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# Can we please stop talking about the Simpsons?: Using Bob's Burgers and Hanna-Barbera to recenter conversations about television animation

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
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Thesis

**CAN WE PLEASE STOP TALKING ABOUT *THE SIMPSONS?*:  
USING *BOB'S BURGERS* AND HANNA-BARBERA TO RECENTER  
CONVERSATIONS ABOUT TELEVISION ANIMATION**

by

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B.F.A., Cazenovia College, 2019

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**HOLLY MARIE COOPER**

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the historical connecting threads between legacy and contemporary forms of television animation. I argue that *Bob's Burgers* has been neglected by animation studies due to its incomparability to the established fulcrum of television animation: *The Simpsons* (1989–). However, by analyzing *Bob's Burgers* through a historical lens that reaches beyond *The Simpsons*, we can begin to see what the field of animation studies has overlooked when it has dismissed animated texts that were not comparable to *The Simpsons*. This thesis will utilize *Bob's Burgers* as a primary case study and draws connecting threads between the series and Hanna-Barbera cartoons to make this argument.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Bob's Burgers* (2011–) follows Bob Belcher (H. Jon Benjamin), who operates the struggling burger shop from which the series receives its name. Bob has big dreams for his burger shop's culinary and financial success and often goes the extra mile to use quality ingredients to craft his unique-creations. Bob depends heavily-on his wife, Linda (John Roberts), and their children, Tina (Dan Mintz), Gene (Eugene Mirman), and Louise (Kristen Schaal), to keep the restaurant running (Bento Box Animation 2022). *Bob's Burgers* comes from the creative mind of Loren Bouchard. A man of many hats, Bouchard has worked in the animation industry as an animator, writer, producer, director, and composer. Before *Bob's Burgers*, Bouchard was involved in other notable animated series such as *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist* (CBS, 1995–2002) and *Home Movies* (UPN, 1999–2004) and worked as an executive producer-on HBO's *The Ricky Gervais Show* (2010–2012) which animated selections from the eponymous podcast (IMDB 2022). As of 2022, *Bob's Burgers* airs during Fox's Sunday “animation domination” block alongside season stalwarts such as *The Simpsons* (1989–) and newcomers such as *The Great North* (2021–), another animated comedy from the creators of *Bob's Burgers*. Since 2012, *Bob's Burgers* has garnered a slew of critical attention and award nominations. For example, throughout its run *Bob's Burgers* has received fifteen Annie-Award nominations. The Annie Awards are presented by The International Animated Film Society (ASIFA-Hollywood) to recognize excellence in cinematic and televised animation. *Bob's Burgers* has been nominated for Best General Audience Animated TV Production, Outstanding Achievement, Music in an Animated Television/Broadcast

Production, Outstanding Achievement, Voice Acting in an Animated Television/Broadcast Production, and Outstanding Achievement, Editorial in an Animated Television/Broadcast Production. *Bob's Burgers* has won five out of its fifteen nominations; its success speaks to its standing as a text of value within the animation industry (Annie Awards 2022). In addition to the critical acclaim that *Bob's Burgers* has received within the animation industry, the television industry has also critically recognized the series. The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences has-nominated *Bob's Burgers* for ten Prime Time Emmy awards for Outstanding Animated Program and Outstanding Voice-Over Character Performance (Television Academy 2022). Except for 2014 and 2017, *Bob's Burgers* has lost the award to its fellow nominees. The Annie Awards and the Emmys function as legitimizing factors within the respective industries and as symbols of approval from *Bob's Burgers*' industry peers.

Additionally, since 2011 *Bob's Burgers* has garnered attention from industry critics who have both praised and disparaged the series. For instance, in the same breath that he admonishes the series for its lack of witty comedy, *New York Times* critic Mike Hale states that *Bob's Burgers* is "...not another grating half-hour from the mind of Seth MacFarlane..." (Hale 2011). Like Hale, Sarah Rodman of *The Boston Globe* criticizes *Bob's Burgers* for its off-beat comedy that oscillates between enjoyable and annoying. However, Rodman later states that "there's something about *Bob's Burgers* that feels fresh" (Rodman 2011). However, some critics merely condemn the series for its perceived comedic and intellectual shortcomings. For instance, *The Washington Post's* Hank Stuever says *Bob's Burgers*' lackluster and tasteless humor merely solidifies *The*

*Simpsons* and *Family Guy* as what remains of “classic, intellectual television.” Stuever finishes his review by stating that “somewhere, once again, Fred Flintstone weeps” (Stuever 2011). Despite their initial reception, industry critics began to sing a different tune after *Bob’s Burgers* remained on the air. For instance, Ben Travers from *Indie Wire* argues that throughout its run *Bob’s Burgers* gradually earned critical respect for its resiliency. Later in his article, Travers states *Bob’s Burgers*’ success and longevity are a result of the Belchers’ likeability and genuine affection for one another (Travers 2020). Much like Travers, *Variety*’s Joe Otterson treats *Bob’s Burgers*’ 200<sup>th</sup> episode as a testament to the series’ longevity and appeal. He cites that *Bob’s Burgers*’ vehemently defensive fan following contributes to the series’ success (Otterson 2020). Fan engagement on social media sites such as Twitter, TikTok, and Tumblr, produces evidence of *Bob’s Burgers* fan following. For instance, on Twitter under #Bobsburgers, users post favorite screencaps, quotes, and words of affection for the series. Most of these tweets of affection merely state variations of “I love this show,” but they nonetheless articulate the fannish affection the series has accumulated throughout its duration. The devotion of *Bob’s Burgers*’ fans was highlighted in the series’ season eight premiere. In an article for *The Verge*, Kwane Opam states that while airing the series’ seventh season, the creators of *Bob’s Burgers* posted a call for submissions asking its fans to “remake *Bob’s Burgers* however you see fit” (Opam 2017). In the early spring of 2017 Fox set up a site entitled “Bob’s Fart,” asking fans to submit fan art to be animated for the season eight premiere. In terms of guidelines, *Bob’s Burgers* asked fans to submit fan art into one of three categories: title sequence animations, static background panels, and static

character panels. As long as fans remained within these guidelines, they were permitted to artistically explore and reconstruct *Bob's Burgers* any way they saw fit. According to Opam, other animated shows have embraced fan culture but none to the scale that *Bob's Burgers* had with their call for submissions (Opam 2017). *Bob's Burgers'* fans heard the call and the season eight premiere of *Bob's Burgers* was animated entirely with fan art from 62 individual artists, each with their own unique artistic voice. The collage of these artistic voices resulted in an episode still rooted in the witticisms of *Bob's Burgers* but was unique as the series itself.

Despite its popularity and critical success, *Bob's Burgers* has received little scholarly attention from the field of animation studies. I argue in this thesis that *Bob's Burgers* has been neglected by animation studies due to its incomparability to the established fulcrum of television animation: *The Simpsons* (1989–). According to Jared Bahir Browsh (2021), *The Simpsons* has monopolized what little academic attention television animation has received (16). Indeed, numerous journal articles and book chapters have analyzed *The Simpsons*. For instance, most of the chapters in the anthology *Primetime Animation: Television Animation in American Culture* use *The Simpsons* as a case study. Given *The Simpsons'* role in the resurrection of the primetime animated comedy on television, the scholarly fascination with the series is understandable. *The Simpsons* premiered in December 1989 on the young Fox network and soon became the first successful animated comedy to air during primetime since *The Flintstones*, which aired from 1960–1966 (Tueth 2003, 139). *The Simpsons'* early success inspired the networks to invest in numerous adult animated comedies, such as *Capitol Critters* (ABC,

1992), *Fish Police* (CBS, 1992), and *Family Dog* (CBS, 1993), few of which saw the same critical success as *The Simpsons* (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 2003, 79). *The Simpsons* became pivotal in animated television history because, after twenty-three years of devotion to the child demographic, the TV industry recognized the viability of animated programming that targeted adults. Maureen Furniss (2016) speaks to *The Simpsons'* role in helping television animation exit Saturday morning exile, stating that *The Simpsons* were willing to double down on edgy and controversial programming that changed the course of animation history (354). The scholarly attention *The Simpsons* has received since it first aired in 1989 validates Furniss' assessment. Due to its success, *The Simpsons* has been privileged by scholars and critics alike as the basis of historical comparison for all other contemporary forms of primetime animation.

For instance, to approach *Family Guy* as animated magical realism, Alison Crawford uses *The Simpsons* as the yardstick for "realism" against which the "magic" of *Family Guy* is measured (2009, 51). Similarly, Ethan Thompson's article on the satirical comedy of *King of the Hill* uses *The Simpsons'* satirical humor as a basis for comparison (2009, 44). When scholars continually situate *The Simpsons* as a benchmark for all other forms of contemporary primetime animation, a portion of animation history that predates *The Simpsons* vanishes from scholarly conversation. For instance, Hanna-Barbera is a crucial fixture of not only animation history but television history as well. However, despite its prolific contributions, much of the scholarship devoted to Hanna-Barbera has been limited to charting the studio's history rather than analyzing the cartoons to understand both historical and contemporary forms of animation. Along with the

diminution or erasure of Hanna-Barbera's contributions to animated form comes the scholarly dismissal of animated texts, such as *Bob's Burgers*, that are not directly comparable with *The Simpsons*.

Consequently, scholars outside the realm of animation studies have produced most of the scholarship concerning *Bob's Burgers*. Browsh refers to these scholars as “disciplinary tourists” (2021, 6). For instance, Shelby Smith (2018) is a sociology scholar whose research discusses how *Bob's Burgers* presents a reconstructed version of the working-class family that is more compatible with contemporary social norms. To make their case, Smith shows how the Belchers push back against the expectations of the stereotypical working-class sitcom to articulate the importance of healthy family dynamics (7). Much like Smith, Meg Tully (2018), through a critical cultural studies lens, approaches how Tina, Bob, and Linda's eldest, has been adopted as a contemporary feminist icon (194). While Tully is approaching their research with a background in media studies, once again, they are similarly treating *Bob's Burgers* strictly as a cultural text rather than an animated text. Contributing to this small body of work, Margaret France will release *The Genius of Bob's Burgers: Comedy, Culture, and Onion-Tended Consequences* in May 2022. France, whose background is in English, approaches *Bob's Burgers* from a cultural perspective and will pay attention to how the series explores gender and sexuality, as well as fan culture (Mcfarland 2022). While this does not disqualify her from discussing *Bob's Burgers* as a culturally significant television text, it supports the point that *Bob's Burgers* has accumulated much of its scholarly attention from outside animation studies.

According to Browsh, while the scholarship produced by “disciplinary tourists” is valuable it lacks the historical or contextual specificity that the discipline of animated studies can provide (Browsh 2021, 6–7). This thesis does not seek to discredit the scholarship produced by these “disciplinary tourists.” Nor does it seek to dismiss the attention that scholars have paid *The Simpsons*. However, to be approached as an animated text, *Bob's Burgers* must be considered valuable to the field of animation studies itself. David Perlmutter has conducted what little research there has been concerning *Bob's Burgers* as an animated text. Perlmutter's research on *Bob's Burgers* dismisses the series for its alleged failure to live up to the expectations set by *The Simpsons* (2014, 11). Although Perlmutter's consideration for *Bob's Burgers* is minimal at best, it helps explain why the field of animation studies has dismissed *Bob's Burgers*: it cannot be reconciled alongside *The Simpsons*. In other words, scholars will always find *Bob's Burgers* lacking compared to *The Simpsons*.

I argue that *Bob's Burgers* would benefit from a historical perspective that privileges earlier forms of television animation. *Bob's Burgers* echoes legacy forms of broadcast television animation through its dialogic comedic soundscape, the embrace of the unreality of the limited television animation aesthetic, and its subdued sense of design. By analyzing *Bob's Burgers* through a historical lens that reaches beyond *The Simpsons*, we can begin to see what the field of animation studies has overlooked when it has dismissed other animated texts that were not comparable to *The Simpsons*. This thesis will utilize *Bob's Burgers* as a primary case study and draw connecting threads between the series and Hanna-Barbera cartoons to make this argument. Hanna-Barbera is acting as

the primary point of historical comparison because of its prolific contributions to television animation. Therefore, it is the ideal point of historical comparison that reaches beyond *The Simpsons*.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter one of this thesis discusses how *Bob's Burgers* applies good design practices that reverberate the design practices of legacy forms of broadcast television animation. This chapter draws upon graphic design principles rooted in line, shape, and color to define good design. Using graphic design as a lens to approach television animation is appropriate because, historically, television animation has drawn upon trends in graphic design to construct its visuals. For instance, both Sandler and Wells argue that legacy forms of broadcast television animation employed a graphic sense of design articulated by Hanna-Barbera's quirky expression of line, shape, and color. Hanna-Barbera's sense of design reflects the modernist graphic design trends of the 1950s (Wells 2003, Sandler 2019). Chapter one catalogs a brief history of graphic design principles to support the methods in which television animation has historically used a similar sense of design to occupy the space of television and to be valued as a commodifiable object. This thesis chapter draws connecting threads between Hanna-Barbera's and *Bob's Burgers*' expression of design to further articulate that the contemporary animated series echoes the practices of legacy forms of television animation

Chapter two of this thesis examines how television animation's limited aesthetic has contributed to its separation from reality. Jason Mittell (2003) states that much of animation studies have historically considered television animation intellectually and

culturally unimportant, often referring to the space of television as "a cartoon graveyard" (33). However, according to Paul Wells (2003) the scarcity of research on television animation is due to the perception that television animation's limited style equates to a reduction of artistry and is thus not worth scholarly attention. He states that animation studies scholars positioned limited animation as a "detriment of animation as an art form" (15). Limited animation is an economized form of animation developed and popularized by United Productions of America (UPA) in retaliation to the Disney aesthetic. While it initially occupied the cinematic space, limited animation was adapted for-television because it was cheap to produce and its minimal aesthetic proved compatible with the television screen (Furniss 2016, Sandler 2019, Solon Williams 2021). The negative connotations surrounding limited animation as an aesthetic have historically discouraged animation scholars from pursuing research interests intersecting with early forms of television animation. Browsh argues that the still-young field of animation studies has devoted most of its research towards studying feature-length fully animated films, such as those produced by Walt Disney Studios (2022, 2).

According to Furniss, the practice of full animation used by feature-length theatrical animation associated the form with traditions of cinematic realism. Disney's development of the multi-plane camera and personality animation created depth and mass that would serve as animated expressions of realism (Furniss 2016, 95–102). While theatrical animation was developing and perfecting its relationship to realism, Sandler argues that television animation, with its limited aesthetic, was moving away from depictions of animated realism. According to Sandler, as a direct consequence of

budgetary constraints, by the end of the 1950s, television animation embraced and perfected an economized animation technique referred to as limited animation (Sandler 2019, 76).

In contrast to full animation, limited animation uses extensive camera movements, standardized cycles of character movement, and limited ranges of character expression to create cartoons seeped in unreality. In doing so, limited animation became soundly divorced from the realism of full animation (Sandler 2019, 76). However, in recent years there have been efforts made by *The Simpsons* to position themselves as articulators of "cartoon realism" (Mittell 2001, 22). "Cartoon realism," a term coined by Jason Mittell, refers to television animation's expression of realism through the production of bodily fluids such as blood and vomit. Historically, *The Simpsons* have used cartoon realism to separate itself from its predecessors and to legitimize the series intellectually and culturally (Mittell 2001, 22–23). However, as this chapter discusses, the notion of cartoon realism comes into question when more prominent industry stakeholders and qualifiers of "good" taste are involved. Through this line of questioning, this chapter further argues that *Bob's Burgers'* application of limited animation aesthetics can be compared to that of legacy forms of animation. This thesis chapter positions *Bob's Burgers* as an animated text worth scholarly consideration when viewed through a historical lens predating *The Simpsons*.

Kevin Sandler (2019) states that in comparison to full animation, limited animation relied on sounds such as dialogue, music, or voice-over narration to communicate the essence of narrative and comedic clarity (76). Using stylistic analysis

and scholarship on television sound, the final chapter of this thesis explores how *Bob's Burgers* relies on sound to communicate narrative and comedic clarity in a way that calls back to legacy forms of television animation. Television is not the only medium that has influenced TV animation, however. Paul Wells (2003) states that in the early days of television, industry professionals considered television cartoons to be little more than illustrated radio that privileged dialogue over the visual (23). In addition, Patrick Sullivan (2021) states that Hanna-Barbera was characterized by its popularization of a highly graphic limited cel-animation bountiful with witty dialogue and sound effects (22). To better explore television animation's legacy of relying upon sound over the visual, this thesis chapter also charts the connecting thread-between the techniques utilized by broadcast radio and early forms of television animation. Specifically, chapter three concerns itself with unpacking how *Bob's Burgers* echoes the broadcast traditions of comedic linguistic signifiers and linguistic slapstick. In addition, this chapter briefly analyzes how *Bob's Burgers* has used Gene Belcher as a vehicle to articulate television animation's roots in sound effects.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “Wow, the Red Pairs Nicely with the White:”

#### Applications of Good Design in *Bob's Burgers*

Historically, *Bob's Burgers* has been criticized for its unappealing design relative to full animation and the 90s animated sitcoms that came before it. For instance, David Perlmutter states, "although the show has acquired a following, some defenders, and an Emmy nomination, it's hard to see why. The characters are drawn in a crude, blocky and unattractive style...and have none of the saving grace of the characters of Groening, Judge, and McFarland" (2014, 311). Perlmutter's criticism echoes that of other industry critics and scholars, who have had trouble reconciling the design of *Bob's Burgers* alongside that of *The Simpsons*. However, as other portions of this thesis will address, using *The Simpsons* as a primary point of historical and contemporary comparison diminishes the analytical conversations critics and scholars can have about contemporary television animation. The area of design is no different. While there are no clear design parallels between *Bob's Burgers* and *The Simpsons*, *Bob's Burgers'* expression of good design through their articulations of line, shape, and color connects them to legacy forms of television animation.

#### Good Design Defined

Unlike fine art, design is not necessarily subjective. For designs to be categorized as good, some principles must be followed, even during periods of experimentation. Much of this has to do with the functionality of design itself. The function of design is to market a product that takes the shape of either a material good or an abstract concept

(think of the pamphlets used to market the beliefs of political candidates). The commercial function of design contrasts with fine art, whose production is rooted in psychoanalytical constructs of meaning and abstract perceptions of beauty. Cinematic full animation, which is more traditionally artistic, and limited television animation, which developed on an advertiser-supported medium, represent the dichotomy between artistry and commercialism. The principles of design are rigid because they must function within a competitive marketplace. For corporate entities, there is an ever-present fear of constructing ineffective visuals that compromise the marketability of commodifiable goods.

Good design is based on line, shape, and color collaboration. The field of graphic design defines a line as a pathway between two points. A line can be straight, curved, thick, thin, horizontal, and vertical (Dabner et al. 2009, 36). An expression of line has the power to communicate different ideas. For instance, straight and thick lines articulate an essence of stability and uniformity, whereas thin and shaky lines communicate instability and unpredictability. Based on their directional orientation, lines imply motion, momentum, and upward or downward movement (Dabner et al. 2009, 36). For example, vertical lines imply upward or downward mobility, while horizontal lines imply the visual boundary between the sky and land or water. Shapes are created where lines intersect (Dabner et al. 2009, 35). Much like lines, these shapes range in their implications. Due to their symmetrical curvature, circles communicate unity. In comparison, rectangles communicate order and rigidity. The convergence of lines that do not manifest into recognizable shapes are organic in their expression, communicating a

sense of naturalism. A shape is experienced based upon its orientation to the space it occupies and the other shapes around it (Dabner et al. 2009, 38). For instance, picture a piece of paper, and on that paper is a circle and a smaller triangle. To comprehend the size difference between the two shapes, the circle and the triangle must be experienced together within the same space. This experience of shape is called the figure-ground relationship. The "figure" is referential to any object within a given space and the "ground" is the background or the space in which the object is being observed. Based on this principle, David Dabner et al. states, "visual elements are always seen in relation to a visual field, background, or frame...every form is seen in context and cannot be totally isolated..." (2009, 38). Good design considers this figure-ground relationship.

In addition to line and shape, good design is dependent on color. An acute understanding of color is essential to good design. When creating color palettes, a designer must consider contrast, harmony, introductory color psychology, and exhibition points. According to Dabner et al., color is differentiated by hue, tone, and saturation. Hue is the color's generic name (i.e., blue). Hues can range in tone from light (tint) to dark (shade) and also vary in "saturation" or chroma (intensity). Color can also be described by its "temperature" or "movement." For example, hues that fall in the red spectrum are warmer and closer to the viewer than hues that fall on the blue spectrum, which appear colder and further away. How colors are sorted dictates how they interact with each other (Dabner et al. 2009, 92). For instance, the colors yellow and purple sit across each other on the color wheel, making them complementary colors. Complementary colors are named not for their sameness but for their contrast.

Regarding yellow and purple, contrast is perceived in the division of temperature and movement; yellow is seen as warmer and closer, and purple is seen as colder and farther away. Although understanding how colors interact with each other is essential to good design, understanding their contextual function is also critical. Colors are broken up into two distinct categories: subtractive and additive. Subtractive colors, or the CMYK system, are color pigments exclusively associated with print-based mediums such as posters, magazines, and billboards. When combined, subtractive colors make black, meaning light has been subtracted; thus, there is an absence of color.

In contrast, additive colors, or the RGB system, refers to colored light and is exclusively used to create colors on computers, televisions, and monitors. When combined, additives result in white light. According to Dabner et al., context becomes vital because the context in which color is perceived—either screen or print—affects the colors' legibility, affecting the quality of the design (2009, 93–96). For instance, if a design is produced digitally using the RGB system and then printed, the colors of that design are drastically shifted and desaturated (i.e., hot pink becomes a muted purple). The colors shift dramatically because the CMYK system cannot produce a similar range of colors as the RGB system. However, the near reverse happens when a design completed using the CMYK system is then converted to RGB; the design becomes overly saturated as a fuller range of color is used.

Color is additionally considered to be critical to good design because of the emotional complexity that comes with the territory of color perception. Color psychology is the field of study that explores how color has the power to evoke certain emotions. The

effects of the psychological connection to color range from the likelihood of a sports team winning against their competitors to the likelihood of a customer choosing to buy one brand of laundry detergent over another. For instance, according to Andrew J. Elliot and Markus M. Maier (2014) a psychological study in 2004 found red functions as a dominance cue in human sporting competitions and can enhance athletic performance. The same study found that in one-on-one combat sports such as judo, competitors that sported blue, which communicated logic and tact, were more likely to best their competitors dressed in white (101–102). From a marketability perspective, color influences consumers to buy certain products. According to Khattak et al., consumers make up their minds about a product within 90 seconds or less, and at least 62 to 90 percent of this decision-making process is based upon color alone (2018, 183–184). For instance, the laundry detergent brand Tide sports the bold colors yellow, orange, blue, and white in its traditional packaging. This combination of colors communicates essences of vitality, cleanliness, and vibrancy, all things that a consumer would value when considering a detergent brand. However, if Tide branded itself utilizing greens, purples, browns, and grays, a separate set of emotions would have been invoked within the consumer. The colors green, purple, brown, and gray, when combined, have the power to communicate the essences of sickness and uncleanliness; these ideas naturally would not sell many bottles of laundry detergent. From the same marketability standpoint, it is also important to consider how cultural connotations surrounding certain colors affect their ability to evoke certain emotions within consumers to make commodifiable goods appealing (Khattak et al. 2018, 185). When combined with line and shape, color becomes

the final but most critical puzzle piece of good design.

### **Advertiser-Supported Television, Commodification, Good Design**

Much like good design in the general marketplace, good design within television animation, especially that which airs on advertiser-supported television, is critical to the commodification of animated television. Much of the historical considerations of the commodification of animated television tend to fixate on the 1980s era of Saturday morning cartoons that were created to sell action figures (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 2003, Furniss 2016, Sandler 2019). However, television animation's commodification can be traced to Hanna-Barbera. The American shift toward a commodity culture began in years after World War II partially because of the growth in social science that promised a greater understanding of consumers' buying patterns. Buying became more accessible with the introduction of shopping centers that housed multiple stores and the American Express card that was soon followed by both Visa and Mastercard in the mid-1960s. Consumer culture also infiltrated the home via television and magazines. According to Maureen Furniss (2016), animation, especially that which appeared on television, fit comfortably within this consumerist landscape. Its graphic form made it particularly suitable for product design and licensed goods (224). Consequently, studios producing animation for television became increasingly aware of the commercialized positioning of their animation and integrated consumer considerations into their design (Furniss 2016, 224).

The industrial awareness of the commodification potential of television animation directly intersected with the early considerations of children as a profitable audience

demographic. Jason Mittell (2003) states that in the early 1950s, products that were directly associated with children, such as toys, were not considered viable objects because children were not considered active consumers. However, beginning in the late 1950s, attitudes towards children shifted to favor children as a profitable consumer demographic. Consequently, the broadcast television networks primed themselves to direct children towards the products of eager sponsors. Initially, corporations and television networks believed that the only successful method to entrap the child consumer was to invoke the Disney name. However, Hanna-Barbera's success proved this assumption to be baseless (39–40). Hanna-Barbera opened its doors in 1957 and took television by storm with its first animated television series, *The Ruff and Reddy Show* (Furniss 2016, 225). Paul Wells (2002) notes that Hanna-Barbera was aware that their cartoons were considered commodifiable goods. In response, Hanna-Barbera designed their characters to appeal to the mass audience of broadcast television, especially the newly valuable children's audience (88).

According to Amid Amidi (2006), the limited budgets afforded early television animation unintentionally amplified the role of design (2006, 41). Consequently, animation studios producing cartoons in the 1950s drew inspiration from graphic design, children's book illustrations, and magazine cartoons to inspire the designs that would populate early television screens (20). Character designer Ed Benedict can be credited with defining Hanna-Barbera's design style. Despite the irrefutable impact of his designs, Benedict came from humble beginnings. Benedict was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1912, and he remained there until his family moved to Los Angeles in 1921. As a teenager in

Los Angeles, Benedict drew newspaper comics, which made frequent appearances in the "Junior Times" supplement of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Evening Herald*. His father's premature death forced Benedict to drop out of high school and work odd jobs to support his family until 1930, when Walt Disney Studios hired him as an inbetweener (a person who generates the images that go between key frames of animation). Despite his lack of formal art education, Benedict's natural eye for design helped him excel among and eventually surpass his peers. Benedict's designs were graphic in their execution and boasted all the markers of good design (Amidi 2006, 40).

For instance, the linework of Benedict's character designs is characterized by its unwavering execution and variation in weight to indicate the quiriness of character. Benedict's linework easily combined with his mixture of organic and inorganic shapes such as asymmetrical circles, little triangles, and bold rectangles to construct character personas. In terms of color, animation poses an interesting case study because up until recent years it was one of the few places in which both color systems were utilized. Kirsten Thompson (2014) states "animation combines both colors as pigments (the paint applied to the surface of cells) and color as light (optical color of the photographic reproduction of those cells)" (3). Even in the studio's early days, Hanna-Barbera, hyper aware of this "bimodal relationship" (Thompson 3), began working with color during their production process in preparation for what they perceived to be the inevitable shift of television to a fully colorized medium (Wells 2003, 21). According to Susan Murray (2018), Hanna-Barbera's approach paid off. In the 1960s, Hanna-Barbera televised its cartoons in full color (185). Within their historical context, Hanna-Barbera cartoons

could be categorized as vibrant. However, it should be noted that while shifting between the CMYK system and the RGB system, which, as previously stated, moderately increases the saturation of the color, Hanna-Barbera was still limited by the range of color afforded to them by the CMYK system. Therefore, from a contemporary perspective accustomed to engaging with animation produced entirely with the RGB system, Hanna-Barbera cartoons embody a subdued color palette. Even so, the application of color by Hanna-Barbera embodies the qualities of good design because the palettes created were done so with the consideration of the relationships between individual colors in mind. For instance, Fred Flintstone sports an orange animal skin pelt and a blue tie. The combinations of orange and blue are appealing because they directly contrast one another; orange is warmer and perceptively closer, and blue is cooler and perceptively further away. Therefore, Hanna-Barbera's application of color and their execution of line and shape embody the markers of good design.

The graphic execution of Benedict's design work elevated the artistry of the animation produced by Hanna-Barbera and aided in its commodification. Due to their popularization, the characters of Hanna-Barbera appeared on the front of cereal boxes, as stuffed toys, in Little Golden Children's Books, card games, and many more objects and trinkets that appealed to the children's audience. However, Hanna-Barbera is notable because they have also been credited with producing one of the first primetime cartoons directly addressing an adult audience. Therefore, their commodification expanded to include products that targeted adults. According to Sandler, *The Flintstones* articulated a greater storytelling sophistication to appeal to adult audiences in a way that their

children-centric syndicated cartoons, such as *The Huckleberry Hound Show*, did not (2018, 88). Hanna-Barbera was successful in its endeavor to capture the adult audience, and consequently, the products that *The Flintstones* became associated with also targeted adult consumers. For instance, in their early years, one of the most prominent sponsors for *The Flintstones* was Winston Cigarettes (Reynolds Tobacco) and One-a-Day Vitamins (Miles Laboratories) (Sandler 2018, 89). Compared to Huckleberry Hound, the Flintstones and company appeared on glassware and as display figurines. However, the type of merchandise produced eventually shifted. David Perlmutter (2014) defines this shift as the transition of *The Flintstones* from the "adult" period (1960–1963) to their "kid" period (1963–1966). Between 1963–1966 *The Flintstones* transformed into a kid-friendly family show with the addition of the characters of Pebbles and Bam-Bam (55–57). Eventually *The Flintstones* became featured on board games, boxes for sugary breakfast cereal, and children's vitamins. Children would remain the focal consumer associated with the commodified television cartoon well into the 1980s until *The Simpsons* came on the scene.

The 1970s and the 1980s saw rises in big business, corporate acquisitions, and industrial consolidation, all of which resulted in powerful conglomerates. These conglomerates have the power to control markets by selling a series of similar products under different brand names. According to Furniss, only the appearance of variety was maintained in the marketplace, and cultural mediocrity increased as concerns for quality, well-being, and actual value were cast to the side. Made-for-television animated series were a natural part of this commercial order. The television animated series created

during this period were designed primarily to market toys to children (Furniss 2016, 352). According to Wendy Hilton-Morrow and David T. McMahan (2003), advertising rates for these projects soared and maintained animation's position as a hot commodity for the broadcast networks. However, the caveat for this success was that these programs remained in Saturday morning exile and targeted a young audience while adult animated programming remained off the airwaves (77). The 1990s brought new chances for creative expression that would position television animation alongside comic books and other pop culture forms in the cultural cachet (Furniss 2016, 352). At the center of this cultural change was *The Simpsons*, the first animated program to successfully air during primetime since *The Flintstones*. *The Simpsons* has been lauded as a catalyst in animation history for its smart writing that addresses contemporary issues (Furniss 2016, 354). Much of the successful resurgence of primetime animation in the 1990s can be attributed to the decrease in the profitability of the Saturday morning cartoon beginning in the late 1980s (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 2003, 80). However, *the Simpsons* was not interested in addressing children but the adults who grew up watching television and loved animation (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 2003, 82). By targeting this demographic, *The Simpsons* reopened doors that once again addressed television animation as a commodifiable good that could appeal to adult consumers. Much like *The Flintstones* in the 1960s, the *The Simpsons* targeting of adult consumers was reflected in the types of products embellished within the Simpsons' images. However, unlike Hanna-Barbera cartoons, *The Simpsons* is not just associated with pedestrian products such as drinkware and T-shirts, but also bombastic merchandise, such as video games, which

connected to the show's tonality.

Another distinct difference between the products associated with Hanna-Barbera and those of *The Simpsons* was the sheer amount of merchandise produced. Much of *The Simpsons*' successful commodification can be attributed to its adherence to the elements of good design. According to Furniss, the design of *The Simpsons* was primarily influenced by post-modernist art (2016, 354). Post-modernist graphic design is punctuated by bright color palettes, bold lines, and shapes. This post-modernist design sensibility is reflected in *The Simpsons*' usage of yellow, bold outlines, and large circular eyes. *The Simpsons*' design translates easily to a variety of two-dimensional to three-dimensional products and became one of the primary points of comparison between *The Simpsons* and its contemporaries. When other animated television series' sense of design cannot be reconciled alongside that of *The Simpsons*, these animated series are typically positioned as unattractive, as has been the case with *Bob's Burgers*. However, when *The Simpsons* is not held up as the primary point of historical comparison, connections between the designs of contemporary and legacy forms of animation become clearer.

### **The Design of *Bob's Burgers***

To effectively draw historical connections between the design of Hanna-Barbera cartoons and *Bob's Burgers*, I approach the evolution of the series' design analytically and begin with the animated short submitted to Fox as part of the series' original pitch. *Bob's Burgers* was initially conceptualized as a family of cannibals that ran a restaurant that served human flesh. The design of *Bob's Burgers* in this initial pitch short reflects this darker tonality, but closer analysis reveals bad design. While smooth, the lines in *Bob's*

*Burgers* pitch short vary in weight depending on which part of the character is meant to be emphasized as heavier or lighter. For instance, the outline that encases Bob is drawn thinner around his mouth than around his stomach. This variation in line weight communicates that Bob possesses a thinner mouth and carries most of his weight in his stomach area. However, this variation in line weight also communicates the primary characteristics of Bob's person. In this pitch, Bob is a man with little to say. He lacks the ability to smooth talk that would position him as intellectually enchanting. Much of this is articulated through his inability to placate his wife's rage after he forgets their anniversary. Bob says generic consolable phrases but lacks the sort of finesse that would help him verbally pull himself out of the hole he has dug. His thin mouth also emphasizes his short temper. While Bob is not very articulate, the full range of his irritation has no problem bursting from the small confines of his mouth. The correlation between Bob's mouth and his temper is best expressed in his outburst towards Linda after she has beguiled herself into thinking that a ring left on a cadaver's hand is Bob's surprise anniversary present. Compared to the lines rendering his mouth, the lines drawn to express Bob's stomach are thicker, communicating the importance of food to Bob's character. The importance of Bob's culinary connection is expressed in obvious ways, such as the fact that he is a passionate restaurateur. However, it is also communicated in the way the line of Bob's apron converges with his body. The apron converging with the physicality of Bob's person further articulates the deep connection he has with food. In contrast with Bob, the weight of the line around Linda's mouth is thicker. Linda's thicker mouth expresses how she is more apt in verbal communication and is not averse to

confrontation. Linda's lack of repulsion towards confrontation is communicated through her direct address of Bob's neglect. Her direct line of questioning leads Bob to the conclusion that he forgot their wedding anniversary. Also, in comparison to Bob, Linda lacks an equally strong connection to food. This is communicated through the clearer separation of the lines that compose Linda's person and those of her apron. Instead, there appears to be more attention given to emphasizing the mass of Linda's chest, as is indicated by the thicker line weight used to render that part of Linda's body. This emphasis on Linda's chest communicates her conventional femininity, which is supported by her stereotypical desire for diamond rings and Jimmy Choo high heels.

Within this pitch short, the shapes of Bob and Linda can be broken up into two different forms: the horizontal ovals of their eyes and the organic shape of the rest of their body. Linda's and Bob's eyes are thin horizontal ovals. In other television cartoons, horizontal oval-shaped eyes are used to indicate that a character is of Asian descent. Take Amy Wong from *Futurama*, for instance. Within the series, Wong is explicitly known to be a woman of Asian descent, and part of the way this is visually expressed is through the oval shape of her eyes meant to replicate the epicanthal folds commonly seen in people of Asian descent. However, in this *Bob's Burgers*' pitch short, the oval shape of the Belchers' eyes is not meant to communicate their ethnicity but the more sinister tone of the show's original premise. Bob and Linda must take on sinister qualities to occupy this more sinister narrative. Therefore, the narrow shape of their eyes is meant to communicate suspicion of their own character and an air of suspicion that Bob and Linda must carry themselves with in order not to get caught.

Interestingly, one of their eyes is detached from their skulls. The separation of their eyes communicates the Belchers' separation from the norms of society, which is a natural consequence of their cannibalism. The second shape that composes the Belchers is the distinct organic shape that encompasses the remainder of their bodies. As previously discussed, organic shape communicates a sense of naturalism, so in a way, it only makes sense that the Belchers are organically shaped to communicate their humanity. However, the Belchers' humanism is juxtaposed by their narrow eyes. While the Belchers are suspicious characters, they also must be appropriately human within the narrative space of this series so that they do not get caught doing their dastardly deeds. Thus, the organic nature of their bodily construction is a falsified shield of their unsettling, atypical nature that cannot be hidden in the wrongness of their eyes. Wrongness is an appropriate word to describe the construction of the Belchers, another being grotesque. Unfortunately, neither wrongness nor grotesqueness is synonymous with good design, and the coloring of this pitch short will be no saving grace either.

*Bob's Burgers* pitch-short notably lacks color. While black and white are conversationally referred to as colors, technically, they are shades and tints. Through its absence of color, the pitch short communicates an essence of joylessness juxtaposed with the short's mundane events. For instance, Bob and Linda go back and forth over their forgotten anniversary until their discussion morphs into one that is tinged with comedic undertones. This petty marital dispute connects Bob and Linda to an essence of humanity in a way that their colorless environment does not. Red is the only color present in the short. Red communicates a sense of gore and death in this context. Gore more obviously

connects *Bob's Burgers* to the horror genre. However, red also divorces the Belchers from appropriate visual articulations of humanity. For instance, in contrast with her bright personality Linda is also covered in the bleak gore of her occupation. Therefore, red, in its boldness, powerfully juxtaposes the Belchers' humanity and their gruesome occupation.

Individually, the elements of line, shape, and color as they have been executed here are not inherently problematic because they effectively articulate the tonality of the series' pitch premise. However, this pitch short cannot be categorically considered good design because while the visual elements of the scene are befitting of their subject matter, they would not be easily commodifiable. This comes down to the unattractiveness of *Bob's Burgers'* initial design, which leans more towards artistry rather than graphic application. There is an essence of unattractiveness about Bob and Linda's initial design that fails to veer into the territory of charm that other grotesque characters, such as Ren and Stimpy, have been able to occupy. Much of this unattractiveness can be attributed to how the key elements of design interact with each other to communicate a multitude of messages, all of which are intriguing but lack an essence of appeal and clarity of highly graphic forms. Consequently, when *Bob's Burgers* is given permission to submit a demo pilot to Fox, they scrap the initial concept and the initial design.

Within the demo pilot, the design of *Bob's Burgers* takes a sharp turn in a drastically different direction, as is demonstrated through their use of thick and unsteady outlines, symmetrical shapes, and overly saturated color palette. Despite the drastic change in design, *Bob's Burgers* still sports the markers of bad design because the

elements are disharmonious with the series tonality and create a harsh visual landscape that proves to be difficult for the viewer to navigate. For instance, each of the Belchers is outlined in thick, black, and unsteady lines. These thicker black lines work better in a design sense because they would be easily transferable to a variety of products such as stickers and T-shirts. However, the use of lines by *Bob's Burgers* in this demo pilot still fails because they draw viewer attention away from what is happening on screen. While the viewer is distracted by the thick outlines of the characters on screen, they are not engaged with the comedic dialogue. Graphic designers and theorists Steven Heller and Mirko Ilic (2012) argue audience disengagement stems from overstimulation. According to Heller, overstimulation is detrimental to the commodification of design because viewers become unwilling to engage long enough to consider purchasing a product (11–12). In the case of its demo pilot, *Bob's Burgers* over-stimulates its viewer through its overly saturated color palette and copious amounts of dialogue. Therefore, to successfully be commodifiable, *Bob's Burgers* must either be visually stimulating or aurally stimulating. As previously discussed, *Bob's Burgers*' distinct personality comes from its reliance on dialogic comedy rather than physical expressions of humor. Therefore, the application of thicker and unsteadily expressed lines becomes ineffective. In addition, the boldness of the lines lifts the characters away from the background in a way that creates disharmony. While contrast is ideal in good design, disharmony is not. Disharmony is a signifier of failure in design because it creates unnecessary labor for the consumer. If a consumer is spending time trying to decipher a design, they are not engaging with it in a way that would prompt them to make a purchase or conform to an idea. Thus, the

inability to capture the consumer's attention and keep them engaged with a design productively is a marker of bad design. Therefore, the demo pilot of *Bob's Burgers* failed at its design because of the explicit creation of disharmony and distraction.

The shapes of the characters in *Bob's Burgers* demo pilot are only moderately different from the pitch, but the minor changes still have a substantial impact. Much like the initial pitch pilot, the characters of *Bob's Burgers* are composed of two types of shapes: organics shapes and inorganic shapes. The organic shapes of the Belchers in the demo pilot are not dissimilar to those of the Belchers from the pitch. The organic shape still works to enforce the Belchers' humanity. However, since the Belchers are not cannibals, there is less urgency to enforce their humanity to prevent them from being exposed. As a result, the expressions of the Belchers' bodies are less severe and occupy less of the screen. This decrease in the severity of the body shape of the Belchers itself is successful. However, the design of the Belchers begins to fail with the shapes of the eyes. Compared to the pitch short, the Belchers in the demon pilot are drawn with circular eyes, reminiscent of those sported by the Simpsons. Much like the organic shape of the body, these eyes communicate the Belchers' sense of humanity and openness. However, the circular shape of the eyes becomes a point of design failure when read with the lines meant to represent the Belchers' noses. For instance, Bob has circular eyes that sit above a long u-shaped line representing his nose. Bob's eyes and nose are not inherently problematic when looked at individually. However, shapes are always read in context with what is around them. So, when read together, Bob's eyes and his nose become representational of male genitalia. From a marketability standpoint, the overt

representation of genitalia on the Belchers' face would make it extremely difficult to emboss their images onto products without facing a significant backlash that would prove unprofitable. Therefore, the shapes in the *Bob's Burgers'* demo pilot are another marker of its design failure for their incompatibility with the standards of the market.

Lastly, within the pitch short, color was used sparingly. However, in the demo pilot, *Bob's Burgers* follows in the footsteps of its contemporaries through their usage of heavily saturated colors. Historically, heavily saturated color palettes have worked well for other contemporary cartoons, such as *The Simpsons*, because they reflected the bombastic quality of the show itself. However, in the case of *Bob's Burgers*, a saturated color palette does not work as well because it does not reflect the personality of the show. For instance, in contrast with the vibrancy of the colors, the show itself is notably subdued in its dialogue and movement. This subdued personality is best indicated when the Belchers have their family meeting before opening the restaurant. The Belchers themselves engage in a verbal exchange that is calm in its delivery, and the character movement in this scene is sparse. The subtle personality of *Bob's Burgers* does not correlate with the essence of flamboyance and spectacle that is associated with overly saturated color palettes. In addition, combined with the thick black outlines, this heavily saturated color palette becomes challenging to stare at for extended periods. A more heavily saturated color palette is harsh on the eyes because *Bob's Burgers* is digitally colorized using the RGB system of color. As previously discussed, the RGB system refers to colored light. Because the human eye already perceives color through light, the saturation of colors within the RGB system must be done delicately to avoid causing the

human eye to strain as it tries to filter and recognize the colors on screen. In addition, when heavily saturating naturally vibrant colors such as red, yellow, orange, the strain on the human eye increases. The over-saturation of colors to the point of discomfort is considered bad design practice for the same reason provided when discussing the application of shape within the demo pilot; it has the power to discourage the consumer from engaging with what potentially is a commodifiable object. Therefore, applying color in this regard is considered bad design practice. *Bob's Burgers* underwent a few minor design changes upon their move to television. These changes included using thinner and steadier line work, more appealing combinations of organic and inorganic shapes, and a subdued color palette. These changes connect *Bob's Burgers* to Hanna-Barbera animation, which utilized a similar design sense in their cartoons. For instance, compared to the demo pilot, *Bob's Burgers* utilized thinner and steadier outlines around their characters and environments. Implicitly, the usage of thinner linework communicates an essence of lightness that matches the comedic tonality of the show in a way that thicker linework did not.

Additionally, *Bob's Burgers'* usage of thinner linework within their series is easier on the eye of the consumer and less distracting; it does not forcefully draw attention away from the onscreen action and dialogic exchange. By not creating a distracting visual landscape through its application of line work, *Bob's Burgers* promotes consumer engagement in what could be a commodifiable object. Also, in contrast with the linework of the demo pilot, the linework in the televised version of *Bob's Burgers* does little to distinguish the characters from the background. Instead, the usage of linework within

Bob's *Burgers* creates a sense of harmony between the background and the characters, which is a marker of good design practice. Similarly, with the application of thinner and steadier lines and the maintenance of visual harmony between the background and the characters, *Bob's Burgers* becomes more appealing as commodifiable object. This application of steady linework recalls the practices of Hanna-Barbera animation and has proven successfully commodifiable.

Much like the demo pilot, the televised version of *Bob's Burgers* favors organic and inorganic shapes to create its characters. However, the demo pilot and televised version of *Bob's Burgers* diverge in their expressions of organic and inorganic shapes. In terms of the expression of organic shape, not much has changed since the demo pilot. The televised version of *Bob's Burgers* relies heavily on the expression of fluid organic shapes to represent the characters' bodies on screen. These organic shapes still represent the humanity of the characters of *Bob's Burgers*, which fits well with the comedic tone of the show. However, compared to the demo pilot, the televised version of *Bob's Burgers* uses vertically expressed ovals instead of circles to represent the characters' eyes. This may not seem like a meaningful change since circles and vertically rendered ovals communicate a similar essence of openness. However, by choosing to use ovals and shorter noses, *Bob's Burgers* no longer depicts male genitalia. By cleaning up their application of shapes, *Bob's Burgers* becomes appealing to consumers and increases their commodifiable potential. Additionally, Bob's Burgers' application of organic and inorganic shapes is like that used by Hanna-Barbera. Hanna-Barbera used organic and inorganic shapes in their character composition to communicate a humanistic essence

within the animals and the quirkiness of their characters. The application of shape by Hanna-Barbera has historically proven successful in elevating the commodifiable potential of the studios' cartoons and thus increases the commodifiable potential of *Bob's Burgers*.

The televised version of *Bob's Burgers* abandons a heavily saturated color palette in favor of embracing a more muted design presence like that of Hanna-Barbera. *Bob's Burgers* benefits from this shift in color for three primary reasons: a subdued color palette matches the tonality of the show, it is easier on the eyes of the potential consumer, and it opens the possibility of color interpretation. For instance, *Bob's Burgers* exerts a subtle comedic presence through its reliance on dialogue rather than physical comedy. In comparison with the more saturated color palette used by the demo pilot, the subdued color palette of the televised version of *Bob's Burgers* better reflects the subtler comedic tendencies of the series. The subdued color palette of the televised version of *Bob's Burgers* is easier on the eye, so consumers will then be more likely to purchase products with the Belchers embossed upon them. Lastly, a subtler color palette allows for interpretation in a way that the demo discouraged because of the sheer amount of visual labor required to remain engaged.

Without the visual intensity of a saturated color palette, it becomes apparent that *Bob's Burgers* applies color to articulate the Belchers' personalities and relationships to one another. Take Louise and Tina, for example. Tina sports different shades of blue, whereas Louise wears a green dress and a pink bunny hat. The blue of Tina's outfit communicates her trustworthiness and calmer persona. However, the green of Louise's

dress articulates her conniving tendencies, while her pink bunny ears signify her sporadic acts of kindness. In addition, given that they are adjacent to each other on the color wheel, blue and green are analogous colors. Analogous colors are typically similar in their temperature and movement. Therefore, the blue of Tina's clothes and the green of Louise's dress articulate how the sisters are similar. However, pink and blue are opposite on the color wheel, making them complementary colors. Unlike analogous colors, complementary colors are defined by their contrast to one another. Thus, the blue of Tina's clothing and the pink of Louise's bunny hat communicate how the sisters are different in personality and tend to clash with one another. *Bob's Burgers* uses color to communicate Bob's personality, as well. Compared to his family, who all are wearing color, Bob sports a monochromatic gray outfit. While black and white are not considered colors, gray is considered an achromatic color and is used to neutralize the intensity of more vibrant colors, such as yellow. Bob is dressed in gray clothing, communicating his status as a mediator that balances out his family's personality types. The gray of Bob's outfit also signifies his more monotone presence, which directly contrasts Linda's more exuberant personality, which is communicated through her red shirt. By clarifying character relationships and personalities through color, *Bob's Burgers* articulates a more precise understanding of character which can be used to distinguish the commodifiable potential of each character. For instance, Tina's personality, which again is visually articulated through color, has qualified her as a folk hero among fans. Consequently, the image of Tina has graced stickers, buttons, and t-shirts. Gene, who is boisterous and often perceived as annoying, as is emphasized by his yellow shirt, is rarely portrayed without

his family on merchandise. This limited range of Gene-centric merchandise is because Gene Belcher is tolerable in small doses and is best perceived by viewers when interacting with other characters. Gene's character is not dissimilar to yellow, which is one of the most hated colors and is best received with its complementary colors such as purple or blue. Therefore, color becomes a signifier of *Bob's Burgers'* application of good design in a way that benefits the series' commodity potential.

When compared with *The Simpsons*, *Bob's Burgers* has been criticized for its apparent lack of appealing design. However, when the principles of good design are defined it becomes clearer that *Bob's Burgers* expressed design tastes that lean towards a historical perspective. This further proves the futility of utilizing *The Simpsons* as a historical point of comparison when analytically approaching *Bob's Burgers* as an animated text.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “Let’s See Your Everything Is Okay Face:”

#### *Bob’s Burgers*, Realism, and the Limited Television Aesthetic

Previous scholarly discussions of animated realism fixated on feature-length, theatrical full animation. However, recently scholars and industry professionals have included contemporary television animation in this discourse. For instance, because it depicts bodily fluids and physical harm, *The Simpsons* is considered to be more realistic than other animated series (Mittell 2001, 22–23). I argue that *Bob’s Burgers* resists this move toward animated realism, and instead embraces the traditions of limited television animation rooted in unreality. This chapter will explore *Bob’s Burgers*’ rejection of realism through a close analysis of its illusion of rapid camera movement, limited range of character expression, and restricted drawing cycle.

#### **Full Animation and Realism**

Live-action film has dominated scholarly conversations about realism. Film theorist Marc Steinberg (2014) argues that the privileging of live-action cinema within scholarly conversation is a direct result of the medium's relationship with what he calls a "profilmic reality" (287). In other words, film notably presents an image and manner of movement that is an indexically faithful portrayal of the events in front of the camera. Therefore, it becomes easier to construct theoretical approaches to the portrayal of reality in the context of live-action film. According to Steinberg, animation is not traditionally considered a realist form due to its early embrace of the medium’s non-realistic styles of

movement and drawing (Steinberg 2014, 287–288). Notably, animation’s plasticity is one of the reasons why the medium initially earned scholarly attention. Film theorist Sergei Eisenstein contributed to much of the foundational scholarship exploring animation's plasticity. In his studies of Walt Disney Studio's animations, Eisenstein developed the concept of “plasmaticness” to approach the malleable and fanciful animated figures that occupied the cinematic space (Eisenstein 2006, 94).

While theories of animation's plasticity based upon Eisenstein's writings still permeate much of contemporary animation scholarship, a steady flow of scholars have approached animation as a realist form. These contemporary approaches to animation are dominated by the aesthetic analysis of films that use two-dimensional, full-animation techniques because their development centered on presenting realistic portrayals of movement, character, and environment. According to animation historian Maureen Furniss (2014), "full animation involves constant movement and metamorphosis of shapes, with (theoretically) no cycling or re-use of drawing" (134). Full animation achieves fluidity of motion via a process known as animating on ones and twos, creating twenty-four different images for each second. This technique replicates the standard set by live-action motion pictures, which run at 24 frames per second (Furniss 2014, 134). In correlation with this practice, full animation also embodies a non-cyclical practice in which every drawing is designed to be used only once (Furniss 2014, 133–134). Therefore, the process of full animation becomes highly meticulous. However, this methodology also produces fluid movements that have inspired the scholarly designation of animation as a realistic form.

To further discuss full animation's articulation of realistic movement, characters, and environments, I must elaborate on Walt Disney Studio's feature-length filmography. According to Steinberg, beginning with Disney's aesthetic shift in the 1930s, the studio began to produce hyper-realistic films (2014, 288). Furniss states that entering the 1930s, Disney contended with changes in the film production and exhibition process such as the adoption and integration of sound and color. This environment of innovation resulted in the spirit of experimentation with the studio space (Furniss 2016, 93–94). Disney encouraged his animators to return to the form's roots in body movement studies to develop a new animation technique: squash and stretch. Squash and stretch is a type of two-dimensional animation technique that focuses on the constant tension and release of physical features of an animated character. This technical practice is associated with full animation and gives characters an amount of mass and dimension not previously accomplished through rubber-hose style animation (Furniss 2016, 102). In partnership with squash and stretch, Disney developed what is referred to in the industry as “personality animation.” Personality animation utilized movement, voice, and design to produce unique characters that the audience could emotionally connect to (Furniss 2016, 102). In addition to these developments in character animation and style, Disney introduced the multiplane camera to cel-animation (Furniss 2016, 102). The multiplane camera afforded animators increased mobility to capture drama and create dimensionality (Furniss 2016, 105). Ryan Pierson (2020) discusses how Disney's experiments with rotoscoping worked in partnership with their other animation practices to create a hyper-realistic aesthetic. Rotoscoping is a two-dimensional technique that involves layering an

animation over a live-action reference of a complex movement sequence. Rotoscoping economizes crafting figures that move realistically, but if done awkwardly, it threatens to create a sense of cognitive dissonance. Pierson states that cognitive dissonance occurs in instances of rotoscoping-by-outline, a form of rotoscoping that audiences find disturbing for the attention it calls to the two-dimensionality of the figure that is traced over what is perceptively a three-dimensional space (115–116). *A Scanner Darkly* (Linklater, 2006) employed rotoscoping-by-outline, as indicated by the obvious process of tracing directly over the referential film, which creates an uncomfortable awareness within the audience that they are viewing the two-dimensional copies of a three-dimensional image. Disney began to study the invisible lines of force that ran through their referential images to combat the threat of cognitive dissonance that rotoscoping-by-outline threatens to invoke. Disney animators then used these invisible lines of force as a framework of movement to create gestural drawings to animate, instead of tracing directly over the reference (Pierson 2020, 116). Much like Disney's practices of squash and stretch animation in partnership with personality animation and their use of the multiplane camera, the studio's rotoscoping technique contributed to their construction of a hyper-realistic aesthetic. Consequently, theoretical, critical, and practical interest in approaching animation as a realist form has primarily centered on Disney's two-dimensional, full animation features. In recent years, there has been an analytical shift in favor of approaching Disney and Pixar's three-dimensional feature-length productions as realist artifacts due to their more realistic representations of mass and depth (Steinberg 2014, 288).

### **Shifting Away from Realism with Limited Animation**

Cinematic limited animation has been alienated from scholarly considerations of realist cinema because it lacks full animation's realistic sensibilities. According to animation historian Kevin Sandler (2019), the development of the limited mode of cel-animation was a direct by-product of the budgetary cuts that swept Hollywood after the vertically integrated studios were found guilty of anti-competitive practices and subsequently sold off their theaters. Unlike its counterpart, limited animation embodies a restrictive aesthetic in its character movements and design (77). Disney is indirectly involved in the development and popularization of this animation style. More specifically, the Disney strike of 1941 inspired a division between animators not merely in terms of the mode of production but also in terms of the approach to animation. Lines in the sand were drawn between those who embraced Disney's conceptualizations of what animation should be and those who wished to break away from the Disney approach. This divide led animators John Hubley and Zachary Swartz to draft a manifesto in 1946. Swartz and Hubley stated that the medium of animation had become a new language and limited only by the imagination of the creative (Sandler 2019, 77–78).

According to Paul Wells (2002), under the guidance of this manifesto, the animation studio United Productions of America (UPA) pioneered limited cinematic animation to distinguish themselves as the antithesis to Disney's realist sensibilities and to associate their animation with modernist art-forms (88). Dan Bashara (2015) argues that UPA cartoons were distinct in their simplicity. In contrast with the hyper-realistic animation produced by Disney, UPA embraced hard-edged, simplified forms, bold,

monotone colors, and a minimalist background (83). In terms of movement, unlike full animation, limited animation is highly cyclic and animated on threes, fours, fives, or higher, meaning that UPA animated with fewer drawings. This economical production style did not replicate the fluid movement of animating one ones and twos. Limited animation is characterized by its use of rapid camera movement to accentuate motion. Furniss states that traditional cel-animation used physical cameras to pan over artwork and zoom in on character's faces, creating a sense of motion without having to produce more drawings (Furniss 2014, 134).

According to Sandler, UPA relied upon "drawing expressive poses rather than animating squash-and-stretch motion and erasing the spatial distance between characters and background rather than reproducing a more traditional approach to perspective" (2019, 82). UPA utilized limited animation to explore psychological insight rather than entertainment. The UPA approach to animation became highly popular in the 1950s, heralding of a shift toward the limited animation mode in an industry overrun by modernist sensibilities. However, the UPA approach proved to be unsustainable.

The animated artifacts that impacted the industry most profoundly were not the cinematic shorts of the silver screen grounded in personal expression and modern art but the low-budget commercial television series (Sandler 2019, 82–84). Wells argues that Hanna-Barbera defined the television space for animation (2002, 75). He states that, like UPA, Hanna-Barbera placed less emphasis on the execution of quality and fluid movements. However, unlike UPA, which prioritized the psychological potential of the animated form, Hanna-Barbera's television animation embraced the narrative codes of

radio and television through comedic writing and engaging character design (Wells 2002, 88). Initially, Hanna-Barbera described its approach to limited animation as “planned animation.” The studio made this distinction to separate themselves from the cinematic form of limited animation and to market their method as superior to full-animation techniques (Sandler 2019, 86). According to Sandler, “stages from storyboarding to animating, to soundtrack recording each had to be ‘planned’ in advance to accommodate the much-reduced budget and time limitations per cartoon” (2019, 86). Hanna-Barbera often used a pose reel to merge a recorded soundtrack with dialogue to carefully synchronize the compilation of layout drawings, story sketches, and critical poses of action. Those key poses of action articulate critical positions of an animated character's extreme accents of expression or extreme points of their path of action. Hanna-Barbera would not redraw an entire figure for each cell as one would do in full animation to communicate a sense of movement around these critical scenes. Instead, Hanna-Barbera would only redraw the body parts—an arm, leg, hand, mouth, or eye—that had been planned to move. This method of creating movement extended to the range of visual expression afforded to the characters on screen. Sandler states that Hanna-Barbera characters were animated with a different muzzle from the rest of the face to quickly animate a mouth speaking (Sandler 2019, 86–87). This technique economized the animation process and limited how a character could visually express emotion. Hanna-Barbera cartoons relied on shifts in vocal tones and rapid camera movement to communicate emotional shifts. All other actions occur off screen as series of sound effects (Sandler 2019, 87). The explicit distinction in the aesthetic presence of limited

cinematic animation contributed to its alienation from the critical discourse concerning animation as a realist form. However, limited television animation has recently found a place within the exploration of realism by television theorists.

### ***The Simpsons* and So Called “Cartoon Realism”**

In recent years, there have been efforts (albeit minimal and arguably misplaced) to approach limited television animation as a realist form. This section of exploration has been led by television scholar Jason Mittell (2001), who uses *The Simpsons* as a case study to conceptualize "cartoon realism." According to Mittell, few television shows encapsulate 1990s media like *The Simpsons*. Within the fields of television and animation studies, *The Simpsons* has been exalted as a "popular culture sensation, marketing phenomenon, generic mixture, (alleged) embodiment of postmodernism, and representative of the post-Fordist network era" (15). Mittell uses genre theory to explore how *The Simpsons* has been lauded as an example of postmodern media. He argues that critical engagement with *The Simpsons* as a postmodern media text calls attention to the television series' hyper-reflexivity and self-awareness. However, Mittell states that the techniques that critics are positioning as signifiers of postmodernism are rooted in the show's generic predecessors. To support this point, Mittell refers to the cartoons of the 1930s and 1940s, which were also demonstratively hyper-reflexive and self-aware. In the same breath, Mittell argues that *The Simpsons* is a generically mixed media text (Mittell 2001, 15–16). He states that "it is obvious to even the most casual or inexperienced television viewer that *The Simpsons* is on some level a mixture of domestic sitcom and animated cartoon" (2001, 17). Mittell's statement draws attention to an important generic

distinction. Popular critics, industry professionals, and scholars who are from outside the animation industry or the field of animation studies have commonly categorized animation as a genre. Animation scholar Raz Greenberg (2011) speaks to this categorization issue, stating that the compulsion to position animation as a genre comes from the popular vocabulary that is used to discuss animation. Greenberg argues that the term "cartoon" has historically been used to refer to all forms of animation, leading to the circulation of the common misconception that animation is a genre despite its ability to embody multiple genres such as melodrama, fantasy, and horror. At the same time, Greenberg also states that "cartoon" itself can be positioned as a genre. The term "cartoon" applies to comic animation, which directly references the field's origins in comic illustrations whose aesthetics were transplanted and applied to early theatrical animated shorts (4). According to Mittell, it was not until recently that "cartoon" had culturally been distinguished as a genre. However, with this distinction came the association with the child audience, and the cartoon to be delegitimized as a form of adult television (2003, 34). This connotation of the "cartoon" has not changed with the popularization of *The Simpsons*. As a result of the term cartoon's connotations, despite the series' stylistic use of limited animation (Furniss 146), *The Simpsons* does not categorize itself as a "cartoon." Mittell writes that *The Simpsons* has demonstrated bouts of what he terms "cartoon realism" that have distinguished the series from legacy forms of television animation (such as those produced by Hanna-Barbera) that can be categorized as cartoons. Such elements of "cartoon realism" included the presence of blood and bruising when characters are injured on screen. These elements of

“cartoon realism” allegedly contributed to *The Simpsons*’ realism (Mittell 2001, 22–23). However, “cartoon realism” as a theory labors under the assumption that early television animation *could* have depicted evidence of realism. In doing so, “cartoon realism” neglects to consider the sort of self-regulatory pressures that early television animation underwent to be appropriate for the American home. Much of television’s early developmental period was centered on the notions of good taste that rejected the obscene in favor of the decent. As Jason Mittell (2003) later writes, animated television was not exempt from these concerns and took self-regulatory measures to ensure that the content produced was appropriate for the domestic space (34). As television settled into itself as a medium, definitions of good taste evolved to appeal to cultural shifts; *The Simpsons* was a product of this cultural environment. Therefore, “cartoon realism” cannot be considered evidence of a shift in limited television animation towards more accurate portrayals of reality but evidence of cultural shifts and leniency in what qualifies as “good taste.” Nonetheless, *The Simpsons* uses “cartoon realism” to remove itself from the cartoon label attached to limited animation. *Bob’s Burgers*, however, has no qualms about being labeled a cartoon, as is indicated by its full embrace of the limited animation practices of legacy television animation.

### ***Bob’s Burgers* Embraces the Unreality of Limited Animation**

#### **Rapid Camera Movement**

Like Hanna-Barbera cartoons, *Bob’s Burgers* relies on rapid camera movement to accentuate motion, communicate character reactions, and comedic clarity. However, because *Bob’s Burgers* is animated digitally and without a physical camera, the camera

movement within the series is illusionary. Having said that, I will approach the camera work in *Bob's Burgers* the same way as legacy television animation because it conveys the same aesthetics.

*Bob's Burgers'* direct connection to the legacy principles of limited television animation is first established within their pilot episode, "Human Flesh." In this episode, during what is projected to be their most profitable weekend, the Belchers' restaurant gets shut down by Hugo, the health inspector, after Louise tells her class that the restaurant makes their burgers from human flesh. Rapid camera movements such as zooming and panning communicate character reaction, offer comedic punctuation, and to accentuate motion. For instance, when Bob is briefing the rest of his family on how critical the weekend is for the restaurant's survival, he instructs Gene to hand out free samples in front of the restaurant. While handing over the tray of free samples, he instructs Gene not to engage with the people exiting the crematorium next door. This exchange between Bob and Gene begins with them both in the frame. However, to emphasize the importance of Bob's instructions and his emotional domination of the space, the camera zooms in on Bob's face just as his eyebrows slant and his tone changes. This application of camera movement clarifies the intensity of the situation that Bob's limited facial expression cannot do alone.

Rapid camera movement can also offer comedic punctuation. For instance, when Hugo confronts Bob, he learns that Linda was previously engaged to the health inspector. When Linda's past comes to light, a burger on the grill bursts into flames, and Gene steps in with a fire extinguisher to put out the inflamed burger. Once the burger no longer

poses a threat, Hugo begins to speak, and the camera zooms in on his face. However, Gene interrupts Hugo by wielding a fire extinguisher. Consequently, the camera rapidly zooms out to include Gene in frame. When Gene stops using the fire extinguisher, the camera rapidly zooms back in on Hugo. Gene interrupts Hugo two more times within the scene. *Bob's Burgers* uses rapid camera movement to enhance the comedy of the absurd number of interruptions. This scene also illustrates how rapid camera movement accentuates motion within the scene. Each time Gene uses the extinguisher, the camera zooms out and the other characters turn their heads to look at Gene. The turn of the characters' heads is limited; only three key-frames complete the motion. Throughout the execution of this three-point turn, the characters' bodies remain stationary, but the camera's motion articulates the heads' movement without the resources of full animation.

After the first season, *Bob's Burgers* becomes less reliant on rapid camera movement to convey character reactions and comedic effect and to compensate for limited range of motion. For instance, in the second season episode "A Bob Day Afternoon," the local police use the Belchers' restaurant as a pseudo-headquarters to negotiate a hostage situation at the bank across the street. Bob gets roped into delivering food to the hostages and the bank robber. However, the delivery plan goes awry, and Bob is taken as a hostage. To convince Mickey (the bank robber) to release Bob along with the rest of the hostages, Sergeant Bosco (the police officer in charge of the operation) negotiates with the criminal through a series of phone calls. Meanwhile, Louise hijacks one of the phone lines to interview Mickey for her school project. Consequently, Sergeant Bosco and Louise get into a scuffle that leads the police officer to take control

over the phone lines once more. Once Bosco regains control of the phone, the camera zooms in on his face just as he narrows his eyes. This zoom communicates Bosco's agitation and exasperation. Bosco remains in control of the phone and most of the screen for a few moments. However, Mickey decides that he would rather speak with Louise than Sergeant Bosco and demands that the phone be returned to her. To maintain control, Sergeant Bosco decides to pretend to be Louise. Mickey catches onto Bosco and demands that the phone be passed back to Louise. Reluctantly, Bosco relinquishes control of the phone, and the camera zooms out, showing that Bosco has lost control of the situation. However, this use of camera movement is inconsistent. When Bosco tries to take the phone away from Louise, she clutches the phone to her chest and screams at him. Instead of using the camera to articulate the character who has the most emotional real estate at that moment, audience members are cued in through Louise's tone and body language alone while both characters are in frame. What is additionally interesting in this scene is the use of the horizontal split. By splitting the screen between Bosco and Louise (top) and Mickey (bottom), this scene creates a sense of energy hierarchy that correlates with *Bob's Burgers'* reliance on body language as emotional expression. For instance, while occupying the top half of the screen, Bosco and Louise exert live-wire energy, as indicated by their exaggerated body movements: Bosco trying to wrestle the phone from Louise. At the same time, Louise contorts her body forward, screaming, "it's my daddy!" In contrast, Mickey is almost entirely static. While Bosco and Louise tussle, Mickey reclines back in a desk chair, only blinking and tilting his head slightly. Mickey only moves his entire body when Bosco regains control of the phone, and the hierarchy shifts:

Bosco becomes static, and Mickey is set in motion. *Bob's Burgers* relies on camera movement to emphasize the distribution of energy in this scene. Therefore, while *Bob's Burgers* still uses camera movement, it does so sparingly

*Bob's Burgers'* sparing use of camera movement becomes increasingly evident as the series progresses; eventually camera work becomes primarily communicates situational intensity. For instance, in the season four episode "Slumber Party," camera movement expresses Louise's shock and displeasure over the surprise slumber party Linda had decided to throw for her. When Louise opens the door to find a collection of girls from her class on the other side, the camera rapidly zooms in on the girls, communicating Louise's shock. Immediately after this shot, there is an abrupt cut to Louise screaming in despair on her doorstep. In this scene, *Bob's Burgers* uses camera movement to communicate Louise's shock, but to articulate Louise's anguish, it leans into a jump cut and auditory indicators. Therefore, while *Bob's Burgers* still uses camera movement as a tool of emotional expression, it has begun to rely more heavily on aural indicators. In "A Few 'Gurt Men," an episode from season seven, in a mock trial Louise defends Mr. Frond, the school guidance counselor, against the accusations that he is a yogurt thief. Initially, Louise has no interest in defending Mr. Frond, but reconsiders as the mock trial proceedings continue. Louise reveals that the overseeing judge is the actual yogurt thief. After Louise makes the big reveal, the camera rapidly zooms in to capture each characters' shock at the turn of events. Like "Slumber Party," to fully articulate the emotional intensity of the situation, "A Few 'Gurt Men's" camera movement is punctuated by the aural cues of the character's shock. In doing so, *Bob's Burgers*

demonstrates its reliance on camera movement to articulate situational intensity and the character's emotions fully.

Similarly, in "The Frond Files," *Bob's Burgers* uses rapid camera movement to emphasize situational intensity. In this episode Bob and Linda visit the children's school and learn that Tina, Gene, and Louise's essays were not displayed at the "Why I Love Wagstaff" event because they depicted offensive and fantastical versions of Wagstaff School. To explore the Belchers' fantastical and offensive essays, the episode brings them to life. In Louise's essay, a robot Mr. Frond, is sent from the future to assassinate Louise. However, Daryl, one of Louise's peers, travels back in time to prevent robot Mr. Frond from carrying out his dastardly deed. In "The Frond Files," *Bob's Burgers* uses rapid camera movement to emphasize situational intensity and to parody *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984). When Daryl reveals to Louise that he is from the future, the camera zooms in on his face to emphasize the intensity of the situation and the shock value of the reveal. However, like other episodes from later seasons, camera work in "The Frond Files," is used sparingly and is accompanied by aural articulations of emotionality. This shift is because *Bob's Burgers* leaned further into auditory signifiers of intensity. By withdrawing from the applications of rapid camera movement, *Bob's Burgers* is not attempting to position itself closer to realistic animation because, its visual style is still grounded in the traditions of limited television animation.

### **Limited Range of Visual Character Expression**

In addition to its creative use of the camera, *Bob's Burgers* also demonstratively limits its characters' range of visual emotional expression, directly connecting the series

to legacy television animation. As discussed in the previous chapter, legacy forms of television animation conveyed limited emotional range and relied on sound to communicate emotional and narrative clarity. The series' application of limited character expression is established in the pilot episode. As a ploy to get Hugo to expedite the tests needed to reopen the restaurant, Linda invites the health inspector over to the restaurant to negotiate. When Linda informs Bob of her plans, he is upset. However, the degree of Bob's displeasure is not communicated by his facial expression in the same way it might be if the series were fully animated. Instead, Bob is drawn with slanted eyebrows and a slight frown to his mouth to indicate his anger. His body language also does little to give away Bob's current emotional state. Instead, as previously stated, much of Bob's emotional state is communicated through a combination of camera movements and tonal shifts as well as nonverbal performances. While meeting with Hugo, Linda notices a package outside of the restaurant. She is elated at the sight of the package because she believes it to be an anniversary present from Bob. Linda's joy is illustrated visually through a raise of her eyebrows and a wide smile. However, much like Bob's visual expression of anger, Linda's visual expressions of joy are subdued, and *Bob's Burgers* relies on auditory cues and camera movements to communicate emotional clarity.

However, like its use of camera movement, in its later seasons *Bob's Burgers* moderately diverges from limited character expression. For instance, in the first season the characters of *Bob's Burgers* are subdued in their emotional articulation, much of their expression being connected to shifts in vocal tonality. However, beginning in the second season, *Bob's Burgers* relies more on bodily articulations of emotional expression. For

example, in “A Bob Day Afternoon,” as Bob tries to exit the restaurant to deliver the burgers, the rest of the Belchers cling to him and profess their concern and anxiety for Bob's safety. These declarations quickly develop into a cacophony of noise that articulates the Belchers' emotional distress, while the Belchers cling to Bob they also desperately claw their way up him. Bob tries to shake off his increasingly desperate family but fails. Combined with the tonality of their voices, body language becomes a valuable tool to permit the articulation of a broad emotional range. *Bob's Burgers'* reliance on body language becomes increasingly evident in later episodes. In the episode “Mazel-Tina,” Tina is devastated when Tammy does not invite her to her Bat Mitzvah. Later, while at lunch with Gene and Louise, Tina hides her head away in the pillow of her arms and releases a drawn-out groan. Therefore, in this episode, Tina's emotional state is articulated through body language and aural cues. "Mazel Tina's" use of body language articulates that *Bob's Burgers* began to rely on body language to express character emotion compared to its early seasons. By doing so, *Bob's Burgers* afforded its characters a broader visual expression of their emotions.

The same can be said of season six episode “The Haunting.” In this episode, Bob and Linda take the kids to a homemade haunted house on Halloween to scare Louise, who claims never to have been scared before. Bob and Linda's efforts ostensibly are futile. However, as the episode progresses events begin to escalate. Soon, the Belchers find themselves trapped on the house's roof after encountering all sorts of traditional horrors such as mysterious noises and creepy figures. Throughout the episode, Louise becomes increasingly erratic. At the episode's conclusion, a mysterious man with

gardening shears breaks into the house and tries to grab Louise. In response, Louise's eyebrows raise, and her mouth falls open in fear. However, the full range of Louise's fear is articulated through her erratic body language and scream. Later, Bob and Linda reveal to Louise that the haunted house, even the man with gardening shears, were all part of the ploy to scare her. In response to this information Louise sags in relief. Therefore, this episode serves as another example of how *Bob's Burgers* uses body language to visually articulate character emotions in its later seasons, diverging from the dominance of limited animation in early seasons. However, much like the series' sparing use of camera movement, this minor divergence from the traditions of legacy forms of limited television animation does not point towards notions of animated realism. Instead, just as *The Simpsons* is a product of its cultural environment, *Bob's Burgers* is a product of its technological environment.

As technology has developed, steps within the animation process become less tedious and increasingly easier to complete. As previously discussed, to economize the animation process, Hanna-Barbera would plan which body parts *had* to be animated and which would remain stationary. This resulted in the design of characters with muzzle-like features (think Fred Flintstone's perpetual 5 o'clock shadow) animated during dialogue while the rest of the character remained stationary (Sandler 2019, 87). *Bob's Burgers* does not do this. *Bob's Burgers* is animated digitally through a digitally streamlined processes of character animation in Toon Boom Harmony, the industry standard two-dimensional animation software. Toon Boom Harmony economizes the character animation process with tools such as character rigging, peg attachments, and character

libraries. This method of character animation is done in the same spirit as Hanna-Barbera's and is much of the reason the characters in *Bob's Burgers* are all drawn without separate heads and necks. Instead of manipulating the neck and head when setting a character in motion, the animators on *Bob's Burgers* only need to manipulate one form. Therefore, *Bob's Burgers* has found ways to economize the animation process in the digital age while also remaining connected to the methodologies of legacy television animation.

### **Restricted Drawing Cycle**

Lastly, like legacy television animation, *Bob's Burgers* is animated using fewer drawings. By using fewer drawings *Bob's Burgers* lacks the fluidity of motion characteristic of full animation. The trailer for the upcoming *Bob's Burgers*' movie, clearly shows the aesthetic differences between full and limited animation. *Bob's Burgers the Movie* is set to release May 27, 2022, and according to IMDB, the premise of the movie focuses on “the Belchers trying to save the restaurant from closing as a sinkhole forms in front of it while the kids try to solve a mystery that could save their family’s restaurant” (IMDB 2022). The film's most recent trailer released in April 2022 shows how *Bob's Burgers* abandons foundational notions of unreality that directly connect it to the legacies of television animation. It is apt to compare *Bob's Burgers* the television series to its upcoming movie because the movie explicitly represents the aesthetic changes that the television series had to undergo to fit within the cinematic space. To harmonize with the expectations of realism associated with feature-length theatrical animation, *Bob's Burgers the Movie* has adopted realism techniques associated with full

animation. For instance, the trailer shows that the film embodies Rembrandt-like shadows to articulate the hyper-realism associated with full animation. In addition to its use of shadows, in the tradition of full animation, *Bob's Burgers the Movie* is animated on ones and twos to replicate the standard film rate of 24 fps. *Bob's Burgers'* shift towards an increased frame rate is indicated by the fluidity in character motion that was not previously demonstrated in the series. For instance, at the trailer's end, Tina throws her diary across her bedroom. The motion of Tina's throw is flawlessly fluid in its execution in a way that is only accomplished by animating on ones and twos. In comparison, in the episode "Stand by Gene," a similar throwing motion is executed but lacks a similar fluidity. In this episode, Linda and Bob play and invent a game called "narts," also known as napkin darts. Compared to the film trailer, the episode's execution of the throwing motion is significantly less fluid and depends on tracking shots to fully articulate the motion. Therefore, it becomes obvious that *Bob's Burgers the Movie* has adopted the traditions of cinematic realism rather than the unreality of limited television animation. Therefore, the trailer functions as a paratext that reinforces *Bob's Burgers'* connection to the legacy practices of early television animation.

Much like early television animation, *Bob's Burgers* neither concerns itself with depictions of reality nor expresses an explicit desire to be categorized as a realist text. Instead, through its commitment to the technical traditions of limited animation, *Bob's Burgers* positions itself as a descendant of early television animation. In doing so, *Bob's Burgers* distinguishes itself from its contemporaries. By approaching *Bob's Burgers* as a text that embraces the unreality of legacy television animation, we see clearer parallels

between contemporary and historic television animation. In addition, this approach further decenters *The Simpsons* as the premier point of historical comparison.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “Quiet Dignity? Have You Met Us?:”

#### **Auditory Echoes of Legacy Television Animation in *Bob's Burgers***

In a 1998 interview with *AV Club's* Stephen Thompson, legendary animator Chuck Jones stated that since its earliest days, he has always delineated television animation as little more than "illustrated radio." In support of his assessment, Jones argues that television animation lacks motion and relies on sound to communicate narrative and comedic clarity (Jones 1998). In other words, according to Jones, if you stripped television animation of its sparse visuals, the audience would have the same experience listening to an episode of animated television as they would a radio program. Jones' statement reflects the field of animation studies' historical privileging of the visual presentation of the animated form. This privilege of the visuality of the animated form is understandable, given the interesting evolution of style from crudely constructed two-dimensional vaudeville cartoons to computer-generated three-dimensional animation. However, by privileging the visual, animation studies have marginalized subsections of critical interest, such as sound studies. This chapter positions *Bob's Burgers* as an example of the contemporary execution of a primarily dialogic soundscape that echoes the sounds of early television animation.

#### **Animation Studies' Previous Interests in Sound**

The field of animation studies has historically privileged cinematic animation when it came to exploring the intersection of sound studies and animation studies. For instance, Paul Taberham (2018) writes in his research that cinematic animation is of

particular interest because the audio of cinematic animation functions "...like an echo of the physical world in an otherwise constructed landscape..." (131). The remainder of his research argues that in correlation with changes in film sound technologies, cinematic animation sound design has been incorporated creatively into different stylistic traditions (Taberham 2018, 131). Although Taberham refers to animation in the general sense, it is apparent that the author is primarily focused on understanding the soundscape of cinematic animation. Taberham's research communicates larger trends within animation studies that have historically marginalized-television animation, especially from subsections of study such as sound studies. For instance, Victoria Jackson (2019) discusses how, in the 1930s and 1940s, the BBC popularized the practice of broadcasting what was then called 'radio cartoons.' These cartoons predate broadcast television and are exclusively cinematic cartoons from Disney and other popular studios during the time (290). Therefore, even in a historical sense, there have been efforts to discuss how radio and cinematic animation collide, rather than television animation and radio, despite their institutional and aesthetic similarities, as highlighted by Chuck Jones.

What attention has been paid to television animation as it intersects with sound studies can be attributed to the scholarly fascination with sound effects. However, it is notable that this particular interest also intersects with scholarly research on cinematic animation. Robert L. Mott (1991) speaks to this interest. He writes, "although a harmony between picture and sound is important in all areas of sound effects it is especially vital in animated films" (83). To support this claim, Mott argues that the vitality of sound effects in theatrical animation manifests itself in forms of limited animation, given the limitation

of animation's reduced ability to visually communicate narrative and comedic clarity (Mott 1991, 82). Mott's assessment of the vitality of sound effects to theatrical forms of limited animation becomes apparent when approaching the theatrical cartoons produced by United Productions of America (UPA). Kevin Sandler (2019) explains that UPA was the studio responsible for pioneering the limited animation aesthetic in the theatrical space. Limited animation was popularized in the 1950s and was an economized form of animation that deviated from the traditions of full animation, which in the years previous has dominated the cinematic space. Limited animation was characterized by its sparse visuals and was consequently heavily dependent on sound in a way that its predecessor, full animation, was not (Sandler 2019, 82–83). Mott later argues that sound effects within theatrical cartoons emphasized not only action but also permitted the audience to be connected to character emotions, despite the limitation of the visual expression of said emotions (Mott 1991, 82). It is important to note that while Mott is addressing limited animation within his research, he is primarily concerned with theatrical forms of limited animation rather than cartoons that embody televisual forms of limited animation's aesthetics. Although limited animation, as presented on television, has pulled from forms of cinematic limited animation, such as the cartoons produced by UPA, there is still a distinction to be made between their aesthetic styles (Sandler 2019, 84–86).

Patrick Sullivan (2021) introduces an intersection between television animation and sound studies while highlighting the scarcity of research regarding Hanna-Barbera Productions, despite the studio's substantial contributions to television animation. He argues that while television animation's application of sound effects has garnered some

attention in recent years, it remains largely unexplored. In correlation with this assessment, Sullivan also implores that to fully understand the animation of Hanna-Barbera Productions, scholars must take the studio's usage of sound effects into consideration. According to Sullivan, much like the studio's visual aesthetics, these sound effects produced by Hanna-Barbera Productions have become sonically iconic (22). Such usage of sound effects directly correlates to traditions of radio comedy as well as radio drama. For instance, Mott argues that before the integration of sound effects, radio was auditorial static in its execution. Audiences sat and listened to conversations without the assistance of visuals to clarify the narrative action. Early critics of radio argued that listening to a radio drama was not dissimilar to attending the theatre blindfolded. To create a lush soundscape, radio began exploring the use of sound effects. In doing so, it could compensate for the absence of the visual (Mott 1991, 82). Like radio, Sullivan states, "Hanna-Barbera repeatedly used its library of boinks, zaps, zips, skids, and other sound effects to infuse movement into the animated image" (2021, 22). Therefore, there are clear lines between radio and broadcast television animation. However, Sullivan's research also expresses that contemporary scholarly interests lie in exploring the intersection between sound studies and television animation.

While exploring sound effects is critical to understanding the connections between television animation and radio and constructing an understanding of their respective soundscapes, other parallels between radio comedy and television animation also deserve attention. For instance, in their own way, both mediums demonstratively privileged sound over the visual. For radio, privileging sound over the visual is a natural

consequence of its auditory form. However, as Michele Hilmes (2008) notes, the practice of privileging audio over the visual trickled down into the development of broadcast television (153). This audio-visual hierarchy is communicative of not only television's roots in radio but each medium's initial privileging of an aural presence over a visual presence from a historical development perspective. Kevin Sandler (2019) states that, like its live-action counterpart, television animation depends on sounds, such as dialogue, music, or voice-over narration (76). By depending on the construction of a primary aural presence and secondary visual presence, early television animation was able to communicate narrative and comedic clarity. As previously stated, much like early forms of television animation, radio depended on aural constructions of presence and the audience's imaginations. Therefore, a historical connecting thread can be drawn between the soundscapes of broadcast radio and broadcast television animation. This historical thread can help us understand the auditory landscape of early television animation and how that is reflected in contemporary television animation forms.

### **Echoes of Radio in Early Television Animation**

According to Shawn VanCour (2015), radio in the 1920s was admonished for the aural shocks of modernism broadcast-on the airwaves. He states that radio was perceived as both a public informer and a nuisance (10–11). Susan Douglas (2004) states that radio's alleged invasion of the American home led to its classification as a public nuisance during the 1920s (56). However, as VanCour points out, radio fostered community listening by displaying radios in stores that would entice people to congregate around the device (VanCour 2015, 11). This form of community listening is something

that radio would eventually come to be known for in the domestic sphere. Much of radio's acceptance into the domestic sphere can be attributed to the popularization of radio dramas, which distinguished the radio from other forms of aural entertainment, such as the theater. VanCour cites in later research that the distinction between radio and theater comes from the "specialized forms of acting and storytelling" radio adopted to create lush and coherent soundscapes (VanCour 2018, 110). In the same spirit as radio dramas, early radio comedy constructed a comedic landscape rooted in vaudeville traditions and dependent on dialogic comedy. Such dialogic comedy included the construction of distinct comedic characters through tone, speech, pattern, and accent and the utilization of linguistic slapstick. Without visuals to assist in the construction of comedic characters, radio depended on employing linguistic signifiers such as accent specificity, tone, and speech patterns. Douglas discusses how the employment of "linguistic signifiers" was critical for radio comedy's development. Because radio was aural rather than visual, listeners had to use their imaginations to fabricate the characters they heard chattering through the airways. To aid the audience in constructing distinct pictures of characters, performers developed specific patterns of speech, accent, and tone. She states, "it was the contrast between types of voices with different timbres, accents, and inflections, that was key to radio's humor—the jokes lay as much between the sounds and pronunciations of different voices as they did within the voice of one character" (Douglas 2004, 111). In a similar vein, Glyn White and John Mundy (2012) discuss that such linguistic signifiers were critical to individual radio comic success. Through the usage of linguistic signifiers, radio comics were able to distinguish themselves from other

voices on the airway. White and Mundy use the critical success of radio comic Will Rogers as an example. They argue that Rogers found success through his satirical comedy that appealed to working-class America in the Midwest. However, a critical component of Rogers' comedic success was his employment of specific accent, tone, and speech patterns that corresponded with the personalities that Rogers was not only trying to appeal to but emulate as well (85).

Early television animation employed a similar practice to counteract the visual simplicity of their programming and to create memorable characters. According to Paul Wells (2003), emphasis on dialogue and voice became one of the key distinguishing factors of early television animation, one that further divorced it from cinematic animation (23). Early television animation's emphasis on what a character sounded like helped fabricate specific comedic personalities in lieu of relying on their visual construction. Much like radio, the aural fabrication of comedic personalities was directly connected with a character's accents, tonality, and speech patterns. Tyler Solon Williams (2021) speaks to this, stating that Hanna-Barbera had an acute understanding that full animation did not translate well to the space of television. Therefore, when producing their cartoons, Hanna-Barbera focused on creating lush comedic soundscapes that were accompanied by limited visuals (Solon-Williams 2021, 4). For instance, Hanna-Barbera produced several characters that each possessed a unique voice that would distinguish them from the other characters within their show and the ones within Hanna-Barbera's production library. Take Hanna-Barbera's Fred Flintstone, for instance. Like his visual presentation, Flintstone's voice contributes to the complete fabrication of his character,

including his comedic persona. Fred is positioned as a working-class caveman who is gruff and prone to frequent bursts of anger. This essence of Fred's character is communicated through his tone of voice, which is rough, and his speech patterns, which are coded as working class. Like radio comedians, Fred's aural presence not only contributes to the fabrication of his character but also works to distinguish him from other characters. Within *The Flintstones*, the direct foil to Fred is his neighbor Barney Rubble, who exerts a gentler presence which is communicated through his mild manner of speaking. Through the juxtaposition of Fred and Barney, Fred is permitted to function as an individualistic personality that is explicitly coded as working class, whereas Barney's mild manner of speech positions him as genial. Consequently, *The Flintstones* create two unique personalities whose polarized energies ricochet off each other to create a comedic soundscape.

In addition to the usage of linguistic signifiers, radio comedy was also heavily dependent on linguistic slapstick. Douglas defines linguistic slapstick as a form of comedy that aurally replicates the physicality of the slapstick that was characteristic of vaudeville performances. She argues that linguistic slapstick was used by radio to counter the absence of the visual (2004, 101). White and Mundy explain that when vaudevillians migrated to radio, they tried to adapt their acts for aural exhibition. However, these vaudevillians struggled to translate the physical aspects of their comedy, such as props. This struggle was further punctuated by the absence of live audiences to react to the vaudevillians' acts. Therefore, slapstick acts that were funny on the stage became lost in translation without key fixtures of their comedic routines. Consequently, the most

successful comedy acts on the radio were music and comedy routines that were rooted in verbal sparring (White and Mundy 2012, 83). Linguistic slapstick privileged verbal sparring between two characters that were typically different in their essence. Such methods of verbal sparring created a unique comedic effect that was rooted in dialogic exchange rather than the physical slapstick of vaudeville that also came to define silent-era film comedy.

Early television animation adopted radio comedy's usage of linguistic slapstick. In *The Flintstones*, linguistic slapstick operates as a form of comedic exchange between clashing personalities. From the very beginning of the series, Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble are positioned not only as friends and neighbors but as opposites as well. Where Fred is rough, Barney is gentler, and where Fred is gruff in his methods of verbal combat, Barney is "petty," according to David Perlmutter (56). According to Paul Wells, this dichotomy between Fred and Barney's personalities was meant to represent the post-war discourse between the pre-established middle class and the working class (Wells 2002, 93–94). This articulation of *The Flintstone* characters as an implicit forum of social-political discourse permits Fred and Barney's dynamic to clash. In addition to divides in socioeconomic status, early television animation also employed linguistic slapstick to articulate divides in intelligence. For instance, Hanna-Barbera's *Yogi Bear* uses linguistic slapstick to articulate the divide in intelligence between Yogi Bear and Boo-Boo. Within the short-lived cartoon, Yogi Bear believes he is Boo-Boo's intellectual superior and asserts that belief through scheming. However, Yogi's plans consistently fail, exposing his average intellect. Yogi's companion Boo-Boo compliments Yogi's narcissistic

personality. Yogi believes Boo-Boo depends on his guidance, but Boo-Boo consistently shows that he is more adept than Yogi himself. This dynamic, while void of the same implicit political discourse as *The Flintstones*, executes dialogic comedic exchange in the form of linguistic slapstick. For instance, in the episode "Oinks and Boinks," Yogi and Boo-Boo find themselves lost in the woods. While walking, Boo-Boo states, "Yogi, why don't you admit it, we're lost." In response, Yogi confidently says, "Boo-Boo, buddy, we just misplaced our cave, that's all." Boo-Boo then mumbles, "I never heard of woodland creatures getting lost, Yogi." In this scene, Boo-Boo, aware of their predicament, gives Yogi an opportunity to admit he was wrong. However, Yogi's narcissism prevents him from doing so, leading Boo-Boo to poke fun at him. This is due to the imbalance between the pair that opens itself up for comedic jabs.

### **The Sounds of Contemporary Broadcast Animation**

#### ***The Simpsons, Satire, and Physical Comedy***

While early television animation pulled from the comedic techniques of radio to develop its aural presence, contemporary programs have migrated away from these early echoes of radio techniques. Most of contemporary television animation now prioritizes satirical comedy and bombastic physical slapstick rather than a dialogic comedy. Silas Kaine Ezell (2016) speaks to this in their research regarding comedic trends in American television animation. Ezell states that the dominant form of humor found in contemporary television animation is manifested out of the disillusionment with the mythicized American dream (15). To communicate disillusionment, "animated television series often use graphic violence in their jokes, elevate the picaresque character, [and] rely on the

absurd while maintaining ironic realism at their core" (Ezell 2016, 14). According to Ezell, animated television's articulation of disillusionment places animated programs within a "nether-space of respectability." (2016, 18). At one end of the spectrum are people who consider contemporary television animation a key contributor to conversations about the state of American society. The other end of the spectrum is occupied by those who dismiss contemporary television animation for its crude modes of humor (Ezell 2016, 18). Since its appearance in 1989, *The Simpsons* has remained the lead presenter of satirical humor commenting on American society. In comparison to early television animation, *The Simpsons* not only use satirical comedy but also favor a flavor of bombastic slapstick that runs parallel to the comedy style's more physical roots. Throughout *The Simpsons*, there are instances where the characters are violently dismembered or beaten. For instance, the show's longest-running gag is Homer strangling his son, Bart. To articulate the violent physicality of this act, *The Simpsons* exaggerates the motion of Homer throttling Bart as well as Bart's expressive reaction. *The Simpsons'* emphasis on the visual is in direct contrast with legacy television animation's emphasis on the aural. While satire can be rooted in the dialogic, *The Simpsons'* satire depends on the accompaniment of physical gags. For instance, Homer Simpson is dysfunctional and idiotic, whereas the ideal father is intelligent, decent, and a source of stability for his family. Likewise, in contrast with the ideal son, Bart Simpson is chaotic and disobedient. As satirical portraits of the ideal, Homer and Bart's relationship is polarized, and the act of strangulation is a physical expression of this dynamic. While many of the animated series that came after *The Simpsons* also embraced this shift

towards satirical and bombastic slapstick humor, *Bob's Burgers* notably echoes the comedic sounds of legacy forms of television animation.

### ***Bob's Burgers: Linguistic Signifiers***

For instance, *Bob's Burgers'* comedic soundscape is defined by its reliance on the deployment of distinct linguistic signifiers such as the tone, accent, and speech patterns of the characters that occupy the series. Tina Belcher, Bob and Linda Belcher's eldest child, is characteristically awkward and expresses an avid interest in boys, horses, and zombies. Tina's character is visually fabricated through her plain clothes, knee-high socks, and unfashionable haircut that visually distinguishes her from her peers, who are more fashion-forward. In an aural sense, Tina is distinguished from other characters by her deep and monotone voice as well as her slow pattern of speech. Much like other animated characters of early television animation, the tone of Tina's voice helps differentiate herself from other feminine preteen characters within the show who possess higher-pitched valley-girlsque voices. Because of this process of aural differentiation Tina becomes isolated from her peer group that she desperately wants to fit in with. Consequently, one of the comedic themes of the series becomes Tina continually trying to relate to her peer group in increasingly convoluted ways. An episode that best articulates this comedic theme is "Vampire Disco Death Dance." In this episode, Bob and Tina are planning to don costumes and attend a screening of Bob's favorite movie: *Vampire Disco Death Dance*. However, Tina derails their plans when she invites a few of her peers to attend the screening. Throughout the episode, Tina makes efforts to engage with her peers but persistently feels disconnected from them. The aural

differentiation between the teens emphasizes Tina's disconnect from her peer group. For instance, where Tina's voice is more monotone, her frenemies' voices are nasally and-higher pitched. What makes "Vampire Disco Death Dance" an arguably unique example of the aural disconnect experiences from her peers is how *Bob's Burgers* visually manifests her isolation. For instance, on route to the movie Tina sits in the passenger seat, and friends are crammed in the back. The physical isolation Tina is experiencing in this scene directly correlates with her aural separation from her peers. What is additionally interesting about this scene is that Tina is forced to turn around in her seat to interact with her peers. This extra physical labor on Tina's part speaks to the extra social labor she performs to fit in with her peers, which is emphasized by the sonic quality of her voice. Therefore, the differentiation in tonality between Tina and her peers not only contributes to Tina's awkward personality but also works to isolate her from her peer groups. In addition, Tina's voice plays into her awkward character and makes the delivery of lines such as "don't have a crap attack" more pointedly comedic.

The same is true for Linda Belcher, who has a nasally and thick New Jersey accent. At this point, it is worth mentioning that contrary to the norm, Linda and Tina are both voiced by male voice actors. The significance of this distinction is that much like radio, through the sonic quality of their voices, John Roberts (Linda) and Dan Mintz (Tina) are constructing aural caricatures based upon pre-conceptualized audio signifiers. For instance, Roberts states that the sonic quality of Linda's voice comes from the exaggerated impressions he does of his New Jerseyan mother. He argues that aural notes of this impression are demonstrated in the inflections and warbles of Linda's voice that

have become specific to her character (Bob's Burgers, 2022). Therefore by rooting his performance in a caricature of his mother, Roberts is using pre-conceptualized audio signifiers to create Linda's aural presence. Much like Tina, Linda's voice distinguishes her from other female characters that appear within *Bob's Burgers*, the majority of whom possess slower and milder speech patterns. For instance, Cynthia Bush, the snooty mother of Lousie's nemesis, Logan, is a recurring character on the series who acts as a direct foil to Linda's character. The dichotomy between Linda and Cynthia is represented visually through their respective costuming. For instance, Linda is dressed practically for her food service job and does not wear makeup or jewelry. In contrast, Cynthia wears nice clothes, makeup, and pearls. *Bob's Burgers* aurally emphasizes the contrast between Linda and Cynthia through the difference in the sonic quality of their voices. Unlike Linda, Cynthia speaks in an even and sharp tone. Cynthia's tonality reflects her upper-middle-class personality that, directly clashes with Linda's more erratic disposition. Therefore, Linda's voice becomes a point of aural differentiation between her and other female characters. However, unlike Tina, who is still struggling to fit in with her peer group, Linda's voice also aligns her with other female characters. For instance, Gretchen, who is introduced in the earlier seasons of the show as Linda's best friend, possesses a similar tone, accent, and erratic speech pattern as Linda. Therefore, in Linda's case, her voice distinguishes her from other female characters and demonstrates where her friendships lie. Tina's voice, however, articulates her feelings of isolation from her peer group.

In addition to Linda and Tina, Jimmy Pesto Junior is another character whose tone of voice articulates his comedic presence. Jimmy Pesto Junior, or Jimmy Junior as he is

known in the series, is the blonde-haired preteen love interest of Tina. Although Tina considers him a desirable match, Jimmy Junior is woefully average. Jimmy Junior's averageness is visually communicated through his homely character design, complete with jeans, wheat-colored hair, and minimal jawline. Aurally, Jimmy Junior's slight lisp and petulant voice express his averageness, which, much like Linda's heavily accented voice and Tina's monotone voice, constructs Jimmy Junior's comedic presence. *Bob's Burgers* connects much of its comedy to expressions of aural contrast. The comedic quality of a character's voice becomes emphasized when juxtaposed next to a character with drastically different aural signifiers. For instance, *Bob's Burgers* partially constructs Jimmy Junior's comedic presence from the sonic contrast between him and Tina. Where Tina is monotoned and dry, Jimmy Junior is petulant and melodramatic. Tina's unwavering desire for Jimmy Junior further punctuates his comedic presence. For instance, in "Sheesh! Cab, Bob?" Tina persuades her parents to allow her to have a boy-girl thirteenth birthday party in hopes of kissing her crush, Jimmy Junior. Bob takes up a second job as a cab driver to pay for the party. While Bob is successful in raising-funds for Tina's party, Jimmy Pesto forbids Jimmy Junior to attend the party. Initially, because of Jimmy Junior's absence, Tina does not want to attend her birthday party. Eventually, the events of the episode work out, and Jimmy Junior is permitted to attend Tina's party. When Jimmy Junior's averageness is taken into consideration, the-dramatic lengths to which Tina has gone to stage her first kiss with him becomes humorous in their absurdity. Tina continues to resort to such lengths of dramatic and awkward forms of seduction throughout the series to win Jimmy Junior's affections. Each convoluted scheme on Tina's

behalf is comedically punctuated with the aural reminders of Jimmy Junior's averageness. For instance, in "Sheesh! Cab, Bob?" Tina spends the first portion of the episode gushing over Jimmy Junior. However, Jimmy Junior is not introduced as a character in the series until about midway through the episode, leading to a buildup of tension: what is this boy like to merit Tina's crush? In the episode, Tina corners Jimmy Junior at his locker to invite him to her party. While leaning seductively (read: awkwardly) against the locker, Tina says, "This is an invitation to my birthday party." She then pauses before saying, "Hey I notice you haven't RSVP'd to my party yet." Jimmy Junior responds with a heavy lisp, "Um I need to ask my dad for permission. Can I let you know later?" In this moment, the tension is broken, and the audience is aurally struck by Jimmy Junior's averageness that seems irreconcilable with Tina's obsessive affections. Therefore, the juxtaposition of Tina's obsession and aural reminders of Jimmy Junior's averageness make their interactions comedic.

### ***Bob's Burgers: Linguistic Slapstick***

In addition to its usage of linguistic signifiers, *Bob's Burgers* also recalls the dialogic comedy of legacy television animation through its deployment of linguistic slapstick. According to Douglas is a form of comedy that aurally replicates the physicality of the traditional slapstick (2004, 101). The effective deployment of linguistic slapstick is dependent on the creation of comedic tension through aural contrast and the release of that comedic tension. *Bob's Burgers* primes two dynamics for linguistic slapstick: antagonistic and friendly. Antagonistic dynamics depend upon the collision of two contrasting personalities. In comparison, friendly dynamics rely on a sense of

balance created through contrast. An example of an antagonistic relationship within *Bob's Burgers* that primes itself for linguistic slapstick is that of Bob Belcher and his neighbor/competitor Jimmy Pesto. Bob Belcher and Jimmy Pesto are opposites in demeanor. Where Bob is more monotone and reserved, Jimmy is expressive and performative. Consequently, Bob and Jimmy are frequently at odds with one another. A typical antagonistic exchange between Bob and Jimmy appears in the season two episode "Burgerboss." In hopes of drumming up business, Bob buys an old restaurant-themed arcade game, sharing its title with the episode. However, Bob becomes obsessed with the video game when Jimmy gets the high score and writes "BOB SUX" on the leaderboard. This turn of events gives way to this comedic exchange between the two characters:

JIMMY: See you, Bob. Call me next time you find something that you think you're good at. Oh hey, almost forgot.

*(Jimmy enters "BOB SUX" onto the leader board)*

BOB: "Oh, ha ha. "BOB SUX" that's really funny, Jimmy. Then, you know, when I beat your high score, I'm gonna write "Jimmy Pesto is an idiot, and he doesn't know how to spell 'sucks.' And he's dumb!"

This exchange between Bob and Jimmy is humorous in its blatant juvenile antagonism. This scene also articulates the men's ability to goad each other into a state of juvenile pettiness that is comedic in its triviality and stupidity. Bob and Jimmy are colliding forces that indulge in linguistic slapstick to punctuate the antagonism of their interactions. In addition to Bob and Jimmy, the dynamic between Tina and her fenemey Tammy Larsen also articulates the sort of antagonism that primes itself for linguistic slapstick. Tammy was introduced in season two as the new girl in town that Tina befriends to get

closer to Jimmy Junior. After her introduction, Tammy becomes a recurring character whose abrupt and obnoxious personality acts as a foil to Tina's subdued and monotone presence. Aurally Tammy's personality is communicated through her high-pitched and valley girlesque voice. Contrastingly, Tina possesses a monotone voice. This contrast in personalities causes Tammy and Tina to clash frequently throughout the series, creating an antagonistic dynamic ripe for linguistic slapstick. For instance, in the season five episode "the Run Away Club," Tina, testing out a new look, shows up to school with a sparkle jelly bracelet. While walking to class, Tina runs into Tammy, who is wearing the same bracelet. Distraught over their matching fashion statements, Tina and Tammy confront each other:

TAMMY: Tina, you need to take that off right now. Sparkle jelly bracelets are my thing since yesterday when I bought it.

JOCELYN: Yeah!

TINA: Tammy, I understand you're disappointed. I'm a little disappointed too. Before I saw it on you, I thought this bracelet was classy.

TAMMY: Take. It. Off.

TINA: I. Would. Rather. Die.

TAMMY: Then you will die!

This exchange between Tammy and Tina results in a physical altercation that lands the Belchers and a group of their peers in Saturday detention. This exchange between Tammy and Tina is humorous because of its melodramatics. Said melodramatics directly result from the antagonistic collision of Tammy and Tina's contrasting personalities, as expressed sonically through the differentiation in the aural quality of their voices.

Additionally, what is notable about Tammy and Tina is that their collision does not always invoke such melodramatic reactions from one another. For instance, in the episode "Broadcast Wagstaff School News," while a serial pooper is on the loose at Wagstaff School, Tammy and Tina compete for the lead anchor spot of their school news team. The faculty advisor selects Tammy over Tina for her more energetic presentations of superficial "news" stories and her claim to understand the wants of the Wagstaff Student body. However, when Tina decides to go rogue, her investigative journalism resonates with the Wagstaff Student body more than Tammy's bombastic "news." As the episode progresses, the pair clash as Tammy attempts to affirm her superiority over Tina by stealing her news story. Tammy and Tina's point of collision gives way to comedic exchanges such as this:

TAMMY: You know what? I'll do my own story and it will be way better than yours, you lame-pon.

TINA: Good I hope it is.

TAMMY: It will be!

TINA: Because then we'll have more information about the Mad Pooper—

TAMMY: Tina we're trash talking stop turning it into a normal conversation.

TINA: Oh, sorry, um skank?

TAMMY: That's much better!

This exchange between Tammy and Tina is significant because, besides being comedic, it perfectly expresses Tammy and Tina's colliding dynamic: Tammy performs what she thinks is teen girlhood, specifically competing with her social equal to whom she feels superior, but Tina's natural inclination is sincere and non-performative. However, unlike

in the previous exchange, Tammy's goading does not elicit a dramatic reaction from Tina. Instead, faced with Tina's stoic reaction, Tammy admonishes the other teen for turning trash talk into a "normal conversation." Regardless, the exchange between Tina and Tammy serves as evidence of how their dynamic contributes to the construction of *Bob's Burgers'* comedic soundscape through linguistic slapstick.

In addition to antagonistic relationships, *Bob's Burgers'* most prolific deployment of linguistic slapstick comes from the comedic exchanges between the Belchers themselves. As Ben Travers writes, much of what is appealing about *Bob's Burgers'* is the likeability of the Belchers (Travers 2020). The Belchers' likeability stems from their refusal to be mean to each other, even for a comedic bit. *Bob's Burgers'* refusal to indulge in mean-spirited comedy is established in the pilot episode. For instance, Hugo confronts Bob about his numerous health code violations in the pilot. He states that Bob's "burger of the day" (which Louise has renamed "the Child Molester") violates public decency laws. In the middle of Hugo's dressing down, Bob questions his family about the name change:

BOB: Uh, what's the Child Molester?

LOUISE: It's the burger of the day.

BOB: No, it's not.

LOUISE: It was for a limited time only, until you came back upstairs.

BOB: Did someone actually order this?

GENE: Yeah.

BOB: Who?

GENE: Him.

The camera then cuts from the exchange in the kitchen to show a man sitting at the bar of the burger shop. He has an awkward chevron mustache, thin greasy hair, and sunken eyes. After assessing the customer, Bob states, "he *looks* like a child molester. Louise don't serve him. Let Gene bring it." This comment by Bob inspires a new round of comedic questioning:

GENE: Why do I have to get molested?

BOB: Because he's not gonna molest you.

GENE: Why?

BOB: 'Cause you're heavy.

GENE: Heavy kids can get molested.

LOUISE: Yeah, who wouldn't want to molest this face?

BOB: It's not that. I mean, Gene 'cause you're older.

GENE: Tina's the oldest, make her do it.

BOB: Yeah, but Tina's not good with the customers.

TINA: I'm good with the customers.

ALL: Mmm, not really.

TINA: I'm great with the customers.

LOUISE: She's autistic. She can't help it.

TINA: Yeah, I'm autistic.

HUGO: Bob-

BOB: Yeah, just a sec. No, you're not autistic Tina.

Much to Bob's annoyance, Gene tosses three toothpicks onto the floor and asks Tina to count them. After some deliberation, Tina guesses that there are a hundred, sparking

amusement in her family. Gene adds a new toothpick to the pile and asks Tina to count them again. Eventually, Tina states that there are three toothpicks on the ground, causing her family to dissolve into giggles and poke fun at her. Louise says, "you're the worst kind of autistic," and Gene adds, "yeah, you can't even count." Like radio comedy, the exchange between the Belchers is quick, and its momentum only deteriorates when Hugo recenters the conversation back to Bob's health code violations. However, what is notable is that this exchange between the Belchers is not rooted in mean-spirited antagonism or animosity. Instead, the Belchers genuinely enjoy each other's company and find amusement in each other's idiosyncrasies. Aurally, the Belchers balance each other. For instance, where Linda, Gene, and Louise exhibit energetic auditory signatures, Bob and Tina are more subdued. Unlike the linguistic slapstick that stems from contrasting antagonistic dynamics, that which comes from friendly dynamics relies on a sense of harmony. Therefore, linguistic slapstick produced by friendly dynamics is punctuated by its friendly undertones, which contributes to the charm of *Bob's Burgers*.

We see more of this playful comedy in the season four episode-"A River Runs Through Bob." In this episode, Bob takes his reluctant family camping. While trying to have a romantic rendezvous, Bob and Linda get swept away by a rushing river. Eventually, Linda and Bob crawl out of the river, but now (mostly) naked and lost. The pair must navigate the woods back to the kids. At the beginning of their journey, Bob and Linda plan their approach to escape the woods. Bob and Linda's-planning process quickly turns into a round of linguistic slapstick between the married couple:

LINDA: Why does this vest smell like puke and fish?

BOB: That's the smell of a man. A healthy camping man.

LINDA: Camping's gross. And we're friggin' lost.

BOB: *You* might be lost, but I'm not lost. I know the woods. All we have to do is follow the river back to camp.

LINDA: You're sure of that Mr. Outdoors.

BOB: Yeah. We'll be in our tent before the kids even wake up.

LINDA: Good. We got to get to the kids before wolves raise 'em. It's my worst fear.

Little wolf Gene. I'd have to cut holes in all the seats of his pants.

BOB: Why?

LINDA: For the tail.

BOB: Why would we even dress him? He's a wolf.

LINDA: Because he'd still need to go to school and be loved by the other kids.

BOB: But he'd be a—he wouldn't want to wear clothes. It doesn't...

LINDA: Just because he's different Bob.

BOB: Do you know how much money we would save Lin?

Much like the interaction in the pilot, Bob and Linda's engagement is not rooted in antagonism. Bob does not make fun of Linda for her contingency plan if the kids turn into wolves. Nor does Linda angrily criticize Bob for their misfortunes. Instead, the pair engage with each other in a way that is steeped in fondness for the other's oddities. The camaraderie between the pair gives space for linguistic slapstick that contributes to the charm of *Bob's Burgers*. The linguistic slapstick in this scene, and throughout the series, is amplified by the juxtaposition of the character's voices. For instance, Bob has a lower and droning voice, which directly contrasts with Linda's nasally and melodic voice. The

contrast between Bob and Linda's voices intensifies the comedic delivery of their exchange. Without the aural contrast between their voices, Bob's line "that the smell of a man. A healthy camping man," and Linda's anxious musings would be deprived of a critical essence of their comedic flare. Therefore, not only does *Bob's Burgers* rely on antagonistic relationships to deploy linguistic slapstick, they also rely companionable relationship.

### ***Bob's Burgers: Sound Effects***

*Bob's Burgers* uses linguistic signifiers and linguistic slapstick in ways that recall the sonic devices of early radio comedy and early television animation. The series also pays homage to legacy forms of television animation via its use of sound effects, particularly in the context of Gene Belcher. Gene is Bob and Linda Belcher's energetic middle child who enjoys the creation of music and sounds. Gene's use of a sound effects machine and keyboard to capture and create different sounds exemplify his musicality. However, *Bob's Burgers'* diegetic integration of sound effects distinguishes the series from Hanna-Barbera cartoons. For instance, in the season one episode, "Crawl Space," Bob decides to hide in the apartment crawl space when Linda tells him her parents are coming for an extended visit. While Gene is lying in bed one night, he hears his grandparents having sex in the room next door and, without hesitation, decides to sample the sound with a microphone attached to his keyboard. At other points in the series, Gene uses the sounds from his keyboard to offer comedic punctuation, much to the annoyance of the characters around him. *Bob's Burgers* uses Gene as a vehicle to express limited animation's relationship with sound effects. Limited animation, deprived of the same

visual intensity as full animation, depends heavily on sound to better express motion (Sandler 2019 and Sullivan 2021). For instance, Hanna-Barbera would use well-timed whistles and skips to accentuate the motion of running and abruptly stopping (Sullivan 2021, 27).

However, compared to Hanna-Barbera's use of sound effects, Gene's are ill-timed and inappropriate in their execution because they are diegetic and an extension of an eleven-year-old boy. In earlier episodes of the series, Gene would disrupt the more "serious" discussions with his sound effects. Gene's mischievous sonic disruptions typify his contributions to the show's comedy. For example, in the series' pilot episode "Human Flesh," Bob preps his family for the grand re-re-re-opening of their restaurant. While Bob is debriefing his family for the day, Gene uses a megaphone to produce sounds of flatulence. Gene and his sound effects machine are not a nuisance upon their introduction. However, later in the episode, Gene uses his sound effects machine to disrupt a conversation between Bob and the health inspector. Gene's unwelcome and vulgar sound effects annoy Bob, who subsequently takes away the machine. The absurdity and timing of the sound effects are incongruous with Bob's conversation, creating the comedic effect. John Morreall (2009) writes that incongruity occurs when there are unexpected and abrupt disruptions in everyday mental patterns and experiences (11). In the case of *Bob's Burgers*, the Incongruity Theory applies when sound effects are used to disrupt on-screen action in a way that violates mental patterns and experiences. In addition, Gene's ill-timed and inappropriate usage of his collection of sound effects often creates friction between him and other characters. Much like the sound effects

themselves, the friction between Gene and the other characters relies on incongruity for comedic effect. For instance, in the season 10 episode, "Drumforgiven," Gene is banned from the Ocean Avenue HiFi Emporium for his inappropriate explorations of their music equipment. Eager to re-enter the emporium, Gene challenges Dino, the emporium's owner, to a "drum machine battle." Dino and Gene take turns mixing sounds in an electronic drum machine. Dino's musical musings are organized, while Gene's are eclectic. While Gene's eclectic nature is the source of the friction between him and Dino, it is also what permits him to enter the musical space once again. Dino sees himself in Gene and the charm of his motley style and allows Gene into the music shop. The drum machine battle is absurd and unexpected in both its execution and its principal functionality, but much like the sound effects, the absurdity makes the scene comedic.

*Bob's Burgers* depends on linguistic signifiers, linguistic slapstick, and incongruous sound effects to construct its comedic soundscape. While *The Simpsons* employ linguistic signifiers that have become signatures to the show, the series primarily relies on satire and physical comedy. *The Simpsons'* mixture of high and low-brow forms of humor aligns with what Morreall refers to as Superiority Theory. Superiority Theory explores the notion that laughter can be invoked when someone's misgivings are revealed through public humiliation (2009, 8). *Bob's Burgers* and *The Simpsons* diverge sonically, which also separates them comedically. By drawing clear parallels between the comedic soundscape of *Bob's Burgers* and that of early television animation, which was indebted to early radio, this chapter proves the futility of evaluating *Bob's Burgers* against *The Simpsons*. However, by reintroducing the historical

contributions of radio comedy and early television animation, we can evaluate *Bob's Burgers* according to a standard that emphasizes innovative connections between sound and humor. Thus, by not treating *The Simpsons* as the only viable point of historical comparison, *Bob's Burgers* becomes a text of value.

## CONCLUSION

When compared to *The Simpsons* (1989–), scholars and critics consider *Bob's Burgers* irredeemable in its averageness and unattractive style, leaving the series to be all but exiled from animation studies. However, fields of scholarship outside of animation have seen *Bob's Burgers*' value as cultural text exploring contemporary portrayals of feminism and working-class family dynamics on television (Smith 2018, Tully 2018, France 2022). While this scholarship is valuable, these “disciplinary tourists” (Browsh 6) do not necessarily possess the historical or contextual knowledge that the discipline of animation studies can provide. Animation studies can begin to unpack the value of *Bob's Burgers* as an animated text when it is compared to legacy forms of television animation rather than *The Simpsons*.

While I used *Bob's Burgers* as case study for this thesis, later research could expand to include other animated series previously dismissed by animation studies due to their incompatibility with *The Simpsons*. For instance, Wendy Hilton-Morrow and David McMahan (2003) discussed three failed cartoons produced during the 1990s prime time animation boom, including *Fish Police* (CBS 1992) and *Capitol Critters* (ABC 1992) (79). *Fish Police* and *Capitol Critters* were both short-lived television cartoons designed to compete with the popularity of *The Simpsons*. *Fish Police* is a police comedy that follows a fish named Inspector Gil, whereas *Capitol Critters* is an animated sitcom about a family of mice that live in the White House. After only airing six episodes, *Fish Police* quickly received the ax from CBS. Likewise, ABC quickly canceled *Capitol Critters* (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 2003, 79). Both *Fish Police* and *Capitol*

*Critters* have contextualized *The Simpsons'* success in the 1990s. However, few scholars have addressed the historical comparisons that can be made between *Fish Police*, *Capitol Critters*, and legacy forms of television animation, which is strange considering that *Fish Police* and *Capitol Critters* are Hanna-Barbera-produced cartoons. Thus, by maintaining *The Simpsons* as the fulcrum of animated television, these failed animated series merely function within television history as scaffolding to prop up *The Simpsons'* success.

In addition, further research could approach how streaming animation connects to legacy forms of television animation. There has been an increased investment in animation in the age of streaming television. Netflix has led this charge to invest in animated content and was soon followed by other streaming services such as HBO Max, Apple TV+, Amazon Prime, and Hulu. Leslie Goldberg of *The Hollywood Reporter* writes that streaming services increased their investment in animated content because it is cheaper to produce and is bingeable (2021). However, in this new age of streaming animation, despite a wide range of narratives and styles, *The Simpsons* remain central to conversations about television animation. For instance, in a *Time* article charting the history of adult animated television, Andrew R. Chow chronologically begins with *The Simpsons*. Chow goes as far as to call *The Simpsons* "the North Star of adult animation." He later states, "...cartoons specifically for adults as opposed to children are a relatively new development, coming to mainstream prominence only after *The Simpsons'* success in the early '90s" (Chow 2021). By not addressing *The Flintstones* (the first adult cartoon) Chow actively erases Hanna-Barbera's critical place

in animated television history and limits the historical connections to be made to contemporary animated television. Therefore, even in the new age of streaming television, a time in which adult animated television is being redefined by shows such as *The Midnight Gospel* (2020), *Invincible* (2021–), and *Tuca & Bertie* (2019–), *The Simpsons* maintains its status as the historical fulcrum.

There are also research questions that run tangentially to the topics covered in this thesis that I did not address at this time but are worth pursuing. For instance, the creators behind *Bob's Burgers* have produced two new television series: *Central Park* (2020–) and *The Great North* (2021–). *Central Park* is a musical comedy about a cast of strange but well-meaning people living near Central Park. The series premiered in May of 2020 on Apple TV+ and received mixed reviews, much like its predecessor. Kathryn VanArendonk from *Vulture* summarizes *Central Park's* reception by stating that it is “a delight that's also sometimes a misfire.” VanArendonk argues that *Central Park* constructs its characters from a collage of randomized characteristics pulled from the *Belchers* (2020).

Consequently, *Central Park* feels underdeveloped. However, VanArendonk firmly believes that with time *Central Park* can grow into itself and charm its viewers in the same way its predecessor has (VanArendonk 2020). *The Great North* received a similar reception from critics and viewers. *The Great North* is a comedy about the Tobin family and their lives in remote Alaska. Jen Chaney from *Vulture* writes that the series “exudes a warmth that is welcome, whether you live in Lone Moose, Alaska, or anywhere else where, literally or figuratively, it often feels pretty cold outside.” However, Chaney

also argues that *The Great North* does not charm its viewers until episodes three and four (Chaney 2021).

In addition to receiving a similarly lukewarm reception as *Bob's Burgers*, what is interesting about *Central Park* and *The Great North* is that they signify how *Bob's Burgers'* animation style has become a cycle. For instance, like *Bob's Burgers*, the design of *Central Park* and *The Great North* favors a subdued color palette, the use of inorganic and organic shapes, and thin linework. In terms of aesthetics, *Central Park* and *The Great North* are rooted in the same limited animation practices of its predecessor. Although this thesis shifted attention away from *The Simpsons* to highlight the benefits of drawing historical comparisons between legacy television animation and contemporary television animation, the animation style of *The Simpsons* is also cyclized.

For example, after *The Simpsons* became culturally legitimized by the television industry in the 1990s, Matt Groening created a show that executed a similar style. *Futurama* (1999–2003, Fox and 2008–2009, Comedy Central) was a comedy set in the distant future that initially premiered on Fox in 1999 and remained there until 2003. Tyler Mitchell of *Looper* writes that after Fox, *Futurama* saw a long period of syndication on Adult Swim before being picked back up by Comedy Central (2021). Joe Otterson of *Variety* reports that since it departed from Comedy Central, Hulu decided to revive *Futurama* (2022). While *Futurama* never saw the same stability as its predecessor, its creation arguably signifies *The Simpsons'* status as a culturally legitimized text. The creation of *Disenchantment* (2018–), a medieval fantasy series, further endorses *The Simpsons'* status of cultural legitimacy. Therefore, future research could explore how the

cyclization of an animated television show's specific style and design might act as a signifier of cultural legitimacy.

Another topic that could be addressed in later research is how *Bob's Burgers'* experiments with the limited animation aesthetic when exploring genres other than comedy. For instance, in the musical special "Warf Horse (Or How Bob Saves/Destroys the Town) Part I/II," Felix Fischeodar (Zach Galifianakis) enlists Bob's help in convincing Mr. Fischeodar (Kevin Kline) to sell the local amusement park, The Wonder Warf. However, when Felix's plan goes wrong, he attempts to murder Bob and Mr. Fischeodar. Within this two-part event, *Bob's Burgers* experiments with the aesthetics of limited animation by exploring the surrealist conventions of the musical genre. While animation is not a genre (Greenberg 2011), much like the aesthetic of limited animation, the musical aesthetics are rooted in an essence of unreality (Harrison 2012, 226). *Bob's Burgers* melds the unrealism of the musical genre and limited animation through its use of spotlighting and swift changes in environments. For instance, at the beginning of the number "Nice Things Are Nice," Bob and Mr. Fischeoder sit in a restaurant overlooking the bay. In his efforts to persuade Mr. Fischeoder to sell Wonder Warf, Bob breaks out into song, which is marked by the sudden appearance of a spotlight and the restaurant taking on a pinkish hue, giving the environment a dream-like quality. This unrealism of the music melds with the unrealism of the limited animation aesthetic through *Bob's Burgers'* use of camera movement and close-up shots of the performing characters' faces.

Another example of *Bob's Burgers'* aesthetic exploration of different television genres is the episode "Fort Night." In this Halloween episode, Louise's mean classmate

Millie traps the Belcher siblings and friends in their fort. While the Belchers and friends are trapped in the fort, Millie subjects the group to psychological torture. For instance, during the group's early moments of entrapment Millie slips a bundle of plastic spiders into the fort, eliciting panic. This episode in its use of psychological torture embodies the generic signifiers of horror television (Westcamp 2020, 124). Aesthetically *Bob's Burgers* communicates this episode's connection to the conventions of the horror genre through its use of tight close ups and tracking shots. Therefore, another topic of research that I did not address but would be interesting to pursue is how *Bob's Burgers* experiments aesthetically to embody the conventions of other television genres.

Lastly, as I noted in chapter two, *Bob's Burgers'* feature film premieres in the summer of 2022. In this chapter, I used the *Bob's Burgers* feature film trailer to visually catalog the feature film's embrace of the full animation aesthetic to fit within the cinematic space. The trailer functions as a paratext that reaffirms *Bob's Burgers'* use of the limited animation aesthetic. However, further research could use this film as a case study to analyze how animated content initially from television must abandon its aesthetic principles within the theatrical space. Furthermore, further research could question how this aesthetic change might fundamentally compromise the text's integrity previously established in the space of television.

Regardless, the discipline of animation studies is young, academics and critics must remember that animation is not. For animation studies to progress as a field, its richer television history must be reconnected to contemporary television animation. The only way to do this is to cast wider intellectual nets that fish for animated histories that do

not begin and end with *The Simpsons*. Otherwise, the field runs the risk of abandoning unexplored and valuable texts, leading the field of study to continue to pursue paths that led back to Springfield. If there is no intellectual exploration, there can be no progression, and without progression, there is stagnation. Moreover, what is animation without movement? Therefore, conversations about animated television must be decentralized from *The Simpsons* to gain new perspectives and better expand intellectual exploration of television animation.

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