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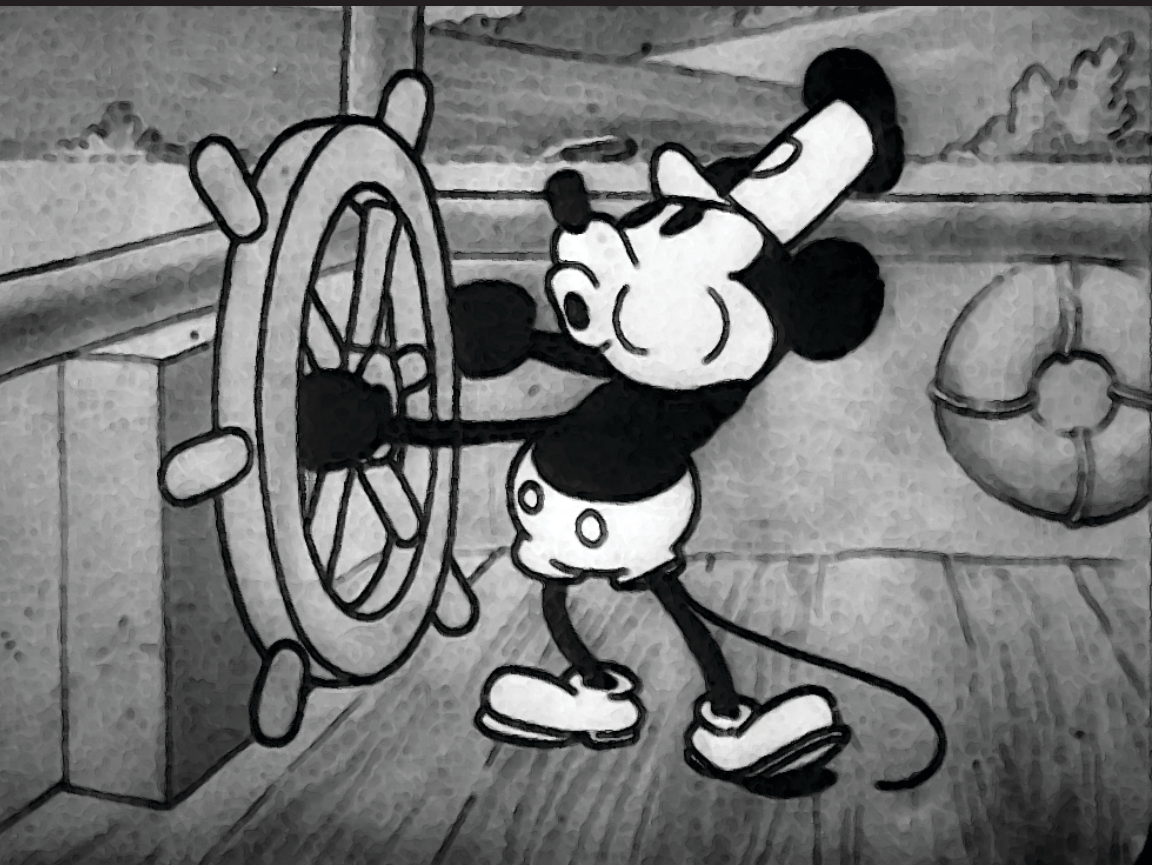
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What's Up, Doc? The Underfunded Artist

Illy Gomez Del Campo Rojas



My dad would watch television with me when I was a kid, which meant we would watch shows he liked but

were appropriate enough for me. It's why I can vividly remember sitting in my dad's office as he worked, watching old MTV

tapings on repeat or *The Muppet Show*. He loved cartoons, so he made me love them too. *Looney Tunes*, *Top Cat*, *Fraidy Cat* (a lot of cats), *Here Comes the Grump*, *The Smurfs*—the list goes on. When I moved to the United States I watched new channels, like Cartoon Network and Boomerang. From there, I got into *The Amazing World of Gumball*, *Steven Universe*, and *Teen Titans Go!* As I got older, I got into *Arcane*; *Love, Death & Robots*; and *The Legend of Vox Machina*. I watched live-action media too, but animation has followed me my whole life. It's what I watched while I played with water paints back then and what I watch when I've had a busy day in uni now. Nothing looks fake in animation because it's all already fake; Wile. E Coyote running in the air and suddenly falling will always look hilarious because it can't age—it just loses its linework.

I can't help but think of a phrase that has been making the rounds online, one that even Guillermo del Toro referenced upon winning an Oscar for his version of *Pinocchio*: "Animation is not a genre, and animation is ready to be taken to the next step. We are all ready for it." This call to action has been especially necessary these past few years as the industry has come under attack, isolated as a feature for children or an immature medium maintained by and made for immature adults. This belief has allowed for the industry's poor treatment, and it may be why many companies and institutions allow the public to continue to ignore this innovative art form.

One way in which animation has been disallowed from being properly recognized is through the Oscars. It has historically been the most important award ceremony for cin-

ema, yet its structure is highly restrictive and discriminatory. An article by Melody Rivera for *The Recorder* points out that since the Oscars debuted in 1929, only three animated movies (*Beauty and the Beast*, *Toy Story 3*, and *Up*) have been nominated for Best Picture, and none of them won (Rivera). And while DreamWorks won the first ever Oscar for Best Animated Feature in 2002 with *Shrek*, Disney has won fifteen times since—that is, Pixar won eleven Oscars and Walt Disney Studios won four. The two studios combined have been nominated thirty times, and both studios have had multiple movies nominated for Best Animated Feature in the same year at least four times, compared with one each by DreamWorks, in 2011, and Netflix, in 2022.

Disney's large influence has prevented other institutions from being recognized at the Oscars; in the past twenty years, DreamWorks has won Best Animated Feature twice, and five other companies have only won once. That's exactly seven times that Disney has been defeated in this category, and only two of those awards were for companies outside the U.S.: Studio Ghibli (for *Spirited Away*) and Aardman Animations (for *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*). Aside from the near-monopolistic hold Disney has on this category, it's extremely difficult for adult animation to be acknowledged at all at the Oscars and even harder for animation studios outside the U.S. And if a studio whose target audience is composed of children and nostalgic adults keeps bagging this award like it's a walk in the park, the general public will continue to associate animation not only with Disney but also with simplicity—because let's be honest, besides the

Stockholm syndrome discussion sparked by *Beauty and the Beast*, there doesn't tend to be a lot of depth behind these films. And while there was a time when Disney frantically tried to spew out serious films such as *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* to win a nomination for Best Picture, their schemes ultimately went worse than Elmer Fudd trying to catch a rabbit (Vilas-Boas). The Oscars' failure to recognize any other institutions and Disney's obstruction of recognition for other studios prevents the industry from being acknowledged as the powerful art medium it is.

Power and influence are not the only factors preventing this industry from thriving with Western audiences. Money is another. Seeing companies start to bet on the safe calls and preferring profit over originality makes it feel as if an ACME bomb went off in the animation industry. Slowly, more and more companies focus on reboots or live-action remakes because of their success at the box office. We can see how this new initiative affects all forms of cinema, but it's glaringly obvious with animation, even on a television/streaming level. Cartoon Network recently gained a new CEO named David Zaslav through its merger with Warner Bros. Studio, a development that immediately led fans to protest online. And while Zaslav's employment doesn't mean Cartoon Network will cease to exist as many claimed on Twitter, the channel is in danger of facing disaster similar to that of Disney's poorly executed *Lion King* remake. In terms of content, Zaslav has been known to prefer following modern trends, specifically regarding reboots. As he shows no signs of changing his leadership methods, it's safe to assume he will bring his

profit-oriented ideals to his new post as Cartoon Network's CEO (Bajer). Since Zaslav's employment, Warner Bros. Discovery has laid off hundreds of workers, but it has also doubled the number of stock awards Zaslav is eligible for, such that he ranks among the highest-paid corporate chieftains in America. Additionally, in a regulatory filing regarding \$27 million set aside for employee bonuses in early March 2023, half of these earnings were saved for corporate executives alone (James). Meanwhile, Netflix is notorious for canceling shows, but none have fallen prey to these decisions more than animated original works, which usually don't even get to reach their final stages before Netflix cancels them. Productions such as *Bone* (based on the comic series of the same name), *Boons and Curses*, *Toils and Troubles*, and *The Twits* are examples of animated projects that were canceled mid-production (Leston). When drastic company decisions like those being executed by the likes of Netflix and Warner Bros. are made, animation is the first to face the consequences of budget cuts. Hundreds of animators in multiple institutions are being laid off, and their passion projects are being eliminated with them. This issue has gone largely ignored due to the lack of recognition this field receives.

On January 8, of 2023, Shion Takeuchi, the creator of the show *Inside Job*, released a statement revealing the cancellation of the show's second season: "I'm heartbroken to confirm that Netflix has decided to cancel season 2 of *Inside Job*. Over the years, these characters have become real people to me, and I am devastated not to be able to watch them grow up" (Takeuchi). This news brought forth a wave of support for the

creator and anger toward the platform for canceling a show that had been ready to air. The following day, Takeuchi tweeted, “Also if anyone is looking for their next hire, I have a list of incredible, passionate, and talented writers and artists who are now looking for their next gig! Please reach out!” (Takeuchi). While this second tweet did not gain as much attention, it does show the real problems that come with undermining an entire industry—by the cancellation of this one show, not only has this creator’s artwork been halted, but an entire staffroom has become unemployed. Returning to Cartoon Network, as we see many shows being canceled and the CEO’s salary growing larger, thousands of creators are being pushed to the side and forgotten, mainly because their works weren’t able to be announced in the first place.

The disregard for animation is endangering artists’ jobs and limiting the amount of progress and impact the art form can make, not just with children but with adults as well. Many people fondly recall animated films; for people who grew up with a favorite animated show and maybe never watched the medium again, animation is a source of nostalgia that should be preserved. For people like me who fell in love with this art and don’t want to let it go, this medium is underappreciated and has so much potential. Of all the societal issues I could have written about, this might not have been the most important, but there are people with aspirations behind the works that I love that inspire me daily. It is important to support works of all kinds, whether animated series on YouTube or original works airing for the first time on streaming platforms, to make it evident

that we are eager to enjoy innovative and unique content. If this medium keeps being pushed into a box labeled “Just for Kids,” the industry will only continue to face disregard and abuse from higher-ups who know these actions will be overlooked. Remember that for every heartless remake spat out, there’s an original idea waiting on a blank page.

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