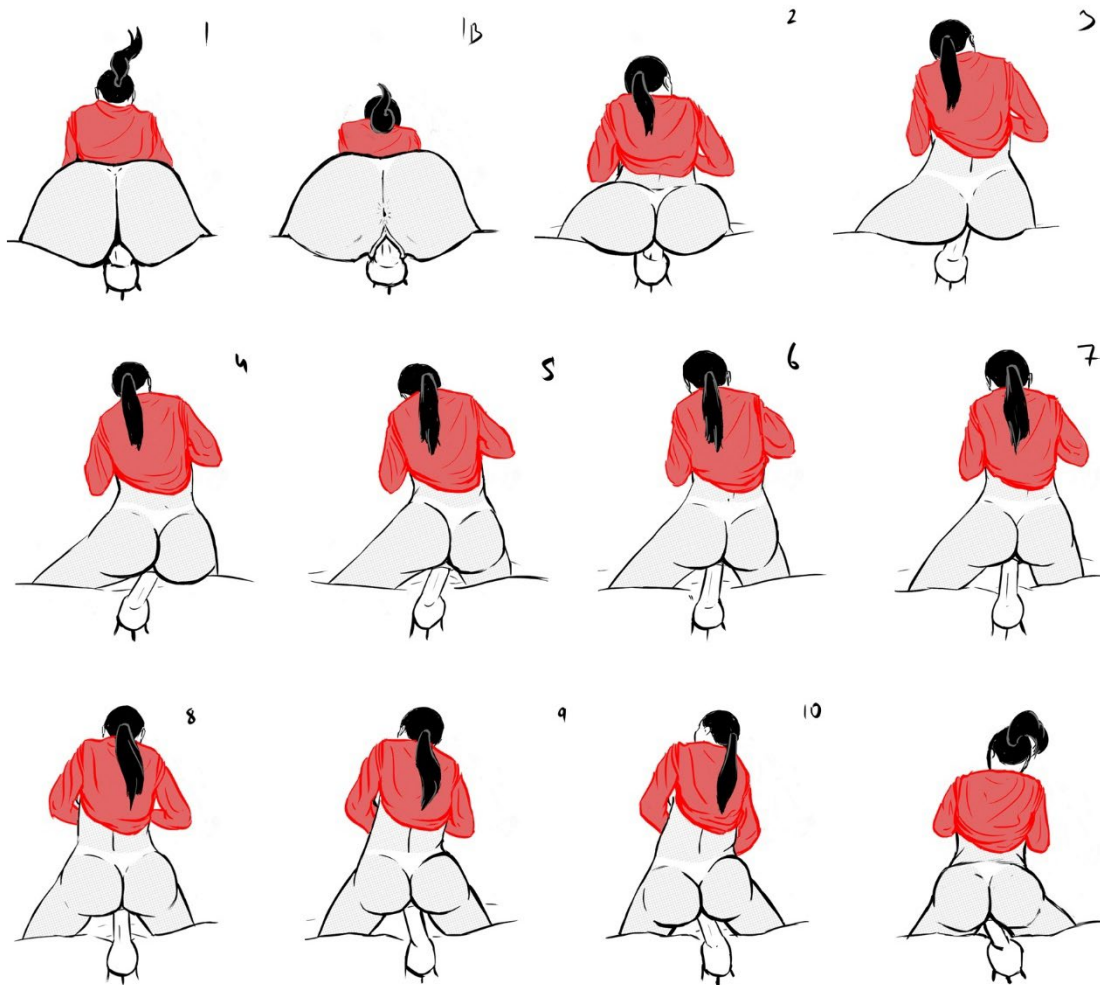


Figure 36. Animation test #3 – *Couple having sex II*. To create an attractive animated interpretation of a movement of a sexual act, it is necessary to exploit all the principles of animation.

animation to look pleasant for the viewer, it has to provide a near-perfect version of sexual intercourse. It seems that erotic animation cannot 'afford' to look too realistic and portray any noticeable imperfections in movement (see Figure 37).

This test provided me with another interesting, although purely accidental, insight. As I showed two of his male colleagues (at that moment) an extremely rough animation test, I was surprised that the first information they required was, 'is it a gay scene?' The confusion was understandable because, at that stage, the animation test portrayed a female character from the back and without any hair on the character's head as the author was still working on blocking. But it was intriguing to realise that to evaluate the sexual appeal of the animation, it is first necessary to know if it is in line with person's sexual orientation.

Even more intriguing feedback was given to me by a female colleague. The

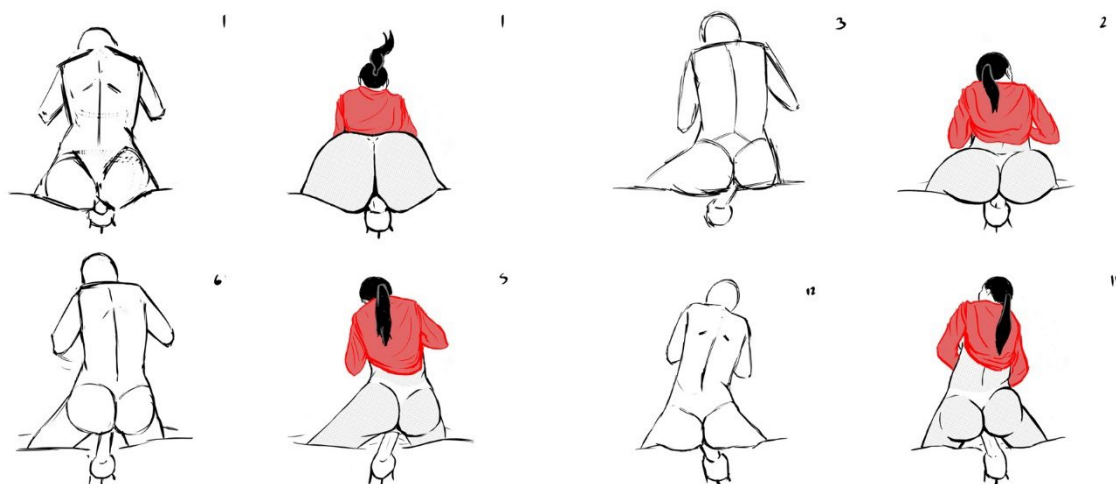


Figure 37. Animation test #3 – *Couple having sex II*. The images on the left are blocking based on live-action references, and on the right – images adapted to display more aesthetically pleasing shapes.

female colleague expressed that she liked the animation because it looked dynamic, and the character looked like they were ‘having fun’. However, to her, the animation did not look erotic because, as she pointed out, as a heterosexual female, she most likely is not the target audience. Interestingly, she added that viewing this animation did not invoke the feeling of embarrassment that some hard-core for male pornography does. When asked to describe the feeling, she replied, ‘f**k how uncomfortable that looks, and it is obvious that none of the females would ever have any pleasure from this sexual act/position’. She concluded that in the end, the animation gives the feeling that the portrayed sexual activity is ‘wholesome’.

This feedback suggests that there are aspects of animated sexual intercourse that are fundamentally different between the sexes. It is necessary to consider that different sexes can evaluate sexual positions differently according to the comfort and pleasure provided. However, a separate study with a different methodology is needed to identify these differences.

Finally, it becomes evident that the story plays a vital role to invoke sexual arousal from the audience. Unfortunately, one-shot animation clips have extremely limited possibilities in this capacity, so future research should aim to increase the animation scale to test some of the hypotheses raised in this study. However, it is evident that acting plays a critical role in this genre. There is a great need for the audience to believe that the characters in animation experience genuine sexual (or sexually related) pleasure. Fortunately, the 2D style provides animators with extremely

potent visual storytelling tools to emphasise communication through acting.

Animation test #4 – Seduction

My first aesthetic goal for this animation was trying to capture the sexuality of the female body movement. This test aimed to make animated characters act in a way that would be perceived as playful, sexual, and arousing. Another goal was to test the hypothesis that, eventually, the production of erotic content would become mentally and emotionally easier.

For this test, I decided to animate a female character flashing her breasts from under a sweater (see Figure 38). The rationale for this narrative was that I wanted the story to include a few elements: (i) the female character has agency, (ii) there is some sort of anticipation, and (iii) the animation is not cyclical (there is a beginning, middle and resolution of the story). An important part of this test was invoking erotic feelings without showing sexual intercourse.

As with the other tests, I started with live-action reference analysis. However, this time it differed from the previous ones because the author needed over twenty different samples. This was because I was looking for different aspects in this simple action – timing, the motion of falling breast, design and movement of a sweater, facial expressions, and body poses that would read flirtatious intent. It is worth noting that none of those references was used to be rotoscoped. However, as previous tests indicated, for any phenomenon to be successfully interpreted and stylised, it is first necessary to understand its ‘original’ form.

This animation test is much more complicated than previous experiments. However, at this point, my understanding of what works and what does not in 2D erotic content is much better, and I can analyse the content and formulate mini-hypotheses

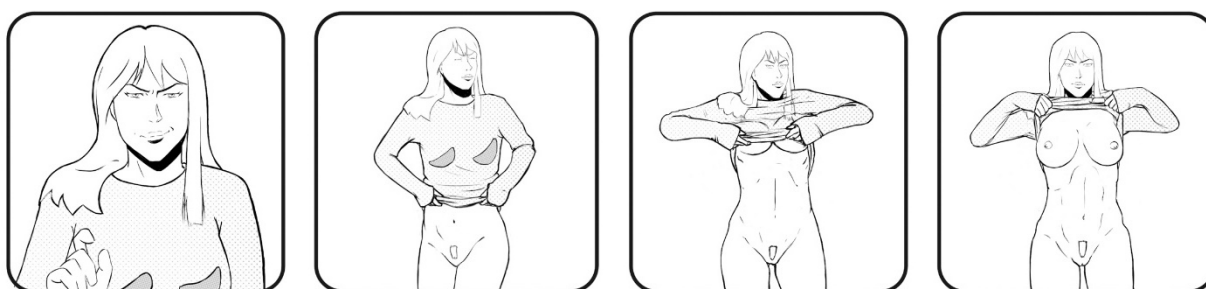


Figure 38. Animation test #4 – *Seduction*. This test sought to telegraph to the audience not only the short narrative taking in the animation, but also to convey certain character traits in the character.

much faster than at the start of the experiment. When the first rough pass of the animation test lacked something, I determined that there is a needed to slow down and push the exaggeration of the breast appearing and bouncing animation, and work with facial expression. The first part of the planned changes was needed to create the perfect visual, sexually titillating version of breast movement action that the male audience would want to see.

The second part was to telegraph the connection between the animated female character and the audience. I wanted to produce a non-verbal message that the character is inviting the viewer to this sexually playful seduction ritual. I wanted to communicate to the audience that this voyeuristic experience is consensual. What is arguably even more important for the experiment is that this feeling of consent can be given only by a living or unique person – an object or a thing cannot provide consent. I must create the illusion of personality in an animated character to achieve a set goal (see Figure 39).

On this count, it needs to be stated that while I believe that I somewhat succeeded with the goal, it is necessary to add that I would argue that the animation needs to be longer for the story to work. A couple of seconds of animated clip has strict limitations on how much it can communicate to the audience and, in turn, how an intimate connection can be made between the character and the viewer. I firmly believe that in this respect, the length of the animation plays an essential part.

I can firmly state that this time there weren't any feelings of distress. On the contrary, the feeling was starting to be close to the one I was experiencing while producing the walking cycle test; I was rejoicing that erotic animation had become just another creative task – just a riddle to be solved. However, just before finishing the exercise, I accidentally learned that Lithuania is one of the few European countries still criminalising pornographic content (the law does not allow it to be produced and distributed). This fact highly disturbed my mental constitution, and for a short time, I completely stopped the research to understand how to deal with this new (potentially illegal and criminal) situation.

Luckily, the university promised to provide legal assistance if law enforcement should be involved. In addition, consultation with Lithuanian lawyers allowed me to identify what aspects I should avoid while implementing empirical part of this doctoral research. Although, after a few weeks, I did manage to calm down, the fact that if my erotic art was perceived as pornographic, I would be facing up to two years in prison

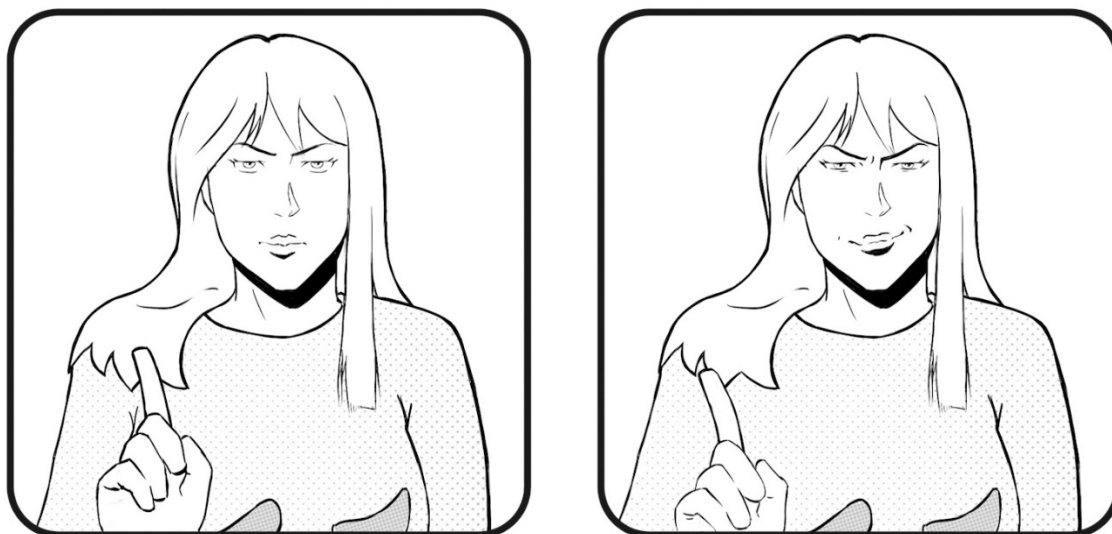


Figure 39. Animation test #4 – *Seduction*. To create the illusion that the cartoon character has a personality, it was decided to use facial expressions and try to portray a mischievous smile.

was highly unsettling. This situation potentially explains why (at least in my country of residence) animated erotica is such a stigmatic subject. This led me to begin extensive research to determine what is considered an erotic genre and how it can be legally separated from the pornography genre. If I want to pursue the option to use erotica in his personal animation projects, I need to possess all theoretical knowledge to defend myself and my creative choices.

Animation test #5 – *sci-fi sex scene*

At the start of my final animation test, I can confidently state that I am comfortable with the erotica genre. However, the fact that in my country of residence pornography is criminalised is lurking somewhere in the corner of my brain. I reckoned that it took over three months to eliminate the emotional distress while producing erotic/pornographic content, and another two months to completely accept this content as another creative task. But this situation is applicable only when I am animating alone, and not showing created content to others.

For the next animation experiment, I wanted to involve another animator to experience how this type of animation project would feel if I were required to give directions about portraying explicit erotic imagery to another creative specialist. However, the animator was also my colleague from the university, so he already knew that I was researching this topic. Therefore, I believe it did help to minimise any

emotional distress and, in turn, distort the goal of this exercise. It is very likely that if I aimed to hire someone with no previous knowledge of my doctoral research, it would evoke considerably more significant emotional distress or even anxiety.

I decided to animate one shot from the animated project *Champion* for the final test (see Figure 40). There were quite a few reasons for this choice. From an aesthetic point of view, I wanted to animate the most complicated shot anatomically. Also, I wanted a shot that was not cyclical like in the previous case, and aimed to tell a structural story with this animation shot. Lastly, I wanted to change the production process and use the CGI animation technique with the intent to rotoscope it later. The rationale for this is to test if I can successfully employ this time-saving production method and still be able to extract the wanted 2D aesthetic experience. I could incorporate additional animators into the experiment by including CGI elements in the production process.

The creative process was giving storyboards, script, character designs, and some general directions to fellow animator and then waiting for the blocking to be done before going to the animation process. The blocking was reasonably well executed but problematic once we started the animation process. In addition, there were severe challenges to communicating with the animator about what was wrong in the particular shot (how to fix it).

After going through the diary, I realised that the animator had the same problems as I did at the beginning of this research experiment. After a few weeks of somewhat



Figure 40. Animation test #5 – *sci-fi sex scene*. This was the most anatomically complicated animated test the author ever produced. Additional challenges in this test were created by the use of colour and shadows.

unsuccessful CGI tests, the animator finally grasped the mechanics of body movement involved during sex and started producing much better-quality animation. When animation shots started to be considerably better, I complimented him and ended the compliment with the observation that this could be a good portfolio piece. However, the animator almost instantly responded with mild shame and said: 'Yeah, a portfolio piece for producing porn'. So, although the animator is fully committed to the experiment, he still associates this work with pornography material and not erotic. Therefore, he believes the content should not be displayed publicly, even if the animated work can be presented as evidence of his skills and knowledge.

The results of this particular exercise supported the insight that the feeling of shame is strongly linked to the erotic genre. However, the experiment also showed that the main challenges of working with this genre were almost identical between the colleague animator and me. Arguably most importantly, it is significantly easier to achieve mental and animating skill breakthroughs with mentorship.

From an aesthetical point of view, the shot was severely complicated, and it took a painfully long time to get a few seconds of animation to look right (see Figure 41). However, the key challenges were at the polishing stage and not blocking like in previous experiments. This is a natural outcome, as I set a goal to create polished animation only for this test. However, this also suggests different aspects of aesthetics in 2D animation within the erotic genre. At this test stage, most insights were generated by working with the female character's face design and acting. For example, I changed the eye design from a highly stylised version to one usually found in Western-produced anime TV shows, and now the character has a very strong *female fatal* vibe. Just one design detail was altered, and the innocence is gone.

These changes in facial design came with a curious 'cost'. Although the female character herself now looks more unique and defined, it also made it much easier to spot any animation mistakes; additional polishing is needed to create aesthetically pleasing animated motion. This made me think of a relationship with the *uncanny valley* phenomenon – that even with a heavily stylised 2D approach, there is a curve that indicates that the more design details the animated character has, the better-quality movement the character must present.

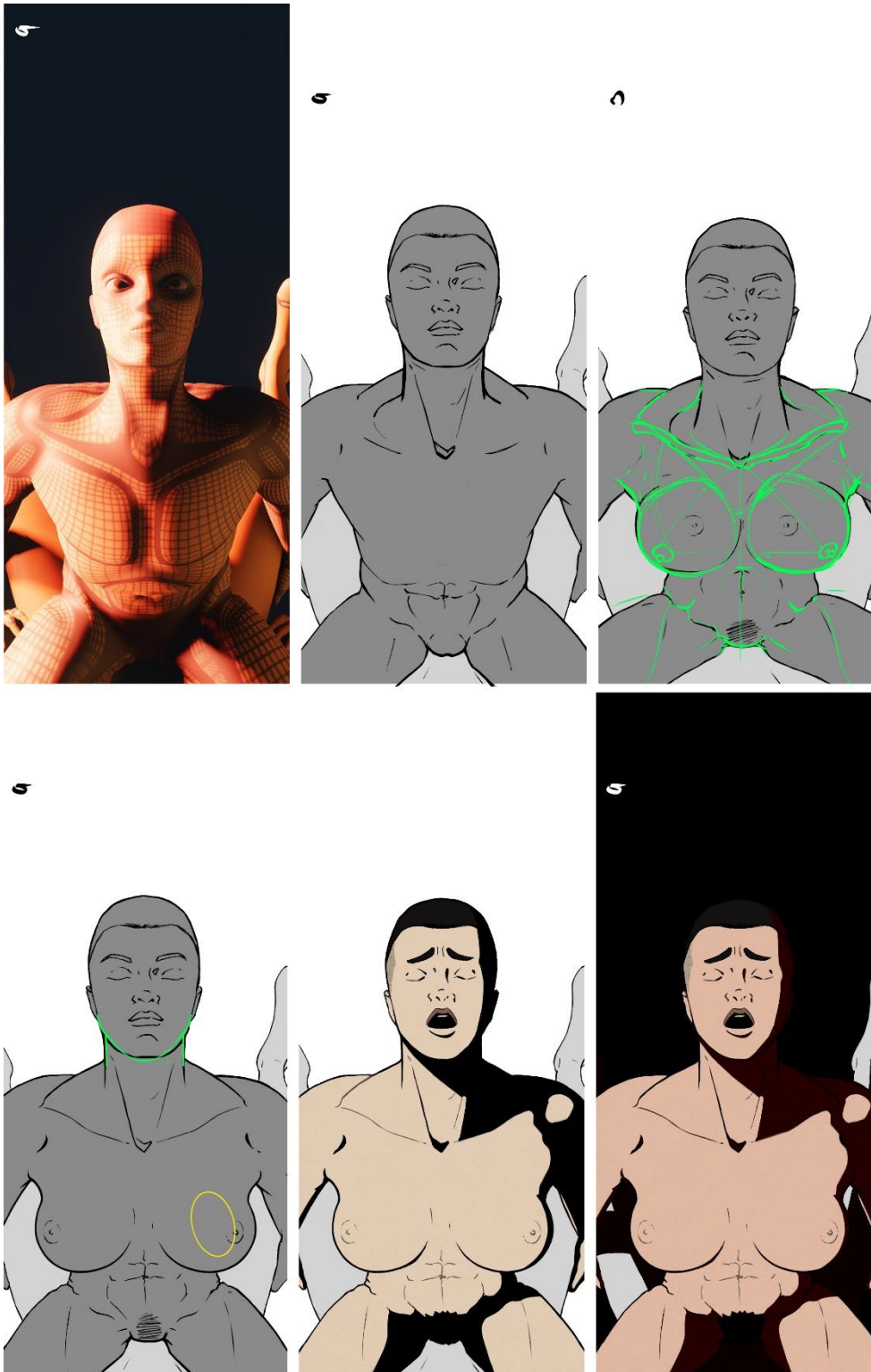


Figure 41. Animation test #5 – *sci-fi sex scene*. The progression of the shot. The top left is a CGI animation that was used as a jumping point for perspective and timing. All frames are presented tilted instead of horizontally, as they are shown in the final animation.

In addition, this particular shot provided me with an insight about anatomy and stylisation balanced for erotic shots. It is very important to get this balance just right. If

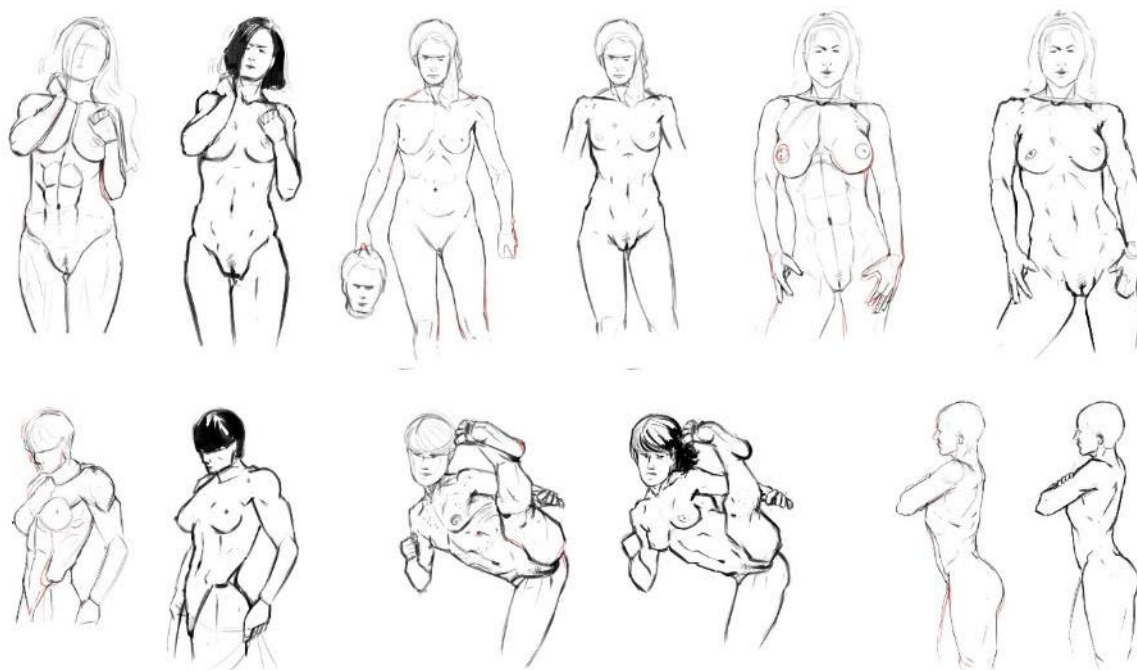


Figure 42. 2D style study. On the left is an anatomy study from a photo reference, and on the right is an attempt to find the most appealing presentation of muscles on a female body.

there are too few details that suggest to the audience how muscles move and how the human body is shaped, the feeling of believability is negatively affected. The audience witnesses just flat shapes moving, and the animated image gains a non-sexual feeling. However, if there are too many moving lines that are supposed to indicate muscles and body shape, the animated image becomes too visually disturbing and confusing, negatively affecting the possibility of creating sexual overtones to the scene. The 2D form must be clear in its form and intent to acquire the maximum appeal. The first clues that the 2D style cannot be overburdened with details were hinted at the very start of my doctoral research journey, while doing anatomy studies (see Figure 42).

This exact animated shot demanded a lot of experimentation to get the balance right because of its unusual angle. This created a challenge because (i) the angle of the shot presents the female character's naked body proportions in distortion (due to the perspective), (ii) flatness goes from the top of the shoulders to the hips, and (iii) there was no live-action reference of this angle that could help better understand how to present body motion. Without lines on the character that would suggest shape changes, the character would severely lose sexual appeal. In addition, because the very angle is not used often in cinematic content, it also means that the audience does not have prior knowledge that would allow them to understand quickly what is being

depicted.

6.1.5 Experimentation Outcomes and Gathered Insights

Autoethnography, as a qualitative research approach, is more concerned with finding answers to questions that seek to understand 'how is' and 'why is', rather than 'what is'. It is a methodology that seeks to interpret the researcher's personal experiences (and, often, occurred transformation triggered by the reflection process) to make sense of particular cultural or social phenomena. Aesthetics of animated explicit imagery is a cinematic experience that cannot happen in isolation from Western cultural and social context. Thus, while the conducted research demonstrates the claim that erotica is a genre that is exceptionally well suited to be told in animation form (even more so in 2D style), autoethnographic inquiry revealed that mastering this genre requires an entirely different mindset (see Figure 43). Furthermore, while the key strength of animation as artistic expression is the ability to create (and not record) the world, it is also the key challenge to telling immersive erotic genre stories. The animation medium requires that the animated content creator is not only able to present erotic nudity or sexual intercourse as a recognisable and believable activity, but in a form that creates meaning and experience that would not be achieved through live-action means. Therefore, for animators to master this genre requires time, patience, and experimentation, as skills and knowledge gathered with other genres do not transfer well to this one.

Each animated test that I completed allowed an understanding of how to better connect theory with practice. That led to how to employ 2D aesthetics to invoke sexual appeal in characters, present a story that had sexual overtones in character's acting, or create better than real animation motion to display sexually charged and harmonically rhythmic explicit action. Through the doctoral research, I could reflect on the practice and produce new ways of understanding how to express non-sexuality through an animated form and move into an organised approach for the new erotic artwork in my future. What is arguably even more important is that the I can now clearly express what I want from erotic projects and articulate to others how to approach them aesthetically.

It is important to address that the willingness to break the taboo shackles is insufficient to produce high-quality erotic content. My experiments indicate that research and practical experimentation are essential to grasp how to produce not only

aesthetical content but also content that would showcase the medium's strengths. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that animators who don't have any previous experience with the genre and want to create erotic animated content should set aside adequate time for experimentation. I now possess knowledge that in any future erotic animated projects, it is necessary to give the animators extra time to tame the genre so that they are able to achieve the aesthetic goals that have been set.

Last but not least, with this reflective practice I found pleasure in the aesthetic qualities of the erotic genre – a feeling that I was not familiar with it before the start of this doctoral journey. Therefore, it is safe to say that even after these doctoral studies are completed, I plan to continue this research journey to better understand how the animation medium can be applied to create unique aesthetic solutions to tell erotic narratives.

This research allowed me to discover aesthetic aspects of eroticism that I did not expect to exist. For example, a story's importance in invoking sexual arousal, or how animated content with sexual overtones has to be more significant and more ideal than real life to feel believable for the audience. Finally, the Western Judo-Christian moral value system can create fear of the genre that, in turn, can subconsciously push the animator for the most non-sexual presentation of erotic content.



Figure 43. Visual entry into the practice diary. This comic sketch was produced while working with *Animation test #4* to capture my new mental state – complete acceptance of the erotica genre.

6.2 Academy as a Shield to Research Erotica and Pornography

As presented in this thesis many times, modern adult animation is the fastest-growing segment in Western mainstream animation. That growth is multifaceted – the segment is growing in size, variety of genres, and overall content quality. Yet adult animation is also the least researched topic in the animation field. Among topics within adult animation phenomena, one topic stands out as especially under-researched – the subject of explicit nudity. There is one simple reason for that – the subject is particularly stigmatised.

This fear of touching sexually charged explicit nudity is not limited to researchers. Animators form the only group that fears animated nudity more than academia. Animated content creators today are fine with portraying profanity and extreme violence (narrative elements suitable only for adult audiences), but erotic imagery is still an unshakeable taboo. This is especially unfortunate if we compare animation with a live-action medium, where nudity and the presentation of sexual activity are the norms.

To provide some context – 66.8 per cent of all prime-time TV shows in the USA contained some form of sexual behaviour (Fisher et al., 2004). Studies on prime-time programming in the UK and Ireland show that the appearance of intercourse scenes on TV screens is considerably higher than in the USA (Millwood-Hargrave, 1992; MacKeogh, 2005). Finally, theatrical films are a couple of times more abundant with sexual content than the prime-time TV line-up (Hetsroni, 20007; Abramson & Mechanic, 1983; Greenberg, 1993). So, it can be argued that eroticism in live-action films and TV media is not shocking or startling. Quite the opposite – as Smith (2015) argues, sex and sexuality will remain key commodities for media producers.

The literature analysis performed indirectly indicates that it is challenging for animators to reorient and be able to create content for adult audiences. It could be because of the belief that content intended for children has a much higher chance of success, or because of self-doubt and disbelief that animators will be able to create content worthy of the attention of adult viewers. Whatever the reason, Evershed (2020) summarises his view on the global animation industry where ‘kids animation studios often not well suited to adult animation’. The literature review suggests that not only erotica genre is stigmatic to the animation creator, but also that conventional animators’ skills and knowledge are insufficient to create content for adult audiences.

The adult animation segment seems to require storytellers from other mediums to unleash its creative potential fully.

Although the theoretical overview allows us to identify the presence of shame regarding erotica among animation professionals, it is critical to note that it is impossible to determine exactly how strong the effect of shame is, and how difficult it is to overcome. Watching or reading (when doing academic research) about the production of erotic or pornographic content does not transfer the understanding of the strong taboos surrounding the erotic genre in the animation medium. Only by employing an autobiographical research approach was I able to experience first-hand how cultural programming and the Judeo-Christian moral value system can invoke distress in animators who set themselves the goal of creating animated erotic content. It is vital to address that my diary is full of entries that discomfort is not only emotional. During this study, I repeatedly experienced and recorded sudden increases in blood pressure, heart rate, sweating, and mild weakness. More than once, the overwhelming feeling that I experienced could be described as a panic attack.

Findings indicate how mentally, emotionally, and physically challenging it is for an animator from the Western cultural sphere to produce erotic content. It should be noted that in the context of this study, the fact that pornographic content is still criminalised in the country where the experiment was conducted created additional stress that probably would not have been caused by the study in another European country. However, the emotional stress was felt and long-lasting even before learning this fact.

On the other hand, this taboo can be broken, but it requires substantial time investment and a strong will. It is essential to address that although it was decided to implement (arguably) pornographic content in the context of this study, it does not mean that such a decision should be made by other animators. Quite the contrary, for animators to be able to break taboos it is quite enough just to produce soft-core erotic content animation. In addition, I do not foresee emotional discomfort returning while I continue to work with this genre.

Now, I would like to address this section's central idea (or rather observation) – how this new knowledge about the aesthetics of explicit imagery, the shame of the genre, and subconscious self-censorship would never be produced without the protective shield of academia (see Figure 44). It does not matter how strong the interest was in the subject, how motivated I was to include erotic elements in my



Figure 44. This realisation that I would never touch the topic of explicit sexual imagery without the protective shield of academia was evident from the very start of the research journey. Slide from confirmation presentation.

creative work, or even that I am already an experienced researcher. It is the doctoral studies that helped me to slowly, with mild fear and some mistrust, to approach this research topic.

It is worth additionally discussing the importance of doctoral studies for further development of this medium. At the moment, only doctoral-level studies provide a motivated person with the necessary timeframe, infrastructure, and guidance to ask the right questions and, in the process, acquire new knowledge. More importantly than that, doctoral studies provide a safe mental space to ask questions that are unnecessary, unimportant, uninteresting, or maybe even offensive to the outside world.

During my preparation for confirmation, two interesting things happened. First, at that time, I was already familiar with the self-censorship phenomenon and noticed that I presented the erotic genre and its aesthetic possibilities in the most sterile way. The second thing comes directly from the first – the I decided to create a storyboard panel that could illustrate one of the advantages of the 2D style when portraying an erotic scene (see Figure 45). I don't remember most of the details that happened during my confirmation presentation almost two years after that event. However, I vividly remember how, by sheer force of willpower, I made myself push my finger to bring up the slide with the aforementioned illustration, how I stopped breathing for a moment, and how my whole body was tensed. My heart started to beat faster, and the mouth became dry. In my diary, it was expressed that this decision 'feels like this is



Figure 45. The first erotic illustration-storyboard that I presented to other people at the formal and public event. Created by the author.

the craziest thing I am planning to do in all my professional career’.

Unfortunately, the feedback that I got after the confirmation meeting (regarding the illustration) was not particularly supportive. I was told that the erotic picture is on the borderline of pornographic material. I disagree with this statement, but as the literature analysis showed, the very separation of genres is highly subjective. Therefore, the remark itself is fair. In addition, the question was raised about the need for animated erotic stories in the first place. To put it in perspective, this would be the same as asking if live-action stories can be told without Western genre, tragic character arcs, or stories that shed a negative light on religion. All these questions can be answered yes, but the real question is – would the medium and the world become better for it? Therefore, this question, or rather a position, is fundamentally wrong because it comes from the conservative mental stand that the animation medium should be reserved for children. The very question is part of the problem of why animated eroticism is so linked with shame.

It is necessary to emphasise that I decided to mention this event because it was the only place where I felt safe to present my research’s practical applications. Because I was given the opportunity to present this explicit erotic artwork in this judgement-free experience (even though some of the confirmation board members did not fully agree with the purpose of the research), I was allowed to grow and (eventually) break free from these shackles of overwhelming fear. This is very important – in my opinion, as important as producing new knowledge about 2D

aesthetic opportunities with non-sexual imagery or erotic and pornographic genres. Without my doctoral studies as a shield, I would never have implemented this research.

6.3 The Conclusions of Chapter Six

Animated content creators have quite a few mental boundaries to break before animation medium reaches the creative potential that mainstream live-action medium has with the genre of erotica. Various sources indicate that the golden age of adult animation is within reach. However, self-censorship is a severe problem that prevents the medium from reaching its full creative potential. An experiment to identify the effect experienced by an animator trying to create erotic genre content showed that the feeling of shame has a powerful effect. This taboo affects not only the desire to create content in the erotic genre, but also the ability to analyse and create animated content. However, as experiments indicate, systemic practice can remove mental barriers. Findings suggest that the process necessary to overcome the discomfort that erotic content causes can be significantly accelerated with mentorship.

The image of explicit nudity is not created equal. In contrast to explicit images with sexual overtones, non-sexual nudity is fully accepted by the public, so animating non-sexual content (such as a walking cycle with a nude character) does not invoke any emotional discomfort. Therefore, there is a natural drive for animators to create explicit imagery as non-sexual as possible, even when the imagery is the portrayal of a sexual act. There is a strong subconscious motivation to avoid compositions that could be perceived as erotic or even pornographic, and reach for sterile and impotent portrayals. However, if the goal is to portray explicit imagery that needs to telegraph sexual passion and excitement, explicit nudity is not enough.

The story is an important part of the sexual appeal in erotic imagery. There are many elements that can help to create the story – from acting and staging to dialogue and title. The most important question when creating sexually charged explicit imagery is, ‘what sexual fantasy should the animated content portray?’ Arousal-wise, there is a considerable difference between content depicting a couple having sexual intercourse in various situations. These might include a public space, workplace, in front of others, between ex-partners, between a boss and their subordinate, in a historical setting, involving various sex toys, or having coitus while filming it. The

audience is excited about the fantasy of sexual intercourse, not the bareness of bodies.

Consent is an important part of the story involving the portrayal of sexual activities in audiovisual content. In previous chapters, the literature review conducted indicated that even if the story starts with one character sexually forcing themselves on another, the culmination of the sexual act must clearly telegraph that both characters succumb to sexual pleasure. Otherwise, the view could invoke discomfort or distress to the audience. Similar results were collected during animation tests – the character's sexual appeal increased significantly if her body language and facial expressions communicated that she was enjoying the activity and/or had complete agency over her actions. The audience believes that the animated character 'having fun' is an important communicative tool for creating an erotic atmosphere.

The aesthetics of motion of explicit sexual activity in 2D animation has to provide a near-perfect version of sexual intercourse. A more realistic depiction of motion in 2D animation looks unappealing and uninviting, as any noticeable imperfections in the passage of motion distract from the experience and break the immersion. To create the utmost appeal when portraying explicit sexual intercourse, animators must aim to produce fluid motions.

Findings from the experiments suggest that different sexes may perceive explicit sexual activity in animated content differently. This outcome is likely due to deviating sexual experiences resulting from different physiologies; sexual positions portrayed in animated content can invoke different associations in terms of sexual pleasure and comfort. Therefore, animated erotic content creators should always take into account how different sexes would read the presentation of sexual activity on the screen.

It is critical to state that research conducted during this doctoral journey would likely never have happened if not for the shield and support of academia, so doctoral studies are an integral and inseparable part of the research itself. When researching something that is not only on the borderline of socially acceptable topics but also potentially criminal activity, more than skills and abilities are needed to formulate questions, choose methodology, interpolate patterns from findings, and construct arguments. An environment is needed where asking those questions is not only okay, but necessary. As this is ethnographic research, it is vital to address what crucial part doctoral-level studies played in the existence of this unfolding inquiry into the aesthetics of non-sexual imagery, erotica, and pornography in 2D animation.

7. FINAL CONCLUDING REMARKS

I started this doctoral thesis because I wanted to understand how the animation medium can be best used to tell mature stories for adult audiences. This drive to focus the research on the adult audience is based on the observation that animation has the creative potential to tell stories that can present not only incredible and aesthetically marvellous words. Not only that, but also highly complex visual messages that live-action format is incapable of some things without breaking the suspense of disbelief. Animation provides an opportunity to tell tragic stories in such a way that it would not be possible to tell with live-action actors because of the physical danger or emotional distress it could cause. Therefore, there are mature stories that the animation medium is better suited to tell than live action.

It is also possible to look at this statement differently. As Anderson (2023) notices, adults possess the critical thinking skills to interpret the metaphors and imagery that can only be used in animation. Animation is a creatively almost limitless art form that provides a unique way to produce mature and complex experiences for the audience, as opposed to the animation segment for children, where most of the time, content creators have to severely limit its expressive possibilities, because the target audience has limited intellectual capacity and personal experience to extract meaning or evaluate the creative solutions used. The animation medium provides an opportunity to tell complex yet elegant stories better suited for adult audiences than for children.

As Evershed (2020) states, the adult animation segment still has a great many challenges that impair its growth. Furthermore, the literature analysis revealed that there are motivations to avoid mature themes in animated content, as it is perceived as more challenging, unpredictable, and economically risky even though the family-friendly and/or children segment is highly saturated. The lack of necessary skills and knowledge to produce mature animated content, quasi-taboos in animation industries, and the self-fulfilling prophecy that the children's market is a safer bet create an environment where projects that target adult audiences are much less appealing.

Thus, by choosing to connect my life with the animation medium professionally, I am not satisfied with the idea that my creative potential may be constrained. I find this binary situation where I have to choose between working in an animated children's segment or undergoing a retraining process to be able to work in a live-action medium

unacceptable. Of course, it is vital to state that I understand that having a PhD will not magically change the situation regarding the animated adult segment. However, for me, the most important element of this doctoral research is to gain new knowledge and be able to clearly communicate it to others to create the best possible chances to achieve professional dreams.

Finally, even though I had a great passion for this research, I was unprepared for where it would take me. The very choice to narrow the research focus from violence, death, and sex to only the latter was made very late in the research process. This is because I was genuinely afraid of the 'animated sex' topic, even though the evidence was loud and clear that I could produce much better results if the doctoral research focused on the most under-researched topic. Yet this rational approach to the situation does very little when the emotions of fear and shame are embedded at a person's core. Therefore, I am delighted that my doctoral research was able not only to produce new knowledge regarding the 2D aesthetics of explicit sexual imagery, but also to reveal how difficult it is to break a quasi-taboo on this subject. It empirically proves that it is possible to break through from shame and conquer the fear, as opposed to the idea that only a special breed of animators can work with explicit sexual imagery. I believe that the latter aspect is no less important than the knowledge and skill of aesthetically approaching explicit erotic or pornographic imagery. In some respects, it is even more important.

7.1 Challenges and Opportunities of the 2D Aesthetics When Portraying Explicit Imagery

In this doctoral thesis, I set out to answer several research questions to name exactly what challenges and opportunities animated content creators face when they seek to employ explicit nudity and sexual intercourse to tell mature cinematic stories. As it was stated through the thesis, to answer this question a multifaceted study is necessary to identify various factors that can influence animated content creators who want to portray explicit animated content. In this section, I will present concise answers to all the questions raised in this research, and brief but comprehensive reports on what new knowledge was created during this research journey.

The first sub-question aims to clearly define what adult animation is. The necessity to answer this sub-question rests on the fact that most countries in the world

reserve the right to consume various entertainment forms that include explicit nudity only to legal adults²². In addition, the term *adult animation* only relatively recently started to be used to identify mature animated content rather than pornographic material. To investigate how explicit nudity can be employed by animation content creators to tell mature stories, there is a precondition to understand what adult animation is and what is expected from this segment.

The literature review revealed that today, the adult animation segment includes any animated content that is created specifically for mature audiences. As is the case with a live-action format, this segment encompasses vast variety of genres and narrative themes. However, while the target audience of this segment are mature viewers, it does not necessary mean that children are automatically forbidden to consume this type of entertainment. This is a case only if the animated content targeted specifically for adults includes visual or auditorial content, themes, or activities, that could in any shape or form disturb children's mental development. While it is very likely that animated content that identifies mature viewers as its target audience will be unsuitable for young viewers, legal adult status is not a requirement for the contents of this segment.

This leads to another important aspect of the first sub-question – what is expected from the content of this segment? In this regard, the answer is not so simple and easy to formulate. First, this animation segment must offer an aesthetic experience that cannot be produced with a live-action format; audiences also prefer it when the chosen animation style compliments the story.

Second, adult animation content across different genres, styles, and narrative themes must deliver to its audience the feeling of wonder. The world, the conflict, and the characters must be larger-than-life to appeal to audiences. Simple, slow paced, and stories about everyday struggle have very little chance to attract and hold the attention of adult viewers.

Third, animation audiences in general have a very high level of tolerance regarding the suspense of disbelief. The creators of animated content for an adult audience have a unique opportunity to produce the most incredible spectacle without worrying that it can break the suspense of disbelief. Furthermore, this animation

²² As it was established in the thesis, there are some situations when minors could legally consume explicit imagery. However, this outcome is extremely rare and depends not only on cultural background but also on the time framework.

medium's superpower involves not only ability to visually hyperbolise various phenomena, but also to witness extreme displays of violence without being traumatised or repulsed by the image. The best adult animation content capitalises on this medium's superpower, to produce a cinematic experience that live action would have great difficulty in achieving. However, while the statement that the viewer of this segment wants experience that cannot be produced with live-action format is correct, it would be an oversight to believe that it is only the spectacle that makes adult animation content so appealing. I would argue that no less important is how the animated content creators approach the stories in this cinematic artform. To be more precise, it is animation medium's tendency to gravitate towards visual simplification to achieve maximum clarity and, in turn, to amplify the emotional standing of each shot.

The second research sub-question was formulated to identify the reasons why the adult animation segment can still be considered a new phenomenon in the market and why the adult animation is still heavily under-research. Investigation of various sources (such as interviews with creators, memoirs, industry reports, and censorship policy regulations) exposed that half a century of formal censorship still affects how the medium is perceived by the casual consumer. The misconception that animation is a genre suitable explicitly for children affects many business aspects of adult animation content creation. From mainstream animated project development and funding to distribution and consumption – at every step, there is a perceptible resistance towards the idea that mainstream animated content for adults can be commercially viable.

Investigations also revealed that because viewers still hold firm to the misconception that animation is best reserved for younger audiences, it indirectly supports ongoing self-censorship within the Western-based animation community. An important by-product of this cultural phenomenon is established insight that animators are actively distancing themselves from professional work that would lead to acquiring the skills and knowledge needed to tell mature stories. The empirical part of this doctoral research confirmed that traditional animation skills and knowledge are insufficient to animate shots that portray explicit nudity (especially with erotic overtones). There is also the fact that there is a strong culturally based force field that repels animators from approaching the overall topic of explicit nudity.

The third research sub-question was formulated to explore how animation artform can approach adult content through aesthetics. The literature review revealed

that while animation works are often analysed through visual execution lenses, it is, however, rare that aesthetical concepts such as *uncanny*, *sublime*, *sensation*, *beauty*, and *taste* would be employed for given analysis. While it can be argued that aesthetics is a very important part of the medium, the concept itself has very loose relationship with the philosophical study of beauty and taste.

More focused explorations on how different adult animation sub-segments approach mature content allowed an identification of what are the animation medium's strengths when telling stories for adult audiences. While different sub-segments have to address distinct target audience's expectations from the animated content, evidence suggests that the key unifying element regarding aesthetics is the ability to provide the audience with excitement and wonder – pleasant aesthetical experience is very important for the audience.

This experience is extracted via such animation design and execution elements as character and background proportion, shape and function, the uncanny valley, colour, acting, movement, and composition. However, the most important aesthetic aspects would be analytical distance, amplification through simplification, and appeal through exaggeration. Finally, this exploration into different adult animation sub-segments produced knowledge that allowed better understanding of the adult animation phenomenon itself.

The fourth research sub-question was formulated to identify mental and professional challenges when the aim is to produce explicit animated content. To answer this question, empirical experimentation was employed. Findings revealed that for Western animators to be able to create explicit content, the right mindset is necessary. However, to acquire it needs time, will, and, in perfect conditions, mentorship.

The final research sub-question was formulated to identify arguments why animation needs to be able to portray explicit nudity and sexual intercourse. The answer to this question was important not only for the research itself, but also to vindicate the need for this type of research. The short answer is that without this right, animators don't have ability to express themselves fully and in turn, are forced to adopt self-censorship or embrace creative compromises. When an art form is constrained by artificial limitations it can only survive, and cannot evolve.

The answers from these five sub-questions create the conditions to answer the main research question – *What are the challenges and opportunities of the 2D*

aesthetics when portraying explicit nudity and sexual intercourse? This doctoral research revealed that when it comes to explicit imagery, the animation artform provides a significant aesthetical advantage over a live-action format. Diverse artistic styles, visual symbolism, appeal, and a higher tolerance for suspension of disbelief are just a few cinematic tools that can be employed to create unique aesthetical experience for mature audiences. However, to create animated content that employs explicit nudity to tell mature stories, it is necessary to overcome major internal (shame) and external (funding, production, and distribution) challenges. These challenges are surmountable – but their significance cannot be underestimated.

7.2 Further Research

There is a considerable knowledge gap regarding the adult animation segment today, even more regarding aesthetics and representation of explicit nudity. A practice-based approach that heavily draws data from personal reflection from the creative process is best suited to answer the research questions presented in this doctoral research. This approach was suitable for getting acquainted with the phenomenon itself and gaining knowledge and skills on how to implement non-sexual, erotic, or pornographic explicit imagery. However, there is much more to this phenomenon, so it cannot be claimed that the knowledge gap is closed.

First, there is an opportunity to look separately into the aesthetic fulfilments of the genre of erotica and pornography in the animation medium and how those genres affect the viewer in comparison to the live-action medium. Even non-sexual animated imagery can be analysed from perspectives such as application in education, cultural representation, and audience emotional response to nakedness presented on screen. Indeed, many aspects touched on in this doctoral thesis can still be explored in more detail.

Another very promising research path is the relationship of ethics with both genres. This covers aspects from diversity to rejection of the male gaze approach. It would be particularly pertinent to identify how ethical pornographic content should be constructed narratively and aesthetically, when the strength of both genres is stylised and exaggerated aesthetics and heightened sensual experiences. In this regard, it is worth highlighting research on erotic and pornographic fantasies – what is the connection between the animation medium and the need of individuals to witness their

most secret and extraordinary sexual fantasies in a cinematic format? Are animated sexual fantasies more potent than the ones in illustration or photography format? The phenomenon of *pornographic art* is also a very intriguing concept that could result in truly unique animated stories and aesthetical solutions.

There are also extremely controversial research paths that not only require a sensitive approach and adherence to the highest ethical standards but also have the potential to both mentally exhaust the researcher and negatively impact their careers. Such examples include pornographic depictions of minors, and intercourse without consent. The necessity for these studies can be justified because the production and distribution of child erotica in the form of animation (and comics) are still legally allowed in Japan. This cultural tolerance towards animated (therefore non-existing) children's and women's sexual exploitation is based on a belief that, due to fictional and stylised form, it has 'little relationship to real-life children, instead existing as an exaggerated, cartoonish depiction of an infantile femininity' (Bartle, 2023). Furthermore, because no real child models or actors are involved, technically, no child abuse was committed to create explicit sexual imagery in such media as animation, comics, or video games. To state that Western and Japanese cultures take opposite sides in the debate, 'Is there a link between animated children's erotica and children's abuse?' would be a very mild assessment of the situation. However, in this serious debate, only one side can be right. The answer to the question of whether or not crimes against children occur because of stylised artistic expression with erotic content can make a big difference in the real world.

Finally, this doctoral thesis focuses only on 2D aesthetic applications in explicit non-sexual, erotic, and pornographic animated content. Other animation styles also deserve in-depth analysis to identify their respective strengths and challenges in both genres. Different styles can create visual symbolism and metaphor to convey erotic themes, emotions, and intentions. How can different styles be applied to communicate desire, lust, passion, sensation, intimacy, respect, tenderness, and love? How can animation reveal more to the audience about animated characters' sexual lives than live action could? The answers to these questions can significantly expand the understanding of how animation media can be used to tell mature stories.

Appendix:

1. Ethics Approval:

UCA Research Ethics Code of Practice was followed, and ethical considerations around informed consent of participants observed.

2. Films referenced

- 25 April*. (2015). Pooley, L. New Zealand: General Film Corporation.
- A Minor Genocide*. (2018). Koryncka-Gruz, G. Poland: Eureka Studio.
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