

How Ralph Bakshi Revived Authenticity in Animation

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

The fundamental fallacy that animation is inherently a child-friendly genre rather than a legitimate medium of artistic expression has long persisted. However, in the past few decades, animation has increasingly transcended this stereotype, appealing to both adult and younger audiences alike. This thesis argues that the shift toward mature, thematically rich animation is largely attributable to the pioneering work of Ralph Bakshi. Through an auteur analysis, this study examines how Bakshi's bold and authentic approach to the medium revolutionised the animation industry.

Bakshi's work in adult animation, social satire, and experimental techniques paved the way for modern creators such as Genndy Tartakovsky, Mike Judge and Aaron McGruder whose works continue to push the boundaries of the medium. By situating Bakshi's rise within the socio-political turbulence of mid-20th-century America, this research contextualises his impact on animation history. Beginning with *Fritz the Cat* (1972), the most successful independent animated film of its time, Bakshi's career spanned multiple genres and implemented innovations such as rotoscoping, mixed media, and satire-driven narratives. His most controversial film *Coonskin* (1975) is briefly examined as a case study in how animation can serve as a vehicle for extreme social critique.

Finally, this thesis explores Bakshi's influence on the television animation renaissance of the 1990s through his *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures*, which fostered a new generation of animators and redefined the potential of animated storytelling. Through this analysis, Bakshi emerges as a seminal figure in shaping animation's evolution into a legitimate, diverse, and expressive cinematic art form.

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Introduction

The misleading notion surrounding animation as a child-friendly genre rather than a filmic medium of expression is nothing new. Although in the last 30-odd years popular animation has often been claimed to cross that line appealing to both children and adults with unprecedented success. In this thesis I shall argue that this feat comes as a direct result of the career and influence of Ralph Bakshi, whilst also serving as an auteur analysis of the man himself. Bakshi paved the way for authentic storytelling in animation through his expressive and challenging use of the medium often drawing from contemporary civil unrest and the underground comix culture of a divided mid-20th century America.

His pioneering work in ‘adult animation,’ social satire, and experimental techniques has its influence felt through the work of contemporary creators like Genndy Tartakovsky (*Samurai Jack*), Aaron McGruder (*The Boondocks*), and Phil Lord & Chris Miller (*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*), who incorporate bold themes and unique visual styles into their work in a modern-day setting. With the rise of Adult Swim, YouTube and other streaming platforms (many of which pedal mature themed animation which can offer more creative freedom than we’ve seen before), Bakshi’s brave and brash spirit continues to influence modern animation, shaping its evolution and inspiring new generations of animators to take risks and challenge the norms of popular filmmaking; allowing for *honesty* in cartoons again – something unafforded in a strictly child-friendly medium.



Figure 1 – Still from *Hey Good Lookin'*

My argument shall first establish a real-world context for the rampant underground counterculture as a result of the civil unrest from such events as *The Vietnam War*, *The Watergate Scandal* and *The Kent State Massacre*. As well as this, my first chapter shall also map out the torpor of the animation industry during this time and provide Ralph Bakshi as the man to kickstart the ‘new wave’ of cartoons with his first feature *Fritz the Cat* in 1972.

During the ‘New Hollywood’ era, live-action cinema evolved into a grittier, more authentic style, drawing influence from European cinema and the emergence of young directors. Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) is a prime example of this shift, moving away from the wide-screen, spectacle-driven films of ‘Old Hollywood,’ such as William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959). In contrast, animation faced stagnation both in theatres and on television. The nostalgic Disney “feel-good” storytelling, rooted in wartime fantasy, was losing its appeal. The ‘Saturday Morning Cartoon’ had become little more than a vehicle for pedalling merchandise, using inexpensive limited animation sometimes dubbed ‘illustrated radio.’ To the vast majority, animation remained strictly a child-friendly affair. Ralph Bakshi, an animator with a multicultural, working-class background, was uniquely positioned to introduce a new, authentic approach to animation as a medium, drawing from his own life experiences.

Bakshi’s first feature film *Fritz the Cat* (an adaptation of Robert Crumb’s comic) tore up the Disney rule book for an animated theatrical production and was a true form of artistic expression. By visually borrowing directly from the medium of which it had adapted and adopting an array of money saving production techniques, Bakshi used the underground culture to provide an avenue to sell the film. Ultimately this would jumpstart his career, becoming the most successful independent animation ever grossing nearly 100 million dollars, proving that there was indeed another way to lucratively approach the medium with nuance.

My second chapter will discuss the eleven-year period from 1972-1983 where Ralph wrote and directed eight whole features in an array of genres many of which used rotoscoping and a mixed media approach, and directly cross live action with animation. Audiences were buying into a new style of cartoon which didn’t necessarily rely on the gag to sell it.

I will briefly address Bakshi's most controversial film *Coonskin* (1975), (though it will not be the focus of this thesis, as it could warrant an entire study on its own) and shall highlight his use of pre-established racial stereotypes in the film, employing them for extreme satire, and how this reflects the counterculture sentiments of the time. The character of ‘Miss America,’ who sarcastically embodies the idealised American dream, further exemplifies this critique. The backlash from *Coonskin*, especially when compared to the mainstream reaction to the re-release of Disney’s *Song of the South* (1946) in the 1970s (which presented a rose-tinted retrospect of race relations), underlines the cultural divide of the nation.

My final chapter showcases the effect Bakshi had on his return to the children’s cartoon format and how his *Mighty Mouse* revival would spark the cartoon renaissance of cable television in the 90s. This segment explores the growing consumer appetite for original television programming and examines Ralph Bakshi’s impact on the animation industry. By empowering his team of young artists on *Mighty*

Mouse to be creative and challenge the norms of network television, Bakshi fostered an environment of innovation. Many of his crew members went on to achieve significant success, with their work being credited as both important and groundbreaking at the turn of the 21st century. Bakshi's legacy, alongside the resurgence of success in children's cartoons, not only inspired a new generation of animators but also contributed to creating a space for bolder, artistically authentic, and commercially viable expressions in animation—something that had been largely absent from the industry for the previous two decades.

Suffice it to say that Bakshi's influence on the animation industry and on the next generation of animators gave a newfound platform for genuinely creative expression in cartoons that was both original and authentic whilst not reliant on exhausting pre-established characters of old to be commercially viable.



Figure 2 - Bakshi on set of Cool World

Chapter One

How Ralph Bakshi's *Fritz the Cat* Broke the Disney Formula and Revolutionised the American Animated Feature



Figure 3 - Still from *Fritz the Cat*

Introduction

“I don't just like abstract art, I love everything. Because abstract artists had something to go up against... and that was realism. I had something to go up against... and that was Disney. I don't dislike Disney, but I knew that wasn't the only answer.”

– Ralph Bakshi ¹

When thinking of Bakshi's 1972 animated feature *Fritz the Cat*, many may recall it as the first 'adult animation,' filled with controversy and nudity. However, its significance goes beyond this. The film addresses real, contemporary issues, using animation as a powerful medium to tell its story with a fitting visual style, offering its audience something far from the typical feel-good Disney cartoon, especially during a tense and challenging period in America.

¹ Jackson, Barry. The Zoom Art Studio. “Interview: The Making of *Fritz the Cat* with Ralph Bakshi” YouTube. 12:55 to 13:05. December 25, 2023. Accessed: January 12, 2024
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8v871Qci25M&t=25s>

While animated features like *Gay Pur-ee* (1962) and *Yellow Submarine* (1968) challenged Disney's stagnant formula and showcased the potential of feature-length animation, Disney's family-friendly style continued to dominate, shaping the public's view of animation as a "genre" rather than a medium, as seen in films like *The Jungle Book* (1967) and *Winnie the Pooh* (1968).² Bakshi's first feature, *Fritz the Cat*, broke these conventions, serving as a bold attempt to make cartoons truer to life and challenge the norms of popular animation.

This chapter examines *Fritz the Cat* within the context of mid-20th century cinema, focusing on its place in the animation industry and its socio-political and cultural significance. I will explore the challenges Bakshi faced in bringing his auteur vision to life, demonstrating how he was the ideal person to 'liberate' the medium of animation. Despite a limited budget and production difficulties, Bakshi's determination led to creative workarounds that enhanced the technical, visual style, and authenticity of the final film. While not universally praised, the film's mixed reception was offset by its significant box office success. Ultimately, *Fritz the Cat* became a springboard for Bakshi, granting him the creative freedom that defined the rest of his career.



Figure 4 – Still from *Yellow Submarine*

² Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 58



Figure 5 – Still from *Gay Pur-ee*

Context Regarding Industry, Social Culture and Bakshi

“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

- Rita Mae Brown ³

To understand *Fritz the Cat*, it is essential to contextualise the state of the animation industry in relation to live-action’s whilst set against the socio-political backdrop of post-1960s America. In 1942, Chuck Jones’ critically acclaimed *Dover Boys* utilised ‘limited animation,’ a technique that was both artistically innovative and visionary for its time.⁴ This style was later popularised during the television revolution of the 1950s, exemplified by ‘UPA style’ cartoons like *Rooty Toot Toot* (1951) and *The Violinist* (1959).^{5 6} However, by the 1960s, the economic viability of limited animation, combined with the success of the ‘Saturday Morning Cartoon’ time slot, led to an over-commercialisation of the medium. Animation departments at major studios were becoming burdens, and theatrical animation was in decline. MGM’s animation division folded in 1957, Warner Brothers followed in 1963, and even Disney nearly ceased animated short production in the 1960s.⁷ Studios like Terry Toons would be bought out by CBS⁸ and Famous Studios (formerly Fleischer Studios)

³ Brown, Rita Mae. *Sudden Death*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1983) 68

⁴ Beck, Jerry. *The 50 greatest Cartoons: As Selected by 1,000 Animation Professionals*. (Turner Publishing, 1994)

⁵ Amidi, Amid. *Cartoon Modern: Style and Design in Fifties Animation*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006) 112

⁶ *Ibid*, 63, 136

⁷ Stabile, Carol.; Harrison, Mark. *Prime time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*. (London, UK, 2003) 35 - 36

⁸ Yowp. “*Tralfaz: Death to Terrytoons*”. Tralfaz.blogspot.com.

August 14, 2021.

Accessed: January 10, 2024

would be renamed Paramount Cartoons – beginning its demise.⁹ Limited animation – once a creative and innovative stylistic choice of Chuck Jones, Robert Cannon and John Hubley that gave an alternative look to the Disneyfication of animation¹⁰ – had now become a method used to produce cheap, uninspired content for children, contributing to a stagnation in the industry that would last well into the 1980s.^{11 12} Key events, such as Chuck Jones’ departure from Warner in 1962 in apparent violation of his contract working on *Gay Purree* and Walt Disney’s death in 1966, both, I think, signify a bygone era in animation.¹³



Figure 6 - Still from Star Trek: The Animated Series - example of commercial network animation

⁹ Beck, Jerry. “Paramount Cartoons”. CartoonResearch.com. 2013.

Accessed: January 14, 2024

<https://cartoonresearch.com/index.php/paramount-cartoons/>

¹⁰ Furniss, Maureen. *Animation: Art and Industry*. (Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press, 2009) 185; Unknown. “The Dark Age of Animation”. TVTropes.org.

April 29, 2010.

Accessed: January 10, 2024

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/MediaNotes/TheDarkAgeOfAnimation>;

¹¹ Unknown. “The Dark Age of Animation”. TVTropes.org.

April 29, 2010.

Accessed: January 10, 2024

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/MediaNotes/TheDarkAgeOfAnimation>

¹² Meyer, Andrew. *Animation or Cartoons: An American Dilemma*. (USA: Seattle Pacific University, 2016) 33

¹³ Jones, Chuck. *Chuck Jones: Conversations*. (USA: University Press of Mississippi, 2004) xi



Figure 7 - Background from *Rooty Toot Toot*

The social context of the time cannot be understated as a factor in why *Fritz* was so impactful at the time of its release. America was going through great turmoil in the late 60s to early 70s in almost every respect. The post war Republican agenda of anti-communism and conservative religious politics left the youth demanding change. The subsequent rise to presidency of Richard Nixon post Kennedy's assassination left huge civil unrest,¹⁴ an extreme example being the Kent State Massacre of 1970 which saw the death of four unarmed student protestors during a rally opposing the US involvement in the Vietnam War.¹⁵ None of this is to mention the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and assassination of Martin Luther King Jr four years later, all adding to the anti-establishment/counterculture sentiment which can be broadly characterised as the youth's rejection of mainstream values and embracement of alternative lifestyles in the face of these turbulent times. The hip scene of underground media in youth culture was rampant, taking the form of rock and roll through stars like Janis Joplin, comic outlets such as *Zap*, and European existentialist philosophers, for instance, Camus.¹⁶

Live-action cinema transformed to reflect this. After the abolition of the Hayes Code in 1968, Hollywood had moved away from using grandiose, wide-screen spectacle as a solution to television's apparent killing of cinema,¹⁷ and looked to world cinema for influence. Neorealist Italian and New Wave French cinema was exciting – as indeed it had been for the last twenty years. The French had defined the roles of cinema and broken them repeatedly, the effectiveness of auteurism in European cinema was at the forefront of their appeal. The rhetoric established by French filmmaker and critic Francois Truffaut in his 1954 article 'A certain tendency of French Cinema,' proposed the notion that the director be considered the true author of his film.¹⁸ Whilst prior in Italian neorealism, the plight of the working class in a post fascist state, using on location filmmaking seemed to reject the theatrical cinematic conventions of

¹⁴ Kimmage, Michael. *The Conservative Turn*. (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 2009) 2

¹⁵ Wallenfeldt, Jeff. "Kent State shooting" Britannica.com. September 18, 2023

Accessed: January 14, 2024
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Kent-State-shootings>

¹⁶ Frommer, Fred. "1960's Counterculture". Britannica.com. August 31, 2023.

Accessed: January 14, 2024
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/1960s-counterculture>

¹⁷ Sklar, Robert.; Cook, David A. "History of Film: The threat of television". Britannica.com. January 8, 2024

Accessed: January 14, 2024
<https://www.britannica.com/art/history-of-the-motion-picture/The-threat-of-television>

¹⁸ Truffaut, François. *Une Certaine Tendance of Cinema Francaise*. (France: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1954)

Hollywood.¹⁹ Now, in the US, young filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg and Francis Ford Coppola would be given complete trust and full financial backing to go and make something unprecedented and fresh.²⁰ Exciting titles such as *Mean Streets*, *Easy Rider*, and *A Clockwork Orange* a year before the release of *Fritz* proved massive hits, many of which also held risqué narratives reflective of the youth's counterculture and desire for something new. All the while animation seemed to remain the same, despite the glaringly obvious demand for raunchy, genuine, and adult story telling. As far as most were concerned animation was a studio derived, child friendly, and exclusively a family affair.²¹ The result of this was that there remained no moral liberty for storytelling nor accessible financial backing for a young visionary director in the field of animation, despite the recent steps forward in American live action.



Figure 8 - Still from Easy Rider

¹⁹ Iannone, Pasquale. "10 great Italian neorealist films". BFI.org.uk. March 6, 2014

Accessed: January 14, 2024

²⁰ Evony. Any-mation. "Ralph Bakshi | Animation's New Wave". YouTube. 02:00 to 02:15. February 21, 2019. Accessed: January 12, 2024

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TE9mENS9i4c>

²¹ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 15

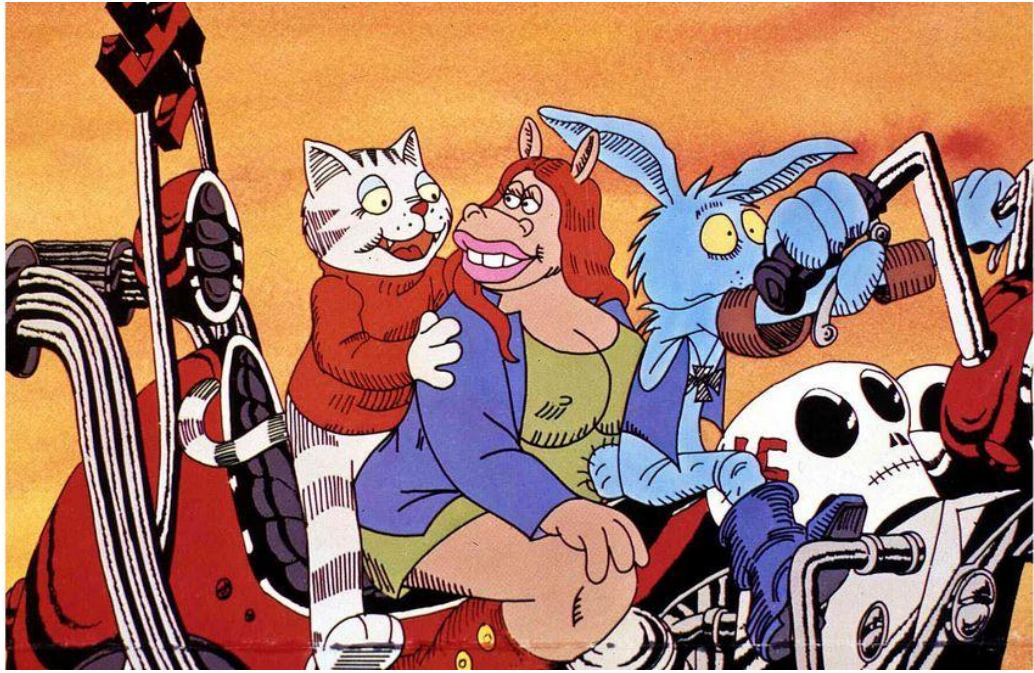


Figure 9 - Still from Fritz the Cat



Figure 10 - Image from the Kent State Massacre



Figure 11 - Director Stanley Kubrick with Malcolm McDowell onset of A Clockwork Orange



Figure 12 - Portrait of Janis Joplin by Robert Crumb.

Ralph Bakshi grew up in Brownsville, New York: a poor, multicultural, melting pot, where he lived with his sister and observed the complexities of diverse communities.²² This upbringing, surrounded by Black, Irish, Italian, and Jewish families, shaped his worldview, encouraging him to judge people by their character rather than appearance –an uncommon perspective in the mid-20th century. This exposure to raw, diverse experiences influenced the brazenly honest characters he would later create, resonating deeply with audiences.

Bakshi began his career in 1958 at Terry Toons, painting cels for cartoons like *The Sad Cat* and *Mighty Mouse*.²³ A decade later, he pitched and became the director of *The Mighty Heroes* on CBS, a show praised for its fresh and charismatic take on Saturday morning cartoons. However, Bakshi soon found that his creative influence was limited, as much of the production was completed before he could contribute.²⁴ Disillusioned, he left Terry Toons in 1967 and took a position as creative director at Paramount Pictures Cartoon Studios, only to discover the studio was on the verge of shutting down, leaving him as a “holdover.”

During this time, Bakshi collaborated with producer Steve Krantz on several projects, including *Spider-Man* and educational shorts for Encyclopaedia Britannica. Yet, Bakshi's desire to redefine American animation remained unfulfilled, prompting him to pursue a fresh, innovative approach to the animated feature film.²⁵

At this time Bakshi pondered what was worth saving in animation and why these studios were closing. To Ralph, animation had become boring, the ‘cat and mouse’ gag had been done to death, and he was tired of the Disney quota.²⁶ The death of Walt Disney mid-decade left the studio in a creative slump post *Jungle Book* (1967), yet still their domination of the market continued to hold. It was clear something needed to change. An authenticity lacked given the state of affairs in the real world, something Ralph of all people could give his two cents on.

*“The idea of grown men sitting in cubicles drawing butterflies floating over a field of flowers, while American planes are dropping bombs in Vietnam and kids are marching in the streets, is ludicrous.”*²⁷

²² Ibid, 18

²³ Collier, Kevin. *Ralph Bakshi's The Mighty Heroes Declassified*. (Burbank, California: Cartoon Research, 2017) 7; Unknown. “*The Dark Age of Animation*”. TVTropes.org. April 29, 2010.

Accessed: January 10,2024

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/MediaNotes/TheDarkAgeOfAnimation>

²³ Meyer, Andrew. *Animation or Cartoons: An American Dilemma*. (USA: Seattle Pacific University, 2016)

²⁴Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 48

²⁵ Ibid, 52

²⁶ Worth, Steven. “*Ralph Bakshi: Surviving In Tough Times*”. YouTube. 01:50 to 02:15. August 2, 2008. Accessed: January 10, 2024

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WApCUBcVMos>

²⁷ Osmond, Andrew. *100 Animated Feature Films* (London, UK: BFI Publishing, 2011) 77



Figure 13 - Still from *Fritz* showing three recognisable characters cheering on fighter jets bombing protestors. An ouverte jab from Bakshi at Disney.

Bakshi initially intended his first feature to be *Heavy Traffic*, however it was postponed at producer Steve Krantz's recommendation to make an adaptation, thus Bakshi used Robert Crumb's *Fritz the Cat*.²⁸

The Technical and Visual Aesthetic of *Fritz the Cat*, its Shoestring Budget, and Thematic Relevancy

*"I'm just gonna animate and try make the story better... That's all I did!"*²⁹

After securing the rights to adapt Crumb's *Fritz* for \$50,000, Bakshi pitched the project to several major studios, eventually receiving an \$850,000 budget from Warner Brothers.³⁰ Although the film was still presumably R-rated, Bakshi refused to hold back and presented an explicit, sexually charged junkyard scene where Fritz gets high and has sex with Big Bertha. This scene appalled Warner executives, leading them to cancel the project, frustrated over the \$250,000 already spent. Bakshi then struck a deal with Cinemation,³¹ but the budget was so tight that he could barely maintain his crew. This financial constraint led to significant improvisation and creative workarounds to complete the film – issues that Disney, with its larger resources, did not face.³²

²⁸ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 84

²⁹ Worth, Steven. "Ralph Bakshi: Surviving In Tough Times". YouTube. 03:25 to 03:40. August 2, 2008. Accessed: January 10, 2024

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WApCUBcVMos>

³⁰ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 66

³¹ Jackson, Barry. The Zoom Art Studio. "Interview: The Making of *Fritz the Cat* with Ralph Bakshi" YouTube. 02:15 to 2:50. December 25, 2023. Accessed: January 12, 2024

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8v871Qci25M&t=25s>

³² Barrier, Michael. "*Funnyworld Revisited: I. Bucking the Tide*." MichaelBarrier.com Fall, 1973



Figure 14 – Still from *Fritz the Cat* - Junkyard Sex Scene with Big Bertha pitched to Warner Bros.

The art direction of Crumb's *Fritz the Cat* and of the underground comics scene in general, paired Ralph's vision for his picture perfectly. Something about pen and ink managed, to convey an immediacy to the drawings depicting the urban decay which many lived with. The monotonising excess of wires and poles on the everyday street corner would have certainly resonated with the average disconcerted American. Aside from the hatched rendering with which Crumb was synonymous and made its way into the characters of Bakshi's film, Crumb also used to trace photographic pictures of the ordinary, everyday scene for backgrounds. Maintaining a catalogue of these kinds of photos to draw from aided in *grounding* the world for its audiences, no matter how outlandishly caricatured the characters were,³³ and served the purpose of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary – something Bakshi would utilise and build upon to full effect in his feature. The deployment of this method was not only cost effective but would also allow Bakshi's team to draw extremely complex perspectives never seen in animation.³⁴

Accessed: November 21, 2023

<http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Funnyworld/FritzPartTwo/FritzFour.htm>

³³ *Crumb*. Directed by Terry Zwigoff, Superior Pictures, 1994. Youtube
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbplbGJziZQ>

1:11:30 to 1:12:37

³⁴ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 77

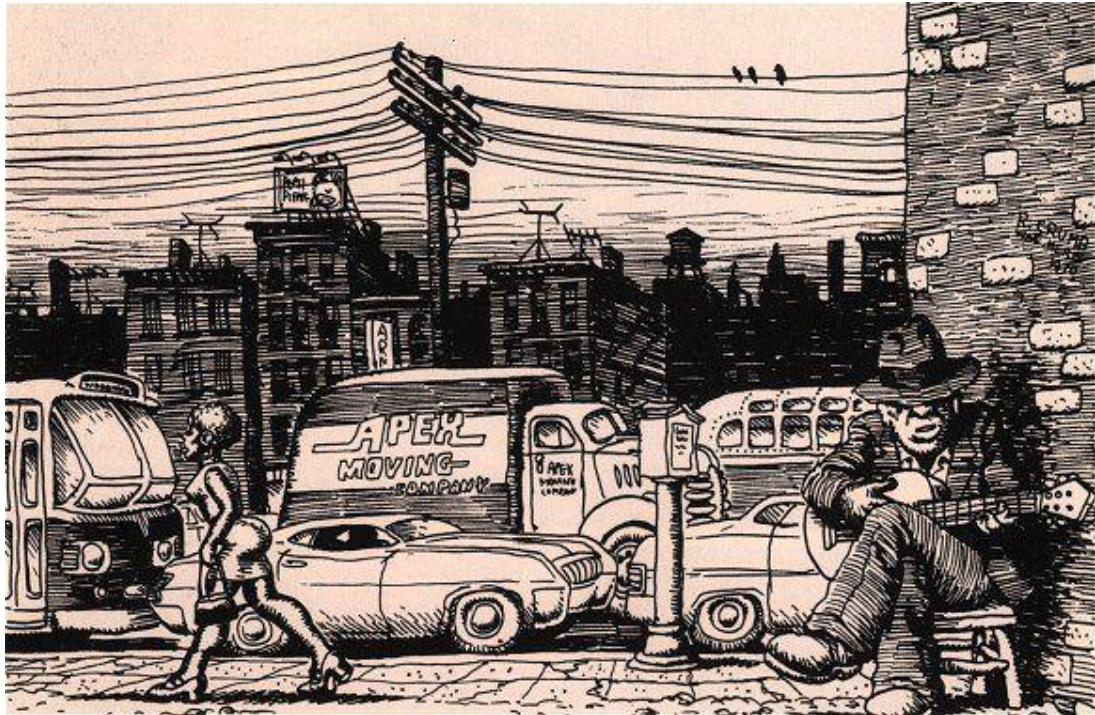


Figure 15 - An example of Crumb's photographic referenced backgrounds.



Figure 16 - Still from Fritz, demonstrating traced techniques

The allocation of funds for this tight budget would have to be prioritised, resulting in Bakshi making several clever cost-cutting decisions that I think ultimately add to the film and encapsulate its authenticity. For example, regarding audio, Ralph introduced

what would become a trademark of his films; the “man on the street” technique.³⁵ For many scenes, instead of using voice actors, he took his recorder to the streets and talked to the ordinary person. He would go bar to bar buying a round of drinks for a table and start a conversation, recording incidental barroom chatter that couldn’t simply be scripted, giving us a more genuine sense of *raw* everyday folk. This approach provided a genuine sense of realism that was absent from more popular fantastical films at of the time.



Figure 17 - Still from Fritz which utilised “man on the street” technique.

More budget-saving measures included a lack of pencil tests for animation – drawings were now “flipbooked” and judged by eye to get a sense of timing. There was never a shadow pass, little to no storyboarding but instead scenes mainly derived from the archive in Ralph’s head.³⁶ Yet Ralph remained a cartoon classicist and refused to use limited animation. His hellbent determination for the film being full animation or nothing, meant that he had to take the inking and celling across the border into Mexico for a fraction of the price of getting it done in the States – a decision that would see Ralph move production from New York to LA after a falling out with the union.³⁷

Traced photographs captured New York’s backstreets without prejudice. By using a 35mm camera, tracing outlines with a radiograph pen and watercolour washes in purples, greens, and blood reds, Ralph created a gritty, stylised realism of dirty appeal coined “Ash Can.”³⁸ This visually striking world, combined with anthropomorphic characters reflecting New York’s racial diversity, was completely original. Whilst also governed by human-like rules, these anthropomorphic characters made a vessel for deeper metaphors, making themes like death and conflict more impactful.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid, 72

³⁷ Jackson, Barry. The Zoom Art Studio. “Interview: The Making of Fritz the Cat with Ralph Bakshi” YouTube. 04.00 to 5:00. December 25, 2023. Accessed: January 12, 2024
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8v871Qci25M&t=25s>

³⁸ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 77



Figure 18 – Still from *Fritz the Cat - Duke's Death*; 'Ash Can style' on display allowing a certain gravity to the situation at hand.

With tight budgets in animation for most other than Disney – many struggled to compete, often prioritising polish over impact.³⁹ Ralph however, focused funds on story and animation, using creative workarounds like effective audio recording to support his vision. He tailored his style to fit the narrative, proving that budget constraints didn't limit his filmmaking. Unafraid to break industry norms he redefined what was possible in animation.

Reaction and Influence

When *Fritz* wrapped for production, the Motion Picture Association of America would rate the film 'X',⁴⁰ something some critics would judge to be unfair and based on a separate criterion compared to live action, simply because of the medium and its association with children. Film critic Rex Reed retorted that it would be no worse for kids than the Saturday morning muck they were already watching.⁴¹ Nonetheless, this X rating would play to Cinemation's advantage, who would market it as a 'must see' spectacle, "We're not X-rated for nothin', baby!" This strategy of advertising, in turn, would bring about unprecedented success for the film. However, this could be seen as simultaneously condensing the narrative to that of a shallow counterculture 'flick' pandering to 'stoners.' When, in fact, the subject matter almost directly satires this along with the pertinent and rich social commentary on topics such as the civil rights movement and the fashionable hypocrisy of the self-congratulating, *enlightened*

³⁹ Barrier, Michael. "*Funnyworld Revisited: I. Bucking the Tide.*" MichaelBarrier.com Fall, 1973

Accessed: November 21, 2023

<http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Funnyworld/FritzPartTwo/FritzFour.htm>

⁴⁰ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi.* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 80

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 77

college student populists amongst the New York elect. An immediate influx of other adult animations such as *King Dick* (1973) and *Tarzoan: Shame of the Jungle* (1975), would inevitably be released in tow with its success, although perhaps missing the mark on all that *Fritz* had accomplished.

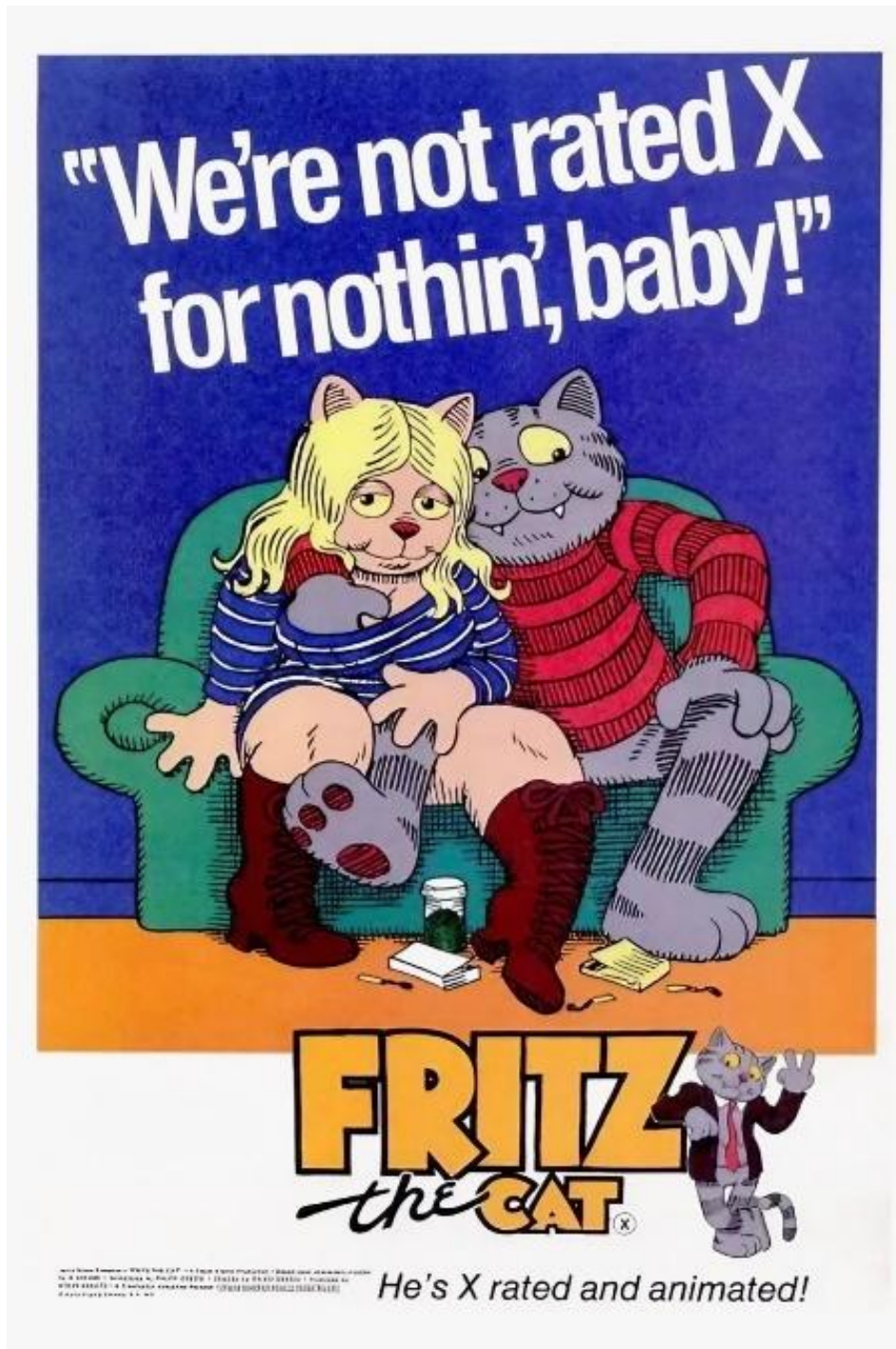


Figure 19 – Poster for Fritz the Cat



Figure 20 - Advertising Posters for: King Dick and Tarzoon: Shame of the Jungle – the element of promiscuity at the forefront.

Bakshi would be labelled a pornographer⁴² amongst many in the industry and was thought to have disgraced animation⁴³ with his “juvenile” and vulgar picture.⁴⁴ In fact, a full-page ad in Variety Magazine signed off by 50 well known Hollywood animators was taken, telling Bakshi to stop tarnishing the image of Disney and get out of L.A.⁴⁵

Robert Crumb was quick to distance himself from the production and Bakshi, claiming it to be an “embarrassment” which was unoriginal, and that Ralph and his team were “*shlock meisters*” who “just rolled right over me,” feeling as though he was coerced into signing off on the rights to Fritz. This distain ultimately led to Crumb killing the character of Fritz in a later comic by an ice pick to the head. Perhaps Crumb was offended by the satirising of the generic enlightened counter culturist, since this is a persona with which he has openly admitted to identifying with.⁴⁶

⁴² Jackson, Barry. The Zoom Art Studio. “Interview: The Making of Fritz the Cat with Ralph Bakshi” YouTube. 07:00 to 07:10. December 25, 2023. Accessed: January 12, 2024

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8v871Qci25M&t=25s>

⁴³ Rose, Steve. “Who flamed Roger Rabbit?”. The Guardian.com August 11, 2006

Accessed: January 13, 2024.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/aug/11/1>

⁴⁴ Albright, Thomas. *Fritz the Cat*. (Rolling Stone. No. 109. Straight Arrow Publishers, Inc., 1972) 74

⁴⁵ Bakshi, Ralph. “Draw What You Want To Draw”. Animation World Network awn.com. July 1, 1999.

Accessed January 9, 2024

<https://www.awn.com/animationworld/draw-what-you-want-draw>

⁴⁶ Arnold, Andrew D. “R. Crumb Speaks”. Time Magazine. Time.com.



Figure 21 – Panels from Fritz the Cat “Superstar” - Crumb kills the character of Fritz, effectively ending his association with the character.

However, despite the mixed reviews, *Fritz* was invited to the Cannes Film Festival where it was a smash hit at the box office, becoming the most successful independent animation ever made, and grossing almost 100 million dollars with a roughly 1-million-dollar budget.⁴⁷ Its appeal for modern audiences is enduring, whereas by comparison, and from Bakshi’s point of view, the so-called ‘more refined’ animated features of that era are today, irrelevant.⁴⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Fritz the Cat* challenged the conventional norms of a declining animation industry, staying true to Ralph Bakshi’s bold vision with unapologetic honesty. Drawing from his working-class background and offering a satirical lens on impoverished New York, Bakshi’s unique storytelling reflected the social climate of the time and the stagnation of animation. This distinctive approach resonated with audiences and set the foundation for a new era in animation. The commercial success of *Fritz the Cat*, grossing over \$90 million at the box office, granted Bakshi the creative freedom to fully explore his artistic vision in his subsequent pictures.

Bakshi would release *Heavy Traffic* in 1973, a somewhat autobiographical film based on a struggling, young cartoonist. It built on what *Fritz* had established and grounded it further with the use of human characters. Using the racially charged streets of 70’s New York along with the motif of a game of pinball – the illusiveness of life in the city is surreal and satirical. In 1973, Bakshi would go on to start production on a film called ‘Harlem Nights’ later renamed ‘Coonskin’ which would be a career defining film and result in a pivot seeing his diversion to fantasy storytelling for some time.

April 29, 2005.

Accessed: March 2, 2025

<https://time.com/archive/6907736/r-crumb-speaks/>

⁴⁷ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 80

⁴⁸ Jackson, Barry. The Zoom Art Studio. “Interview: The Making of *Fritz the Cat* with Ralph Bakshi” YouTube. 08:58 to 09:10. December 25, 2023. Accessed: January 12, 2024

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8v871Qci25M&t=25s>

Chapter Two

To Fantasy and Back – Bakshi’s Range as a Serious Filmmaker



Figure 22 – Cast cel from Bakshi's Lord of the Rings

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the meandering path Bakshi’s career took from the release of *Fritz* in 1972 to his film *American Pop* in 1981 and how despite the many challenges which arose due to immense public backlash, budget problems and bureaucracy throughout his productions of that period, Ralph managed to retain his unique and authentic mode of storytelling despite setbacks, all of which play a key role in cementing his legacy as a true visionary and innovator of the medium. Ralph would release 8 films in 11 years but rarely took a back step to meet the criteria of the apparent status quo. His influence is palpable given the influx of animated fantasy films during the period after the start of Bakshi’s tenure in the genre.

Coonskin: Bakshi’s Most Infamous Release

After *Fritz*, Bakshi had put himself at the forefront of the industry receiving both the flack and acclaim as a *director* who was one of the main forces pushing the envelope beyond what audiences had seen in theatrical animation. However, Bakshi’s third feature *Coonskin* (1975) – an urbanised retelling of Uncle Remus’ Brother Rabbit tales – would land him in the hottest water thus far and turn the trajectory of his career to the fantasy realm for some time after.



Figure 23 – Still from *Coonskin*

When discussing Bakshi's career, the matter of *Coonskin* is unavoidable. This has been a highly controversial film since its release, predominantly due to Bakshi's deliberate use of offensive, pre-established black, racist stereotypes – not to mention the graphic depictions of violence and sex. When placed in context of the overall film and with characters such that of 'Miss America' (who sarcastically embodies the illustriousness of the caricatured American dream), 'Simple Saviour' (leader of a phony revolution), and his extremely coarse depiction of the mob, each damning and over the top are intended to highlight the social struggles of a 1970s America.



Figure 24 – Still from *Coonskin*



Figure 25 - Still from Coonskin



Figure 26 - Still from Coonskin

“Bakshi pukes the iconographic bile of a racist culture back in its stupid, bloated face, wipes his chin and smiles Dirty Harry style. (...) He subverts the context of Hollywood's entire catalogue of racist black iconography through a series of swift cross-edits of original and appropriated footage.”

– Darius James⁴⁹

⁴⁹ James, Darius. *That's Blaxploitation: Roots of the Baadasssss 'Tude. (Rated X by an all-whyte jury).* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995) 117 - 123

I am not excusing or defending *Coonskin*; rather, I include this segment to highlight the apparent bias in its reception when compared with Disney's uncontroversial re-release of *Song of the South* (1946) in 1972 – a live-action/animation blend of the Brer Rabbit tales - a certain invocation to Ralph's film.⁵⁰

Song of the South has since been unanimously condemned for racism and glorifying the plantation life resulting in Disney distancing themselves from the film and banned it from streaming on Disney+.⁵¹ However, the film's prosperous re-release in 1972 had a sticking power and general acceptance which *Coonskin* perhaps lacked, overlapping with the 'colourblind' rhetoric associated with the rise of conservatism post-civil rights movement and into the Reagan presidency of the 1980s, which seemed to portray a rose-tinted retrospect on race relations post-civil-rights movement.⁵² This comparison highlights the political attitudes of institutions, with Disney aligning alongside corporate conservatism and Ralph embodying the counterculture sentiment, reflecting the broader political narrative of the era.

"Song of the South was accepted because it had always been there for new generations on all things Disney" – Jason Sperb⁵³



Figure 27 – Still from *Song of the South* (1946)

During that time, other Blaxploitation films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *Shaft* (1971), were gaining notoriety for highlighting similar social issues as *Coonskin* and brought about a short-lasting cinematic movement bringing a

⁵⁰ Sperb, Jason. *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012) 126

⁵¹ Grater, Tom. "Bob Iger Confirms 'Song Of The South' Won't Be Added To Disney+, Even With Disclaimer". *Deadline.com*. March 11, 2020.

Accessed: January 23, 2025

<https://deadline.com/2020/03/bob-iger-song-of-the-south-disney-disclaimer-1202879464/>

⁵² Sperb, Jason. *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012) 131

⁵³ *Ibid*, 126

powerful black cinematic voice and hero to root for on the silver screen.⁵⁴ Of course, before the hijacking of the genre by the ‘big-wigs’ of corporate America, ultimately saturating the genre and diminishing its original poignancy becoming a superficial cash grab which would objectify black leads to fit the bill of a pimp, private eye or bad-talking drug pusher; smuggling in racist ideologies through melodrama.⁵⁵



Figure 28 – Still from Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song

⁵⁴ Donalson, Melvin. *Black Directors in Hollywood*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003) 21 - 24

⁵⁵ Dunn, Stephane. *Baad Bitches and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 9



Figure 29 – Still from Shaft

Without want to labour the point and describe each contentious moment from the film, *Coonskin* was certainly objectionable for the 70s and its symbolism was a far cry from the status-quo. It was intentionally offensive and Ralph set about making his feelings on the two-tiered race oppressed system of the States heard. It was a passionate “F- you” to the system from the guts of a working-class Jewish immigrant who grew up in the multicultural ghetto of Brownsville, New York. – he thought it a statement he was within his right to make.⁵⁶

*“These weren’t Disney’s happy black slaves, whistling as they walk through the park,” Ralph chimes. “Show me one happy slave – just one – and I’ll show you a real, live Leprechaun!”*⁵⁷

However, despite the evident controversy of the film – at first Paramount and the studio distributor decided to back Ralph and release the film. The Museum of Modern Art would screen *Coonskin* and after having screened his previous two features, MoMA were catering to what seemed to be an apparent triad of successful and groundbreaking releases from the young director. However, it was the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) that strongly objected to the film protesting during the showing’s Q&A:⁵⁸

*Elaine Parker, chairman of the Harlem chapter; said afterward, “It depicts blacks as slaves, hustlers and whores. It is a racist film to me, and very insulting.”*⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 106

⁵⁷ Ibid, 109

⁵⁸ Cohen, Karl F. *Forbidden Animation: Censored Cartoons and Blacklisted Animators in America*. (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997) 84 - 88

⁵⁹ Farber, Stephen. *The Campaign to Suppress ‘Coonskin’*. (New York Times, July 20, 1975)

Many people who object to the film have often expressed the issue of whether as a *white* man it was *Bakshi's* story to tell, pondering the difference between him and other studios who wanted to jump on the band wagon of Blaxploitation – questioning his authenticity. Bakshi's use of ill-flavoured black depictions is of-course meant as a direct play on the systemic racist caricatures in which studios the likes of Disney, Warner Bros and MGM not so long ago had made themselves. And some of the reception to *coonskin* may be telling that Bakshi missed the mark – that it went *so* far that it ended up antagonising its intended audience and left little sympathy for the film.⁶⁰



Figure 30 – Still from *All This and Rabbit Stew* 1941, a Warner short which pedalled racist stereotypes

Paramount would pull *Coonskin's* release after a barrage of protests and complaints from CORE and relinquish the film to distributor Bryanston Films.⁶¹ Despite the 9-month delay in the release of *Coonskin*, Ralph received much critical acclaim across the nation with a review in the *New York Times* saying:

*“Coonskin,” which opened yesterday at the Trans-Lux East and the Bryan, is a shatteringly successful effort to use an uncommon form—cartoons and live action combined—to convey the hallucinatory violence and frustration of American city life, specifically black city life.*⁶²

To this day it is seen by many as his finest piece of work and came to much critical success at the time. Ultimately, like with Fritz and Bakshi's other work – Bakshi had gotten the conversation about the film itself -no different to his live-action auteur counterparts.

⁶⁰ Sperb, Jason. *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012) 131 - 135

⁶¹ Farber, Stephen. *The Campaign to Suppress 'Coonskin'*. (*New York Times*, July 20, 1975)

⁶² Eder, Richard. *Bakshi's Film 'Coonskin' Is Earthy, Poignant*. (*New York Times*, August 21, 1975)



Figure 31 – Still from *Coonskin*

Bakshi's Fantasy Hiatus

After the controversy of *Coonskin* and with *Hey Good Lookin'* in production, studios were hesitant to fund another potentially abrasive Bakshi film.^{63 64} His subsequent divergence to the fantasy realm marked a pivotal point in his career, showcasing his evolution as an artist and his commitment to telling stories authentically. During this time, Bakshi developed budget-friendly techniques like rotoscoping and solarization, which he later applied in *American Pop*, demonstrating that feature animation could exist outside the Disney formula.

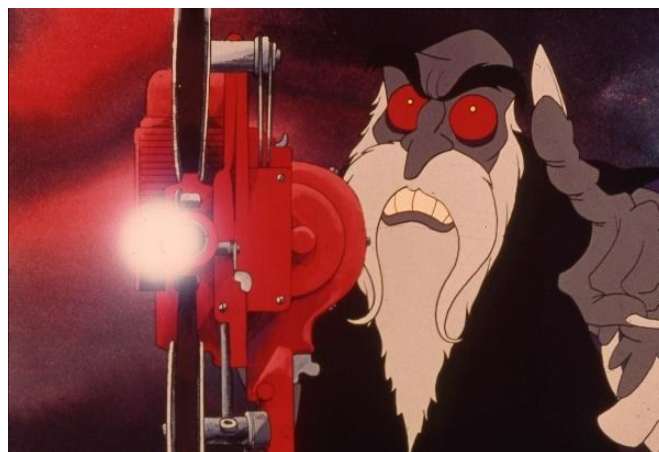


Figure 32 – Still from *Wizards*

⁶³ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 132

⁶⁴ *Forging Through the Darkness: The Ralph Bakshi Vision for 'The Lord of the Rings'*. Directed by Alexander Gray, Studio West Pictures, 2010. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jq5xAuZjsZM&ab_channel=filmSCHOOLarchive
12.00 to 12.50. Accessed: January 23, 2025



Figure 33 – Still from Wizards



Figure 34 – Animation Cel from Wizards

Bakshi had always been a fantasy enthusiast since his youth with his doodles and drawings throughout his life often maintaining a certain motif depicting gasmask wearing, laser-blaster wielding apocalyptic soldiers and enchanting, floppy-hatted sorcerers.⁶⁵ In 1977, with the help of 20th Century Fox, Bakshi would release

⁶⁵ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 133

Wizards, his first attempt at a PG-rated family friendly film. The story takes place after a two-million-year holocaust and twin brothers, Avatar and Blackwolf must face each other in a grandiose battle for good and evil. Despite not being a city-film, Bakshi's storytelling remains poignant, particularly when Blackwolf uses Nazi-era propaganda to lead his army. The film serves as a warning about humanity's potential downfall.



Figure 35 – Still from *Wizards*

“Hitler is the ultimate villain, no one is going to deny that, Jew or not”⁶⁶ Ralph’s parents had migrated to the US whilst fleeing Nazi persecution of course adding to the realism for Ralph and makes the story come from a ‘fantastical’ yet grounded and sincere place for him.⁶⁷

“That was my mother and father. It’s a very emotional film.”⁶⁸



Figure 36 - Bakshi's high school art

Of course, like all Bakshi’s films, the unique aesthetic and ‘ash-can’ look is prevalent, yet *Wizards* still managed to provide something new. This can in part be due to

⁶⁶ Ibid, 132

⁶⁷ Ibid, 22-24

⁶⁸ Ibid, 132

Bakshi bringing in new artists such as Ian Miller ⁶⁹ whose incredibly detailed and claustrophobic background designs brought about a decayed, dense and scarred landscape. The inky mark making gives audiences a sense of a world that's gritty and lived in, not unlike Brownsville whilst also differing drastically from the clean and seemingly unattainable environments of Disney's fantasy worlds perhaps reminiscent of the white picketed fence suburban dream.



Figure 37 - Miller's Work

⁶⁹ Dean, Martyn.; Evans, Christopher. *The Guide to Fantasy Art Techniques*. (UK: Dragon's World Limited) 34



Figure 38 – Still from Wizards



Figure 39 – Still from Wizards



Figure 40 – Still from Wizards



Figure 41 – Background from Sleeping Beauty

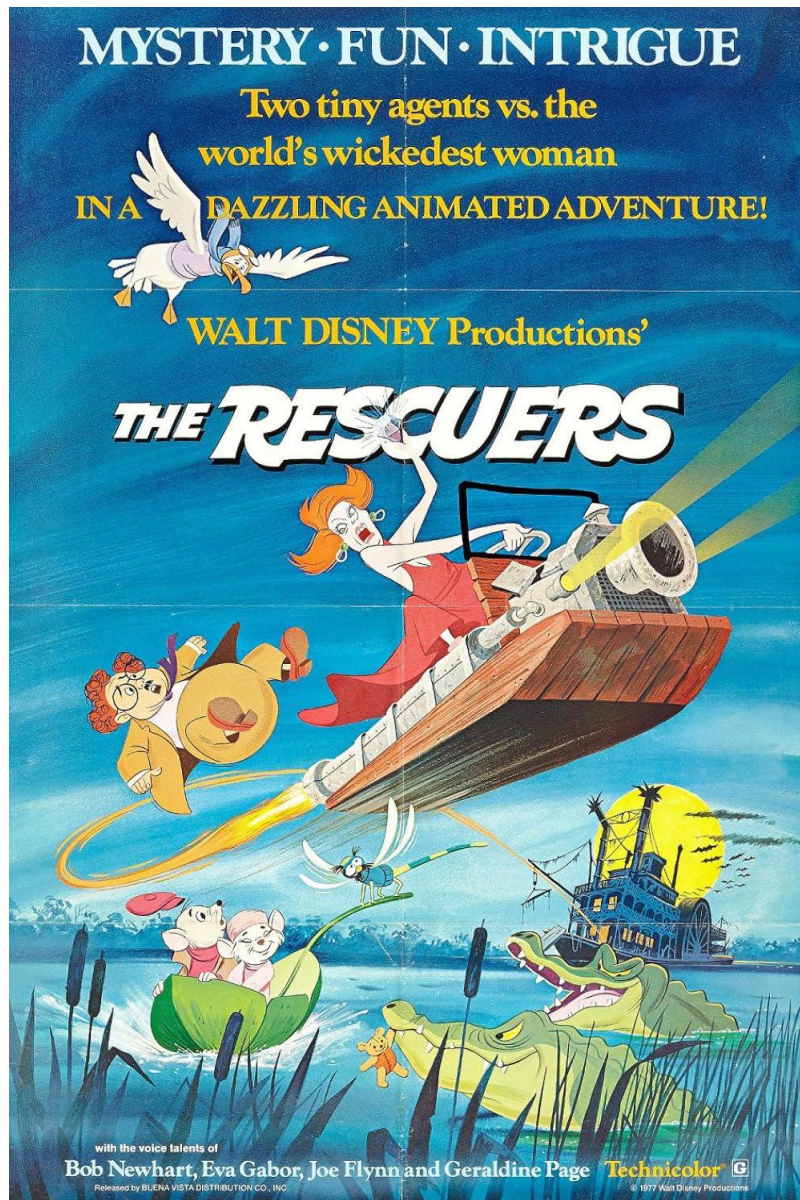


Figure 42 – Poster for The Rescuers

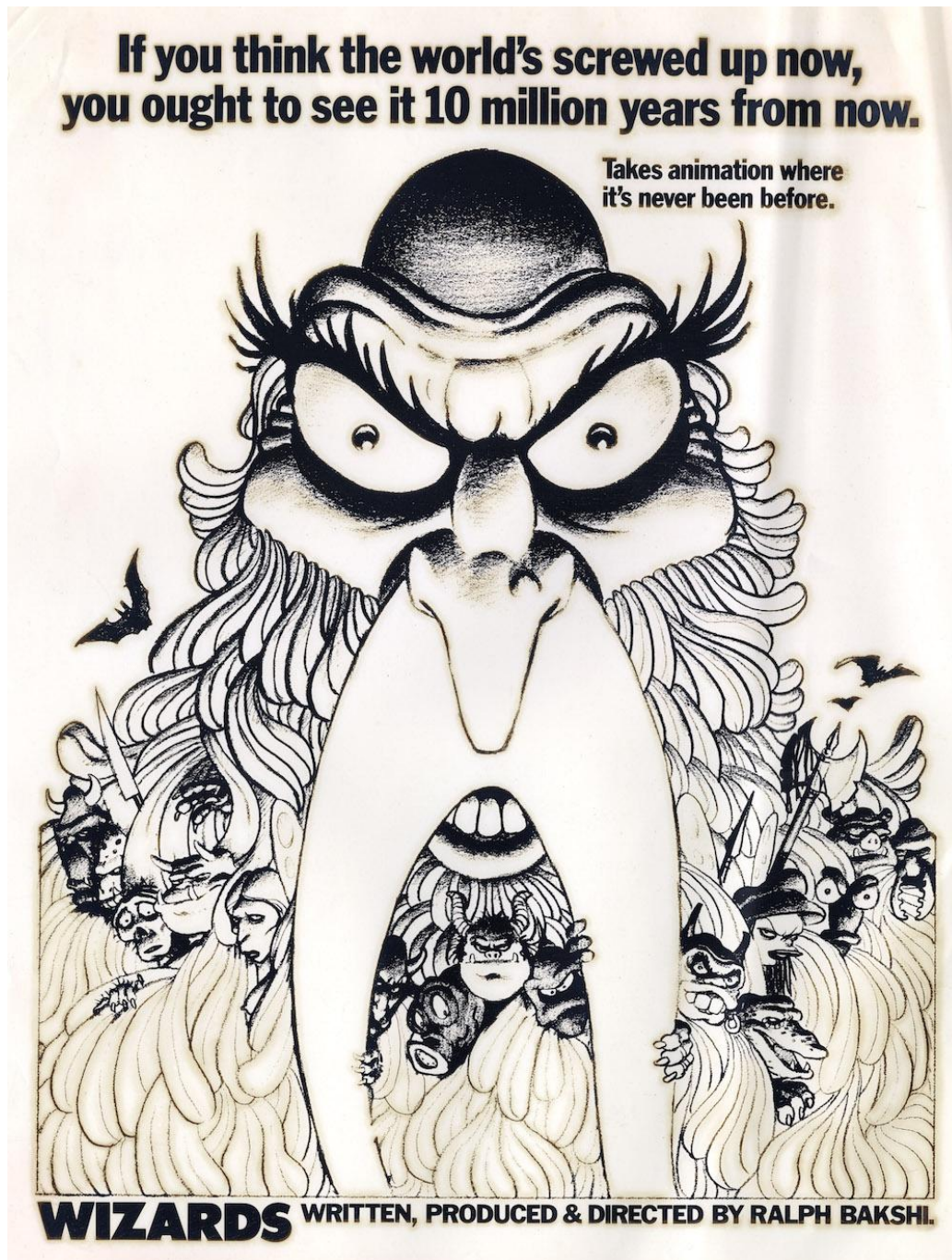


Figure 43 – Poster for *Wizards* (*The Rescuers* and *Wizards* both “family” films released in 1977)

The investment in time conceptualising the world of *Wizards* and the rise of animators’ wages left Bakshi needing an extra \$50,000 to complete the film. Since the production was moving chronologically, this meant that the big finale battle scene would be left out as it stood. When Ralph approached president of Fox, Alan Ladd, Jr. – he wouldn’t hear it and was unsympathetic. At the time Fox was also producing George Lucas’ *Star Wars* whose budget was inflating exponentially. Ladd expected the filmmakers to fund the rest out of their own pocket. This led to Ralph in the face of bankruptcy, having to come up with something and fast. This deadline-driven ingenuity led to Ralph deploying perhaps his most synonymous filmic technique of

‘roto-scoping’.⁷⁰ An animation practise initially developed by Max Fleicher in 1915 which effectively means manually tracing live action reference each frame at a time, a cheaper form of animation as there is less time spent exaggerating a character’s complex motion.⁷¹ But since Bakshi couldn’t afford to hire a crew to perform an enormous battle – the climax to the picture – he had to think on his feet and ended up using his privilege as a Hollywood director to obtain printed film copies of epic war pictures under the guise of research.⁷² Bakshi used a mix of scenes from Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and in effect disguised his action through tracing the silhouette and overlaying his typical punchy ‘Bakshi’ aesthetic which made for a rich and completely new take on rotoscoping. An uncanny and unnerving feel completely appropriate to the summit of the film, with Bakshi himself acclaiming it turned out much better that way having found the appropriate style to suit the narrative.⁷³



Figure 42 – Still from Wizards



Figure 45 - Still from Wizards

⁷⁰ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 134

⁷¹ Culhane, John. *Ralph Bakshi – Iconoclast of Animation*. (New York Times, March 22, 1981)

⁷² Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 134

⁷³ Ramirez, Jaime. “Ralph Bakshi”. YouTube. 14.50 to 16.00. December 12, 2014. Accessed January 23, 2025

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JW7s1rKXV4&t=943s&ab_channel=Col.Jaim%C4%97Ramirez



Figure 46 - Still from Wizards

Although Fox only released the film to a few hundred theatres, the film itself was met with wide acclaim and managed to pack theatres when screened.⁷⁴ How successful Bakshi's first fantasy picture was is debatable, but it remains undoubtably an arresting and boundary pushing cult-classic of good vs evil. Bakshi had certainly found a footing in the fantasy genre and had more films in mind.⁷⁵



Figure 43 - Still from Wizards

In 1976, Bakshi had obtained the rights from United Artists to make *The Lord of the Rings*. Initially after the publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy in 1955, Disney were given the adaption rights – with *The Beatles* at one stage meant to play the four Hobbits, which Tolkien refused.⁷⁶ This eventually leading to the UA acquiring the

⁷⁴ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 138

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ibid, 148

rights and paying John Boorman \$3 million for what they deemed an unfilmable 700-page script. Bakshi, an enormous fan of the books, was determined to make the film. Upon learning of the project, he immediately met with UA and secured the rights - on the condition that he cover the \$3 million lost on the Boorman script.⁷⁷

An often-misrepresented piece of the Bakshi filmography, his *LotR* has been the subject of scrutiny and mixed reviews from viewers and critics alike who many felt the film lacked completion as well as a deficiency in polish. As with much of Bakshi's work, financial difficulties arose leading the film to be a standalone only covering half the trilogy with no sequel(s) and budget-friendly workarounds would have to be deployed, cheapening the look in many eyes. However, Peter Jackson has often cited Bakshi's initial work as a key inspiration to his smash hit live-action trilogy (2001-03). Stating that he enjoyed the early parts of the film, particularly the scenes in Hobbiton, the creepy encounter with the Black Rider, and some strong battle sequences. However, halfway through, the story became disjointed and confusing. Despite this, the film sparked a desire to read the books to understand what happened.⁷⁸



Figure 44 – Stills from Bakshi's LotR and Jackson's

Due to the sheer enormity of the task of adapting Tolkien's Middle Earth, Bakshi shot the entirety of the film in live-action and used his rotoscoping knowledge picked up from Wizards to animate. Another reason for doing so was that Ralph believed that

⁷⁷ Robinson, Tasha. "Ralph Bakshi". The A.V. Club. Dec 6, 2000. Accessed: January 23, 2025.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20071012173749/http://www.avclub.com/content/node/22810>

⁷⁸ Sibley, Brian. *Peter Jackson: A Film-Maker's Journey*. (London: HarperCollins Pub Ltd, 2006) 6

Tolkien's world necessitated realism in its depiction as opposed to the 'squash and stretch' of traditional western animation allowing for sincerity in its storytelling.⁷⁹

If we take Boromir's death in *Rings* as an example for effective use of rotoscoping we really see the sheer poignant, yet subtle realism Ralph hoped to achieve in his decision to use the technique.⁸⁰



⁷⁹ *Forging Through the Darkness: The Ralph Bakshi Vision for 'The Lord of the Rings'*. Directed by Alexander Gray, Studio West Pictures, 2010. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jq5xAuZjsZM&ab_channel=filmSCHOOLarchive

18.56 to 20.10. Accessed: January 23, 2025

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 20.10 to 20.34



Figure 45 – Stills from Rings (*Boromir's Death*)

Alongside rotoscoping, Bakshi also implemented a filmic technique called *solarization* which essentially makes live-action footage look drawn by over-exposing the raw photographic frames during development.⁸¹ Divisive in its apparent 'cheap' appearance, but undoubtedly an interesting and unique looking, cost-effective measure nonetheless.⁸²



⁸¹ Ibid, 20.34 to 21.12

⁸² Turnbull, H.M. "Review of Ralph Bakshi's *'The Lord of the Rings'* (1978)". April 7, 2017. Accessed: January 23, 2025.
<https://hmtturnbull.com/writing/tolkien/bakshi-lotr-cartoon-review/>



Figure 46 – Stills from The Lord of the Rings showcasing use of solarisation

Different this time from Wizards use of archival footage, Bakshi now had the luxury of choreographing his own battle. He decided to film this in Spain taking advantage of all the long-standing castles, beautiful roaming landscapes and the finest horseback riders in the world.

Not to mention it was far cheaper to shoot there. Ralph left a posse of reliable and new artists behind in the US to just “make art!”⁸³

Other clever cost-cutting production methods included turning Bakshi Productions into an officially recognised development lab to buy photography paper in bulk at a fraction of the going rate. Ralph also utilised analogue live action special effects to save on specialist salaries.

“We weren’t a big house like Disney...we didn’t have the luxury of specialty artists that only drew water really well, so I used live-action techniques to save us those salaries.”⁸⁴

Although these measures may perhaps be perceived ‘cheap’ to some, I consider this to be innovative and keeping with this fresh take on crossing live action with animation, and eclectic to Bakshi’s revolutionary perhaps ‘New Wave of Animation.’ The results of which produced some of the most sticking and visually stunning depictions of Middle Earth in motion never before seen.

⁸³ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 150

⁸⁴ Ibid, 154



Figure 47 – Still from The Lord of the Rings



Figure 48 – Live-action photos for rotoscoping from The Lord of the Rings



Figure 49 - Still from The Lord of the Rings

Despite pleas from Ralph to delay the release of *Rings*, United Artists were determined for the film to be out in time for the holidays and as such nothing could deter their schedule: in November 1978 the film was released. Bakshi urged UA to keep *Part One* in the subtitle to no avail and as expected the ultimately compromised film was met with mixed reviews.⁸⁵

Animation expert Jerry Beck described it as a “flawed but inspired interpretation.”⁸⁶

Conclusion

Ralph would go on to release three subsequent theatrical films in the following 5 years, bringing his tried and measured cost-effective and aesthetical know-how back to the streets and beyond. Culminating to what I consider to be his best and most personal work in the generational classic for the ages, *American Pop*. Which follows a bloodline through generations of past to present; immigrants arriving at the docks to a young drug-pushing wannabe rockstar.

Bakshi’s deployment of rotoscoping was game changing. His use of the technique would ultimately allow him to tell adult-themed stories to full feature length and bring about a sincerity to it, not relying on the gag to sell it. Of course, the technique is not perfect with Bakshi himself coming and going on it, believing there to be a lot more to get out of the characters emotionally.⁸⁷ However, maintaining it to be the most realistic way to animate whilst also often used due to the tight budgets and competing against Disney in the animated feature lengths—it was a great way to get footage through the door.

In closing, despite setbacks and obstacles which seemed to arise at every corner for Bakshi due to his abrasive and unapologetic material he always seemed to overcome and provide something fresh. By prioritising story and animation and always backing his artists whilst bringing in new blood to the line to create something new Bakshi made the *unfilmable* filmable and broke the status quo during his most prolific tenure in feature animation. This constant evolution as an artist was a far cry from the formula set by the likes of Disney and Don Bluth at that time. It was ultimately his passion for the films he was making that got them over the line and on the big screen no matter what that made for his insane output over those 11 years.

His films still screen today and are forever relevant. The varying range from cutting edge fantasy to pertinent social commentary (not mutually exclusive) make these timeless classics and show Bakshi as a true innovator and authentic auteur of the medium. Bakshi’s reluctance to settle for the mediocre paved a way for other prickly and different cartoons to be made, pushing the boundaries of the medium of animation as a visual storytelling device not exclusive to a particular audience.

After this 11-year period of constant churn out, Ralph returned to children’s television where it all started for him.

⁸⁵ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 155

⁸⁶ Beck, Jerry. *The Animated Movie Guide*. (USA: Chicago Review Press, 2005) 154 - 156

⁸⁷ Evony. Any-mation. “*Ralph Bakshi | Animation’s New Wave*”. YouTube. 10.28 to 10:40. February 21, 2019. Accessed: February 4, 2025
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TE9mENS9i4c>



Figure 50 – Still from American Pop



Figure 51 – Still from American Pop

Chapter Three

Backing Creatives to Make Cartoons - Bakshi's *Mighty Mouse*; Catalyst of Cable Television's Cartoon Renaissance of the 90s



Figure 52 – Still from *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures*

Introduction

'One time I asked him (Ralph), why aren't we getting any notes from the network – every show I've worked on has gotten tons of notes? He said, "You got notes, you didn't see them - I burned them." He was probably not kidding'

– *Tim Minton (head writer on *Mighty Mouse*)*⁸⁸

When Ralph Bakshi made his return to children's cartoons with *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures* in 1987, him and his team would reignite a passion for youth programming unseen in the decades previous. By the late 80s, the traditional Saturday Morning Cartoon was on the way out and its appeal - even to its target audience (children) - was dead. The shows had essentially become nothing more than cheap half-hour advertisements for toys and merchandise,⁸⁹ and with youth cable networks on the rise such as MTV and subsequently Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, it marked a cultural shift towards irreverent, exuberant and tailored programming.

⁸⁸ *Breaking the Mold: The Re-Making of Mighty Mouse*. Directed by Jeffrey Eagle, Giant Interactive Entertainment, 2010. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XR6BJhn97uw&ab_channel=FungManHin
28.56 to 29.08. Accessed: January 24, 2025

⁸⁹ Stabile, Carol. *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*. (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003) 78



Figure 53 – Themed Adverts from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, He-Man and The Smurfs

This chapter aims to cover the untapped consumer appetite for original television programming along with highlighting the effect in which Bakshi had on the industry; backing his team of young artists on *Mighty Mouse* to be creative and not adhering to the norms of network television. Many of his crew would go on to have huge success in the field with their work being regarded as important and innovative in the industry at the turn of the 21st century.

The legacy of Bakshi's career along with his regained success of the children's cartoon format would not only inspire the next generation of animators but also play a part in providing a platform for testier, artistically authentic and commercially viable expression in the medium - something that had been severely lacking for the past 20 years.



Figure 54 – Still from *Still from Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures*

Mighty Mouse: A Camouflage for Authentic & Unorthodox Storytelling

After the release of *Fire and Ice* in 1983, Bakshi spent some time off before getting back on the scene. This time returning to children’s cartoons with what he pitched to CBS as a reboot of a 1950s Terry Toons classic in which he had previously been a part of *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures*. On the back of several failed original series pitches, Mighty Mouse served as a clever disguise to appease the network who wanted an established character that was marketable – keeping with the ways of the time.⁹⁰ Bakshi’s revival of *Mighty Mouse* would serve as a pre-cursor for the animation boom of the next decade.⁹¹

*“The New Adventures of Mighty Mouse, it really was truly the first foothold of what we now take for granted for Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network.” – Andrew Stanton*⁹²

Bakshi’s *Mighty Mouse* followed the commercial 30-minute format including two independent 11-minute episodes. The series handed Mighty Mouse the secret identity of Mike Mouse with the hijinks of each segment often focusing on side characters and irreverent stories. There was no formula as such with episodes often whimsically focusing on parody and tongue-and-cheek social commentary.

⁹⁰ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 210 - 211

⁹¹ Beck, Jerry. “*New Book Reviews*”. *CartoonResearch.com*. June 23, 2018. Accessed: January 24, 2025.

<https://cartoonresearch.com/index.php/new-book-reviews/>

⁹²*Breaking the Mold: The Re-Making of Mighty Mouse*. Directed by Jeffrey Eagle, Giant Interactive Entertainment, 2010. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XR6BJhn97uw&ab_channel=FungManHin
0.28 to 0.39. Accessed: January 24, 2025

In the episode *Night of the Bat-Bat*, heroes Bat-Bat (a play on Batman) and his sidekick, Tick ‘the Bug Wonder’ face off against The Cow (a bovine villain whose mannerisms mimic those of George C. Scott) to save Vermin City from his ‘campaign of sabotage against the insidious dairy industry’.



Figure 55 - Still from Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures (Mike Mouse asking Bat-Bat to cover for him as he's running late for work)

“I was just brimming with new characters that I (wanted) to get on the screen. So we tended to write Mighty Mouse out of the cartoons, we'd find some excuse for him to go to the bathroom or something and then show up again at the end of the cartoon and say: 'oh luckily Bat-Bat saved the day while I was gone!'”

– John Kricfalusi⁹³



Figure 56 - Still from Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures (Bat-Bat and Tick)

⁹³ Ibid, 16.05 to 16.23



Figure 57 – Still from Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures (The Cow address his centurions)



Figure 58 - Still from Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures (Bat-Bat and the Bug wonder roaring into the heart of the night in The Man Mobile, striking fear into fear into the hearts of evildoers everywhere.)

Whenever the network got fed up that Mighty Mouse rarely starred in his self-titled show, Ralph would tell his team to “Have him stop a train!” which would become a running gag.⁹⁴ The loose and unpredictable recipe of the show offered audiences an innovative and refreshing attempt at making cartoons funny again.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 17.35 to 18.15



Figure 59 – Still from *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures*

What made *Mighty Mouse* different to the *Saturday Morning Cartoons* of the past near half a century, was the deployment of “Creator-Driven” production⁹⁵. In keeping with Ralph’s innovative cost-cutting methods, he was reluctant to hire an established writer for the show as to avoid the high wage whilst also not wanting to cut from the same cloth that gave audiences the likes of *G.I. Joe* and *He-Man*.⁹⁶ Instead, Bakshi hired young freshly graduated animators eager to impress and make something new – much like himself when he first started out in Terry Toons.

*“They can’t believe that they’re free and they perform well. That’s the major Bakshi secret; you hire talented guys and tell them not what to do! A lot of studios hire talented guys and tell them how to do it – it’s mindless!” ... “It’s like hiring Norman Rockwell and telling him how to draw!”*⁹⁷

– Ralph Bakshi

Bakshi’s crew of future stars included – Jim Reardon (director: *The Simpsons*), Dave Marshall (director: *The X’s*), Bruce Timm (co-creator: *Batman: The Animated Series*), Andrew Stanton (director: *WALL-E*, *Finding Nemo* & *A Bug’s Life*), Jeff Pidgeon (story artist: *Monsters, Inc.*) and John Kricfalusi (creator: *The Ren & Stimpy Show*) along with numerous others.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Thill, Scott. “How *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures* Amped Up Animation”. *Wired.com*. January 5, 2010. Accessed: January 24, 2025.

<https://www.wired.com/2010/01/mighty-mouse-new-adventures/>

⁹⁶ *Breaking the Mold: The Re-Making of Mighty Mouse*. Directed by Jeffrey Eagle, Giant Interactive Entertainment, 2010. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XR6BJhn97uw&ab_channel=FungManHin
9.10 to 9.35. Accessed: January 24, 2025

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 12.58 to 13.25

⁹⁸ Gibson, Jon M.; McDonnell, Chris. *Unfiltered: The Complete Ralph Bakshi*. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2008) 211



Figure 60 – Still from The Simpsons - Homer at the Bat (Season 3 Episode 17 – directed by Jim Reardon)



Figure 61 – Still from Batman: The Animated Series

Many of these young artists who were given a break by Bakshi on *Mighty Mouse* along with the artistic liberty to create, helped set in motion the rise of enthusiastic and lively cartoons of the 90s and early 2000s themselves independently being a part of. In result I think, pinpointing *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures* as the origin in what would become a defining era in style and storytelling for the children’s cartoon format.



Figure 62 – Still from *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures* - “But enough of this lying and hypocrisy... time for what television’s really about...”

*Mighty Mouse addresses the viewer before cutting to commercials.
Don’t Touch That Dial – Season 2 Episode 4 p2*

The Rise of Youth Cable Stations: Animation to Primetime

In 1992, cable channel Nickelodeon premiered their 2-hour slot SNICK (Saturday Night Nick) a significant change from the previous decade of children’s network programming – much of which was by then influenced by the ACT (Action for Children’s Television) which sought to push educational segments within highly commercialised cartoons such as *He-Man* and *G.I. Joe*.⁹⁹ The result of which made for bland and completely uninspired cartoons for children.¹⁰⁰ The notion that children’s Saturday primetime was possible was almost non-existent until Nickelodeon tapped the market inspired by the likes of MTV.

Nickelodeon would build on their animated success by taking the newly found ‘tweens’ market stuck at home on Saturday and airing live-action originals such as *Roundhouse* and *Clarissa Explains it All*, paired with cartoons all targeted at the inclusion of a previously excluded entity. As Saturday night programming was dominated at the time by shows aimed at 50 and up in the assumption that youths were out. An oversight excluding the market of ‘too young to go out – too young to be in bed’; tween-agers.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ AP. *Court Orders F.C.C. Review of Policy on Children's TV*. (New York Times, June 27, 1987)

¹⁰⁰ EW STAFF. “SNICK”. EW.com. August 28, 1992. Accessed: January 24, 2025.

<https://ew.com/article/1992/08/28/snick/>

¹⁰¹ Ibid

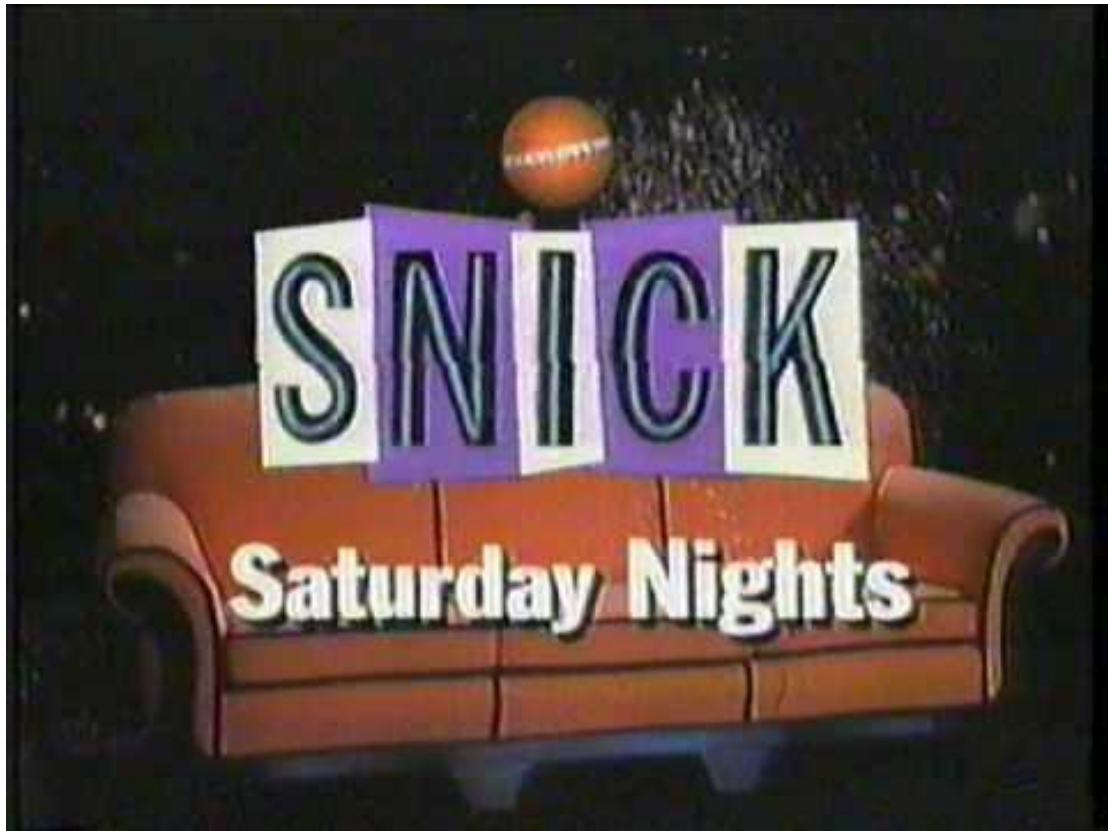


Figure 63 – Advertisement for SNICK feat. 'big orange couch' – prominent marketing item



Figure 64 - Roundhouse cast



Figure 65 – Still from Are You Afraid of the Dark?



Figure 66 - Boy George starring in MTV commercial

This first generation of ‘Nicktoons’ (airing in 1991) consisting of *Ren & Stimpy*, *Doug* and *Rugrats* would be held to acclaim for their ‘creator-driven’ ethos to which shows such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* derive from.¹⁰²¹⁰³ Nicktoons proved that kids would consistently watch original animated characters, disproving the previously held notion that the use of established characters was essential.



Figure 67 – Still from The Ren & Stimpy Show

Nickelodeon’s marketing played up an irreverence that was uncondescending to children, seeking to push the boundaries of their programming. Amidst the zeitgeist of MTV,¹⁰⁴ Nick drew from the same logic of rebellious youthful nature and applied this to kids. Other successful animated shows on cable networks would arise with the likes of *Dexter’s Laboratory*, *Cow & Chicken* and *The Powerpuff Girls* on Cartoon Network during its launch in 1992 while *The Simpsons* became a cultural icon for the American family in taking the form of the anti- ‘Nuclear Family’ sitcom airing on primetime FOX.¹⁰⁵ This cheeky and verbose anti-establishment sentiment all played an integral part in forming the overall fondly reminisced 90s culture; placing animation right at the heart of it.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Comics, Beer & Sci-fi. ”Bob Camp on The Ren & Stimpy Show and SpongeBob SquarePants”. YouTube. 0.35 to 1.00. June 1, 2023. Accessed: January 25, 2025
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvgSSKhr1Dc>

¹⁰³ Ibid, 3.27 to 4.15

¹⁰⁴ ChannelSerfer. “SNICK: The Pinnacle of Nickelodeon’s Golden Age”. YouTube. 2.48 to 3.05. June 12, 2021. Accessed: January 25, 2025.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Fra2jN6n14>

¹⁰⁵ Stabile, Carol. *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*. (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003) 168 - 171

¹⁰⁶ Dean, Anthony. “What were the main influences and trends in 1990s TV animation?”. DiverseTechGeek.com. September 5, 2018. Accessed: January 25, 2025.
<https://www.diversetechgeek.com/influences-trends-1990s-tv-animation/>



Figure 68 – Still from Cow & Chicken

Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnson—two of Disney’s greatest animators and mentors to many in my generation—came around to see the pilot with a few of us. When the lights came up, they both seemed in shock. Trying hard to be polite, they nonetheless tried to talk some sense into us: “Do you really think that audiences will be able to connect to characters that don’t have appeal?”¹⁰⁷

– Norton Virgien (speaking on the Rugrats’ screening)



Figure 69 – Still from Rugrats

¹⁰⁷ Klickstein, Mathew. *Slimed!: An Oral History of Nickelodeon’s Golden Age*. (New York, Penguin Group, 2013) 92

Conclusion

Bakshi's *Mighty Mouse* acted as the springboard for not only many of the team on the show but also in effect providing a fresh take on the children's cartoon format due to the savvy nature of Bakshi's marketing of an established character. In turn allowing for the likes of John Kricfalusi to go on and create *Ren & Stimpy* (an all original) which proved to be one of the driving forces of Nickelodeon at the time. Nickelodeon's unprecedented success would result in more funding and trust being given to true artists with a passion for cartoons, to which spawned the likes of *Rocko's Modern Life*, *SpongeBob* and many more,¹⁰⁸ who might not have gotten the same opportunity if not for *Ren & Stimpy* after Bakshi's return in 1987 with *Mighty Mouse* sparking this unconventional new wave for commercially viable and authentic artistic expression in this medium of animation.

Mighty Mouse was a mixed blessing to the cartoon business. It freed up cartoonists and brought back creativity, excitement and invention to cartoons. It also brought back story structure and characterization - in the best episodes. It reminded the whole business of what cartoons were for in the first place.

– *Jonh Kricfalusi (via his website 2008)*¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Amidi, Amid. “*The Ren & Stimpy Show' Reinvented TV Animation And Its Influence Remains 30 Years Later*”. CartoonBrew.com. August 11, 2021. Accessed: January 25, 2025.

<https://www.cartoonbrew.com/tv/the-ren-stimpy-show-reinvented-tv-animation-and-its-influence-remains-30-years-later-207841.html>

¹⁰⁹ Kricfalusi, John. “*John K Stuff: Wonky 2*”. johnkstuff.com. September 20, 2008. Accessed January 25, 2025.

<https://johnkstuff.blogspot.com/2008/09/wonky-2.html>

Conclusion



Figure 70 – Still from Cool World

Ralph Bakshi's impact on animation stands as a testament to the power of creative risk-taking and the value of authenticity in storytelling. This thesis explored the opinion of, "How Ralph Bakshi Revived Authenticity in Animation," and demonstrated how his work redefined animation from a considered "genre" frequently dismissed as children's entertainment into a mature artistic medium capable of addressing real-world complexities.

Bakshi's career was marked by controversy and a determination to challenge the norms of the animation industry. From his early days at Terrytoons to his groundbreaking success with *Fritz the Cat*, Bakshi's journey was one of overcoming obstacles in determination to remain true to his vision. His willingness to tackle mature themes – from racism and class struggles to urban decay and political ideologies – set him apart from his contemporaries. Films like *Heavy Traffic* and *Coonskin* revealed Bakshi's commitment to using animation as a tool for unflinching social commentary, even when faced with backlash and accusations of insensitivity. This controversy, however, was necessary for Bakshi to highlight societal hypocrisies and establish animation as a medium for provocative storytelling.

Bakshi's style and narrative approach further solidified his authenticity. His embrace of a rough, hand-drawn aesthetic and innovative techniques like rotoscoping contributed to a visual language that mirrored the rawness of his stories. These cost-effective and unconventional methods often set him apart from major studios like Disney, whose polished productions dominated the industry. By doing so, Bakshi inspired many animators to experiment with bolder storytelling and aesthetics.

One of Bakshi's most significant contributions was his "creator-driven" ethos. His belief in hiring young talent and granting them creative freedom cultivated an environment that nurtured innovation. This approach laid the groundwork for the

cartoon renaissance, influencing a new generation of animators who would revolutionise the medium in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Creators such as Matt Groening and Trey Parker have cited Bakshi's work as a major inspiration, underscoring his enduring impact.¹¹⁰

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this analysis. As an auteur, Bakshi's work requires contextual understanding of the time and cultural environment in which it was created. Additionally, his polarising style and the controversies surrounding his films may lead to subjective interpretations that influence assessments of his legacy.

Ultimately, Ralph Bakshi's defiance of industry norms and his unrelenting pursuit of integrity in animation have left an indelible mark on the medium. By confronting uncomfortable truths and rejecting the sanitised narratives of his peers, Bakshi elevated animation into a platform for mature and authentic storytelling. His contributions continue to resonate, especially in an era when the animation industry often prioritises high-budget, sequel-heavy productions. Bakshi's journey – marked by challenges, innovation, and an unwavering commitment to authenticity – remains a powerful reminder of the potential for animation to reflect the complexities of the human experience.

¹¹⁰ Knudde, Kjell. "*Ralph Bakshi – Legacy and influence*". Lambiek.net. December 8, 2024. Accessed: February 27, 2025.

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