Absurd Parody for Nostalgic Night Owls: Understanding Adult Swim's Offensive
Content

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Abstract

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This thesis explores how and why Adult Swim network's signature block of late night programming caters to specific niche audiences and how its content differs from mainstream television's Least Offensive Programming which targets as wide an audience as possible in order to boost ratings and advertising exposure. Beginning in 2001, Adult Swim formulated itself as an independent network in spite of its housing on Cartoon Network. All of Adult Swim's original in-house content and strategically acquired preexisting properties – including Seth MacFarlane's *Family Guy* (1999-2003, 2005-present) – reveal shared generic markers unique to the network's particular style. This style manifests itself in the form of Adult Swim's trademark versions of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia.

Chapter one examines the industrial precedents of Adult Swim which manifest themselves over the course of cable television's rise to its modern day prominence through narrowcasting and the broadcasting of concise content libraries of extant content and newly produced programming targeted at network-particular demographics. With Adult Swim firmly established as a stable network, the "genre" of its programming will be taken to task utilizing the genre theories of Rick Altman and Jason Mittell in chapter two. What follows in chapter three is an in depth look at Adult Swim's variations on parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia. Beginning with Henri Bergson's theory on the comic, a multitude of theorists will be used to highlight the issues at hand including Ron Russo, Dan Harries, Bob Plant, and Janelle L. Wilson. Each of these traits defines the specific humor and appeal of the network and offers "kidult" viewers the chance to capture a sense of an idealized, unknowable childhood by both mocking and venerating the content it parodies. Critical analysis of several programs is performed including the following sample: *Robot Chicken* (2005-present), *Superjail!* (2008-present), *Rick and Morty* (2013-present), and *Too Many Cooks* (2014).

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INTRODUCTION – "AND THE THING IS, WE HAVE NO IDEA HOW

CONTAGEOUS THIS STRAIN IS"[1]: THE ADULT SWIM PHENOMENON

"It takes a lot to make a stew."[2] So begins Adult Swim's latest experiment in

absurdist entertainment, *Too Many Cooks*. These lyrics, while not altogether relevant to

the "narrative" that follows, parody the upbeat theme songs of family situational

comedies from the 1980s. What's more, these lyrics lend understanding to the concept of

Adult Swim itself, both as a network that has been in existence since 2001 and as a

created media object that promotes its own brand and associated style. Overall, *Too Many*

Cooks is in dialogue with a multitude of aspects of the contemporary cultural zeitgeist,

which might explain its viral rise to popularity. However, it is unclear what initially

attracted so many fans to this bizarre text, and, more broadly, what it is about Adult

Swim as a whole that so readily resonates and appeals to its fan base. Because it shares so

many traits in common with Adult Swim at large, *Too Many Cooks* serves as a

remarkable point of entry for this project.

In the roughly 14 years since the network's inception, little in the way of

academic inquiry has broached the topic of Adult Swim at large. One scholar that has

danced with this ever broadening topic is Ron Russo. As a professor at Kent State

University, whose published *Adult Swim and Comedy* has, in its various incarnations and

editions, taken Adult Swim's programming to task. Russo studies the network and its

programs rather than simply addressing it and positing how audiences could be infatuated

with it. He belongs to both academic circles as well as industrial groups, and is therefore

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[1] Casper Kelly, "Too Many Cooks" (Adult Swim, October 28, 2014).
[2] Ibid.

well positioned to reconcile the network and its off the wall programming with the

history of film and media studies itself. Throughout his work, he cites directors like

Welles and those involved in the French New Wave in an attempt to spark further

academic interest in the network. Russo classifies many of the network's programs into

one of three categories: reclaimed, recycled, and, more broadly, new.[3] He argues that

each category of the network's programming plays a significant role in the network's

existence, and similarly, builds and reinforces a rabid fan base. These fans are loyal to the

network and passionate about its continued survival.

      However, the heart of the Adult Swim issue that this project intends to study lies

in relatively uncharted waters. Thus far, exploration on these topics has been left to

various theses and dissertations. Hye Jin Lee, a graduate student from Iowa University,

does well to contextualize the network, especially in its own history. He begins to scratch

the surface of what Adult Swim is as a brand in his dissertation entitled "All Kids Out of

the Pool!: Brand Identity, Television Animations, and Adult Audience of Cartoon

Network's Adult Swim."[4] While studying the niche audience of the network, Lee

explores issues of "kidult culture"[5] and the historical formation of the Adult Swim

industrial brand identity. Lee's work is a welcome sight, since he continues the academic

conversation about this intriguing network. He tackles a plethora of big picture issues as

pertain to the network but are also symptom of larger forces at work in the post-9/11 era

of postmodernity, including issues of the state of adulthood as well as televisual tastes

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[3] Ron P. Russo, *Adult Swim and Comedy* (Chagrin Falls, OH: Gai Russo Inc., 2005), 2.
[4] Hye Jin Lee, "All Kids out of the Pool!: Brand Identity, Television Animations, and Adult Audience of Cartoon Network's Adult Swim" (University of Iowa, 2013), http://search.proquest.com/docview/1417070147?accountid=10747.
[5] Ibid., 19.

across all manner of sexual and gender identities.[6] By so doing, Lee sets the table for future scholars to continue studying this evolving collection of media objects in a variety of academic manners.

What remains to be explored about Adult Swim is that which can be considered the how and why of the network. How has such an unorthodox block of programming become so popular? How is it able to attract as many fans as it has? What qualities shared by its programs factor into the network's draw? Why was creating an Adult Swim brand the most efficient, or at least the most effective way to achieve its current status? Boiling down Adult Swim into *Too Many Cooks* allows for a more precise exploration of these academic inquiries. For the purposes of introducing inroads to explore the how and why of Adult Swim, this project will now observe *Too Many Cooks* as a case study of the network's content.

<div align="center">Adult Swim Refined: Too Many Cooks</div>

Too Many Cooks is the epitome of the Adult Swim content library. There seems to be logic in its illogical exaggeration of a 1980s family sitcom opening credit sequence. Rather than acting as an introduction to the program, the presentation of the cast of *Too Many Cooks* lasts the length of its runtime. Ultimately, this bizarre credit sequence transcends the program itself and ends up cannibalizing a wide range of cultural content. This level of metatextual address, in addition to the bizarre content, is typical of Adult Swim's wider range of programming.

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[6] Lee, "All Kids out of the Pool!", 1-2.

Too Many Cooks, created and directed by Casper Kelly, originally premiered in the 4:00AM slot on Adult Swim at the end of October, 2014. According to an interview with Rolling Stone Magazine, Adult Swim head Mike Lazzo's reaction[7] to Kelly's initial pitch for the short was overwhelmingly positive.[8] The program's initial run quickly evolved from the obscurity of its early morning timeslot. When videos of the reputed "Strangest Thing You'll See Today"[9] appeared on YouTube before the network was able to post it on their dedicated channel, and before it appeared on the Adult Swim website itself,[10] *Too Many Cooks* became a viral sensation. After the first night alone, more than one million viewers had seen the YouTube version of the program, and celebrities were actively sharing the link to it with their followers.[11]

One of the more readily visible aspects of *Too Many Cooks* is its parody. Some examples of this parody are more obvious than others, such as the opening shot. It consists of the family home which the audience might assume will be the main setting of the program, as is typical in family sitcoms.[12] The title, *Too Many Cooks* is overlaid on the house, just as it would be if this were a normal program. Other parodic instances are more deftly understated, such as the listing of two actors' names for the first infant character we are introduced to a la the Olsen twins in *Full House* (1987-1995).[13] One might be tempted to ask if this is simply homage, a call-back joke intended purely as a

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[7] "Casper: *This is fucking great.* Mike" (Mike Lazzo's emphasis).

[8] David Fear, "'Too Many Cooks' Creator Casper Kelly on the Making of an Instant Cult Classic," *Rolling Stone*, accessed November 10, 2014, http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/features/too-many-cooks-casper-kelly-20141107.

[9] Chris Harnick, "The Strangest Thing You'll See Today," *E! Online*, accessed November 10, 2014, http://www.eonline.com/news/595917/too-many-cooks-is-the-strangest-thing-you-ll-see-today.

[10] Casper Kelly, "Casper Kelly: One Million Hits," accessed November 27, 2014, http://hey.casperkelly.com/2014/11/one-million-hits.html.

[11] Fear, "Casper Kelly."

[12] Kelly, "Too Many Cooks."

[13] One character, Michelle Tanner, played by both Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen.

nod to the old school. *Too Many Cooks* does not leave much time to ponder this, though, because it constantly barrages the viewer with over the top comedy, primarily in the form of parody. After viewing the entire program, every scene seems to have been part of a buildup of comic absurdity, rather than each joke and gag having served as independent points of humor alone. This would suggest that something deeper than homage is at work within the text.

Parody in *Too Many Cooks* frequently straddles the distinction between homage and subversion of the content it is parodying. Often, this parody is driven by written and spoken word. Like *Family Matters* (1989-1998) can be seen as a pun, in that the family sitcom is about family issues and about the significance of family, the title of *Too Many Cooks* is a pun on multiple levels. The program plays on the audience's expectations in that it is most likely that the program will be about the Cook family, and that "too many Cooks" is, in turn, a twist on *Eight Is Enough* (1977-1981). However, it is never quite clear if the family name is Cook until the rapid closing credit sequence, which subverts the notion of family in family sitcoms. The pun on the word cook is left open to the viewer, subverting expectations for simplicity within the family sitcom. When four chefs are introduced as part of the cast, the word cook becomes literal.[14] Could there, in fact, instead of too many Cook family members, be too many chefs in whatever situations this program explores? Again, there is no clear answer. What complicates this idea further is the fact that the audience only actually watches about 30 seconds of the actual program after the opening credits come to an end.[15]

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[14] Kelly, "Too Many Cooks."

[15] The climax of the opening credit sequence presents another moment of nostalgic homage as it echoes the end of *The Brady Bunch*'s (1969-1974) opening credit sequence in which the family members, and their housekeeper, appear in a grid overlaid by the title. *Too Many Cooks* takes this grid to the nth degree by

To the point, Kelly has no obligation to provide logic within the strangeness of his program, and the audience should not expect him to because such narrative inconsistency and stylistic excess is wholly consistent with much of Adult Swim's content to begin with. There is a logical illogic at work in the comedic absurdity of the *Too Many Cooks*. Bound together by the audience's conceptions of opening credit sequences and family sitcoms at large, *Too Many Cooks* relies on red herrings, subversion of expectation, and a multitude of non sequiturs to hurry the program towards its climax, something it might never even reach. Formally speaking, *Too Many Cooks* is shot like sitcom, with notable exceptions which include an animated sequence that parodies the style of the original *G.I. Joe* series (1983-1986, 1989-1992).[16] Most scenes play out in front of an unmoving camera, but when one cast member breaks out of the sitcom-formula-mandated freeze frame that introduces her character and escapes into the back lot that connects the various sets *Too Many Cooks* has been filmed on, the camera follows her, as well as her would be killer.[17]

Her would be killer? Yes, a non sequitur, albeit one that develops slowly on the periphery of the short's focus. For Adult Swim, non sequiturs seem to be almost a necessity. Kelly, in an interview with Rolling Stone Magazine, demonstrates this mentality as follows:

> It sounds short, but when you have to fill that time slot and keep the attention of people who are usually watching TV at four in the morning […] I need to throw every notion I've got into this. Even when you start switching genres, and it turns into, say, a cop show — that joke may be funny for a few extra minutes and then

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implying there is an infinite cast, or at least a massive one, by displaying a grid that is 43 blocks squared, rather than 3 blocks squared for *The Brady Bunch*. The sheer number of blocks is parodic, comically absurd, and, in some ways, violent, due to the fractured nature of the frame. Each of these qualities is present in nearly every aspect Adult Swim's content.

[16] Kelly, "Too Many Cooks."

[17] Ibid.

that's going to wear off. And as soon as people get tired of that, I have to hit them with something else. That's where the idea of the killer came from.[18]

After two false endings to the credit sequence in which the "father" character, whom we are first introduced to[19], is unable to situate himself in the center of the Cook family photo before the camera goes off, an unnamed killer begins to slaughter and cannibalize members of the cast without reproach.[20] Rather than reacting in horror, audiences embraced this maniacal character with hearty laughter and praise, sprouting Buzzfeed quizzes, and countless articles online which spurred on audiences to connect with this bizarre program who would not have otherwise tuned in, especially for the 4:00AM timeslot. This proves that the usage of the non sequitur, and more precisely absurdity in *Too Many Cooks*, works. Absurdity, as Kelly observed, is an asset, especially in the late night blocks that the program has aired. What reinforces this absurdity is the length and pace of the 15 minute time slot the program aired in. Relying on so many different genres and callbacks also raises the chances for nostalgia to bloom out of the content. Especially since the program comes full circle at the end and returns to relative harmony after the absurd twists that shake the foundations of the narrative pass, the importance of the idealized household within the family sitcom is maintained so that viewers might long for a return to those simpler times.

To summarize, *Too Many Cooks*, to all variety of viewers, contains several explicit qualities for which they have a deep seated affinity. Firstly, *Too Many Cooks* commands a very specific brand of humor that manifests itself primarily in the form of parody. It plays with pre-existing structures and media objects in order to present a

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[18] Fear, "Casper Kelly."

[19] Aligning him with the generic, all knowing father figure in so many different family programs, namely *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960).

[20] Kelly, "Too Many Cooks."

subversive program. This subversion intentionally appeals to audiences who enjoy

seeing "classic" shows referenced, sampled, spoofed, or in many cases completely

befouled. This parody is not meant simply to elicit laughter, but to simultaneously mock

and venerate the parodied text. In this regard, the target audience of *Too Many Cooks*

could respect the original material as much as they desire the parody of the original

material. The parodied and parody texts ought to remain separate, though. Because of

this, the illogical efforts taken to play with the stringent construction of the parodied text

are expected, and in fact, are logical steps in the process of this specific type of parody.

Too Many Cooks is logically illogical. It has to be. If there was a clear understanding of

why Smarf,[21] a robotic cat with the power to spawn rainbows out of his paws, plays the

role of hero by shooting lasers out of his eyes, the payoff of the parody would

disappear.[22] The comedy must be absurd because, under the conditions set by this brand

of parody, absurdity makes sense while logic flies out the window. Lastly, *Too Many*

Cooks, because it can only parody things that have already been established, is inherently

nostalgic. Regardless of how absurd extant programming is made out to be by the parody

in *Too Many Cooks*, a certain fondness for the parodied work remains. In spite of any

faults exposed by the parody, the viewer still venerates the original programming while it

enjoys the ensuing mockery.

The specific versions of the qualities of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia

present in *Too Many Cooks* are essential to the manner in which Adult Swim forms its

programming block into a genre of its own, as well as how the generic aspects of that

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[21] A parody of ALF from *ALF* (1986-1990)? Or maybe a conglomeration of Alf, a cylon from the original *Battlestar Galactica* (1978-1979) series, Snarf of *Thundercats* (1985-1989) fame, and the T-1000 from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991)? Possibly. It is all left up to the viewer to decide, allowing each viewer to potentially bring their own nostalgia into play.

[22] Kelly, "Too Many Cooks."

construction attract and maintain a loyal audience of nostalgic night owls. Because *Too Many Cooks* is most emblematic of the mode of Adult Swim, a network that traditionally presents animated content rather than live action, one can see how pervasive and uniform the manner by which Adult Swim attracts and maintains an audience has become since its inception in 2001. Whatever is at work on the network, it goes deeper than large scale limitations of genre. It is clear, after studying *Too Many Cooks*, that Adult Swim's specific brand of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgic output play the largest role in the network's success. As such, they will serve as the means through which this thesis will study Adult Swim's ability to attract and maintain audiences as a network and as a tightly defined genre space.

<div align="center">Adult Swim "Defined"</div>

Very little about Adult Swim's generic content makes actual, viable sense. However, this, in and of itself, suggests that, given the time and effort that goes into maintaining the network's cohesive content library and multimedia focus, this is intentional. The network has been constructed to the same degree that *Too Many Cooks* has been created logically out of illogic. It is this conscious construction of what amounts to a brand name blend of programming into one trademark genre that Adult Swim has perfected over the years. This Adult Swim genre is a tightly constructed blend of programming targeted at a specific swath of primarily male viewers between the ages of 18-34.[23] Many contemporary cable networks operate in the same fashion, for example,

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[23] Evan Elkins, "Cultural Identity and Subcultural Forums: The Post-Network Politics of Adult Swim," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 7 (2014): 596.

FXX, after acquiring syndication rights to *The Simpsons* (1989-present) in 2014, as well

several FX comedies, seems poised to offer a similar, focused uniformity of content to its

ideal viewers.[24] While it is not alone in this pursuit, Adult Swim, like NBC's Must See

TV or ABC's TGIF programming block from the 1990s, presents a succinct brand of

content aimed at, and consumed by, a specific audience.[25]

Viewers who tune in to Adult Swim, presumably, will have a handful of programs

that they want to see, but they will tolerate the rest because they share qualities they see

in their favorite shows. They will even stick around for the commercials which often

showcase these qualities as well.[26] These qualities are based in the versions of parody,

comic absurdity, and nostalgia present in *Too Many Cooks*.[27] These qualities are vital to

the network's appeal. The typical Adult Swim audience tunes in consistently in large

numbers that eclipse even the stalwart, prototypical male programming of ESPN, as well

as MTV, a traditional locus of viewers aged 18-34, as well as younger teens.[28] What's

crucial to this attractive sense of essence is that it enables the network to succeed in the

ratings, even when it favors reruns of its own programming, as well as successful

syndicated programming.[29]

According to Evan Elkins, "Adult Swim brands itself as a community of middle

class consumers who represent the intersection of young adulthood, technological

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[24] Jon Lafayette, "Homer and Bart Become Rich Cable Guys," *Broadcasting & Cable* 143, no. 43 (November 18, 2013): 4.

[25] John M. Higgins, "A Closer Look at Must See TV," *Broadcasting & Cable* 134, no. 48 (November 29, 2004): 12.

[26] Anthony Crupi, "Demo Darling," *MediaWeek* 21, no. 8 (February 28, 2011): 12.

[27] Putting the grammar of genre studies, especially that of Mittell, to work with this topic becomes necessary because of the interconnectivity between the network's offerings driven by these three pillars of emblematic Adult Swim appeal.

[28] A. J. Katz, "They're Not Afraid of the Dark (cover Story)," *Broadcasting & Cable* 143, no. 9 (March 9, 2015): 12-13.

[29] Paige Albiniak, "Successful Series Are Good; Big Brands Are Better," *Broadcasting & Cable* 145, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 21.

acumen, heterosexual masculinity, and whiteness – a highly desirable demographic for advertisers."[30] While Elkins goes on to address the "hegemonic versions"[31] of the richer multitude of audience members, this thesis, while not seeking to suggest that "Adult Swim's discursively constructed audience is essentialized as merely white, young, male, middle class, or heterosexual,"[32] intends to smooth out the differences, however problematic, in order to present the universal version of the Adult Swim Lifestyle which all the network's diehard fans buy into. In 2010, Anthony Crupi, writing for *MediaWeek*, stated that Adult Swim had been, up to that point, "dismissed as a cultish backwater for marijuana enthusiasts and shiftless geeks."[33] Who are these shiftless geeks? They could be anyone, so long as they tune in to Adult Swim and are attracted by its genre of programming. Just because the network hit it big in the "most universal of demos, viewers 18-49"[34] for the first time in 2010, does not mean that its audience is still made up of only these particular audience members. Who then are the fans of Adult Swim? It is not for this thesis to determine that. Rather, this is an inquiry left to statisticians and marketers. In order to tackle the overarching issue of defining Adult Swim and exploring how it attracts and maintains a devoted audience, it behooves this thesis to explore, in simplest terms, who the Adult Swim audience is at large[35] and why they are attracted to the network's programming.

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[30] Elkins, "Cultural Identity and Subcultural Forums," 596.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Crupi, "Demo Darling," 12.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Rather than specifically. Demographics aside, all viewers of Adult Swim are choosing to partake in the content provided to them for a specific reason. This is the interesting notion that this thesis wishes to explore. Why does this specific content appeal to the audience that it has, regardless of what the audience is comprised of?

In aggregate, the Adult Swim audience buys into the content provided to them by the network's programs. More than this, the loyal group of Adult Swim viewers choose to participate[36] in what this thesis will call the Adult Swim genre.[37] Lee, in "All Kids out of the Pool!", asserts that Time/Warner markets "Adult Swim as a lifestyle"[38] instead of as television content block alone. For Lee, this is a branding choice, a marketing decision, but this thesis asserts that the concept of the Adult Swim genre goes beyond this. Adult Swim fans seek a salve to remedy the real world nonsense they face daily, even if this means rejecting mainstream culture.[39] In terms of advertizing, Adult Swim, according to Dan Lippe, does their best to meet their audience half way by "balancing young adults' jaded view of all ad pitches with their love of edgy new ideas in TV-watching."[40] In terms of programming, everything that Adult Swim does markets a calculated genre at its audience in order to foster this sense of lifestyle. It is a calculated effort.

Viewing content from the Adult Swim genre tent to amplify fans' tendency to reject mainstream culture and society in favor of the culture and society provided by the network in a form that might be construed as a lifestyle. This allows Adult Swim's viewers to partake in a tiny rebellion from normalcy on a nightly basis. It is a form of escapism. It is a small acceptance of what Bjørn Schiermer's research would consider

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[36] In this thesis, participation should be taken to mean the same thing that Henry Jenkins discusses in a number of his works (see "Quentin Tarantino's *Star Wars*?: Grassroots Creativity Meets the Media Industry" or other chapters/essays out of Jenkins' 2006 book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*). It is an investment in time and loyalty to a particular brand, genre, or mindset reinforced by a media artifact. Elkins recognizes this connection as well, between what Jenkins has viewed in media at large and the manner in which Adult Swim appeals to its audience, and vice versa.
[37] A concept this thesis will focus on exclusively in chapter two.
[38] Lee, "All Kids out of the Pool!", 12.
[39] Ibid., 13-24.
[40] Dan Lippe, "Overmarketed to All Their Lives, Adult Swim Fans Know When to Laugh," *Advertising Age* 77, no. 37 (September 11, 2006): 36.

hipster culture.[41] Priorities shift, and the drudgery of real life is superseded by the absurd

nostalgia present on the network. Simultaneously, viewers who partake of the network's

content might accept a certain degree of otherness from mainstream culture in exchange

for their viewing of the programming. Not only are Adult Swim's viewers potentially

distinguishing themselves from their everyday stresses, but also from the mainstream

society that bears partial blame for said stresses.

"Kidult" fans who reject mainstream culture in favor of the Adult Swim genre are

apt to become cynical toward society, or at least find it partially faulty and worthy of

subversion.[42] Television, on the whole, has operated in a similar manner. The recent trend

of comedy news programs that report purported big issues with a decidedly satirical bend

has also increased levels cynicism towards society and politics in the populace according

to a study performed by Jennifer Kowalewski and Chip Stewart in 2012.[43] In order to

appease and reinforce this cynicism, those infatuated with the Adult Swim genre might

seek out programming that entertains and provides a twist on the sweet twinge of

nostalgia, another recognized marker of hipster culture.[44] According to Schiermer, in the

eyes of a hipster, "[y]esterday's fashion is always bad taste. And bad taste is

phenomenologically intriguing"[45] (Schiermer's emphasis). In the case of an Adult Swim

fan, the network's genre may be intriguing and inviting because it parodies content one

might be able to find nostalgic. This pairing of mockery and veneration is subversive

which probably attracts the typical, potentially cynical, Adult Swim viewer. Often, this

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[41] Bjørn Schiermer, "Late-Modern Hipsters: New Tendencies in Popular Culture," *Acta Sociologica (Sage Publications, Ltd.)* 57, no. 2 (May 2014): 169-170.
[42] Schiermer, "Late-Modern Hipsters,"171-173.
[43] Jennifer Kowalewski and Chip Stewart, "To Laugh or Not to Laugh," *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal* 27, no. 3 (2012): 1–30.
[44] Schiermer, "Late-Modern Hipsters," 173.
[45] Ibid.

intrigue evolves into a new false nostalgia for content that one could not have otherwise been nostalgic for.[46]

Just as viewers and fans who have an affinity for the content of the Adult Swim might genre see themselves as partaking in a rebellion against social norms and societal expectations, the network's programming itself seeks to break away from broadcasting norms. Elkins asserts that "Adult Swim assembles lowbrow, residual, and cult media from various time periods and locales […] across its transmediated properties and recombines them into a bricolage aesthetic."[47] This flies in the face of what Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc term Least Offensive Programming, a practice of major networks in which content is only broadcast if it can appeal to a wide, diverse audience while offending the least amount of people possible.[48] To attract their target demographic, Adult Swim must produce programs that diverge from traditional television norms as much and as often as possible to keep pushing the envelope, to stray away from the status quo mantra of Least Offensive Programming. The network, therefore, broadcasts more contentious, offensive material to present a narrower appeal to niche audiences that are driven to the margins by Least Offensive Programming. In its attempt to appeal to as wide an audience as possible by offending the least amount of people possible, Least Offensive Programming oversimplifies its television audience, whitewashing the tastes of

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[46] The notion of false nostalgia, as well as nostalgia proper will be discussed fully in chapter three. Involved with viewing the parody of nostalgic content is a sort of bittersweet self mockery of one's tastes. This takes a hipster swerve when the parodied content is outside of the readily available realm of experience for the viewer, hence a new sense of ownership over the parodied content through the act of watching the parody. Hence a false nostalgia. Viewers and fans of Adult Swim can participate in lampooning their favorite non Adult Swim content that comes under the network's content's scrutiny even as they maintain the love of their favorite non Adult Swim content. There is a notion of masochism here, but, this falls outside the realm of this thesis' study and is reserved for a more psychological study of the Adult Swim audience at large.
[47] Elkins, "Cultural Identity and Subcultural Forum," 604.
[48] Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc, *The American Television Industry*, International Screen Industries (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2009), 37.

audiences at the margins, or those with minority viewing habits. Because of this, Adult Swim gains another potential rival from which to draft its potentially dissatisfied audience. In the end, Adult Swim is all about setting itself apart from the mainstream media, which viewers might find attractive.

This thesis endeavors to explore the nature of Adult Swim's uniquely forged, concise genre, how it appeals to audiences, and how it manages to retain impressive numbers of viewers on a consistent basis. In a media environment where members of Generation Y, typically understood to be individuals aged 18-34[49], show very little brand loyalty according to a study performed by Dr. Alisa Agozzino[50], Adult Swim retains this key millennial demographic and makes them fervent in their fandom as well. According to Dorothy Pomerantz, audiences are more likely to have a select list of favorite shows from a variety of networks rather than one network brand that speaks directly to them.[51] How is it, then, that Adult Swim has created its unified brand which audiences respond so positively to? Presumably, its fans have stuck around long enough to see the network acquire some of their favorite off-network shows, mostly Fox primetime animation like *Family Guy* (1999-2003, 2005-present) and *Bob's Burgers* (2011-present), but for the network to control the highest total-day ratings of any network in the 18-34 demographic, in addition to high ratings in a multitude of other demographics, something deeper must be going on.[52]

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[49] Ben Adler, "Streams of Consciousness," *Columbia Journalism Review* 52, no. 1 (June 2013): 24.
[50] Alissa Agozzino, "Building a Personal Relationship through Social Media: A Study of Millennial Students' Brand Engagement," *Ohio Communication Journal* 50 (2012): 181–204.
[51] Dorothy Pomerantz, "A+E's Abbe Raven On Why Television Brands Still Matter," *Forbes.Com*, May 21, 2014.
[52] Katz, "They're Not Afraid of the Dark," 14.

This thesis will explore how Adult Swim constructs itself as a network in order to attract and maintain audiences. Chapter one explores the history leading up to Adult Swim, as well as the history of the network itself. This history affords Adult Swim with the tools necessary to mold itself into a uniquely attractive hub for offensive, niche programming. Chapter two discusses Adult Swim's overarching genre of content in terms of the genre theories of Altman and Mittell. Though comprised of a multitude of constituent genre parts, the network's content is uniquely suited to being broadcast on Adult Swim for Adult Swim fans. There are unique qualities that, when combined, yield a culturally constructed, network specific genre. These unique qualities are taken to task in chapter three to explore why Adult Swim's content appeals to its fans, specifically. Adult Swim's own style of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia constitute these qualities seen in all of the network's programming. Salient examples of these qualities at work are cited from the following programs: *Robot Chicken* (2005-present), *Superjail!* (2008-present), *Rick and Morty* (2013-present), and *Too Many Cooks*. In the thesis' conclusion, the totality of these ideas will merge, along with a suggestion that, in its efforts to divert its course from the path of Least Offensive Programming, that Adult Swim has adopted Most Offensive Programming as its tactic to succeed in the post-cable environment that it does while its direct imitators fail.

CHAPTER ONE - "THERE AREN'T A LOT OF RULES, EXACTLY!"[53]:

ADULT SWIM AS A NETWORK

In the present day, Adult Swim, with its particular brand of parody, comic

absurdity, and nostalgia, appears to be quite a stable "network." These scare quotes ought

to convey the notion that Adult Swim, though it behaves as a network, still exists within

the boundaries of Cartoon Network, something this thesis will explore. Before it could

begin to craft its own genre to appeal to various niche audiences, Adult Swim had to

establish itself as a cable network. Two recent histories of cable television, that each

focus on the importance of narrowcasting and content library building, in particular grasp

the precursor elements out of which Adult Swim evolved: Megan Mullen's *The Rise of*

Cable Programming in the United States: Revolution or Evolution? (2003) as well as the

early chapters of Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc's *The American Television Industry*

(2009). As such, much of the history leading up to and including the heyday of Adult

Swim will be drawn primarily from these texts and their influences.[54] This chapter will

conclude with a discussion of the flow[55] of programming on Adult Swim in order to

gauge the success of its construction as a network. The chapter argues that, in order to

further improve upon its solid formation as a network in terms of acquiring and

maintaining an audience, Adult Swim needed adhere to a specific collection of content

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[53] Ken Plume, "An Interview with Mike Lazzo," *IGN*, July 7, 2003,
http://www.ign.com/articles/2003/07/08/an-interview-with-mike-lazzo?page=1.
[54] Lee in "All Kids out of the Pool" establishes a thorough reading of the media environment in the late
1990s out of which Cartoon Network, and subsequently Adult Swim rose. This thesis will turn the clock
back even farther in order to trace the rise of content libraries, the original viability of niche programming,
and other such concepts necessary to the survival of Adult Swim, through to the present day.
[55] Raymond Williams' understanding of the term which, in turn, influenced Henry Jenkins' notion of flow
within the digital media convergence culture he found himself writing in and about.

expectations that its audience recognized in what would become something of its own "genre."

Turner and Harnessing Culture: Adult Swim's Pre-History

Adult Swim's history begins at the dawn of cable television. In an attempt to reach broader audiences, numerous forces led to the rise of CATV and pay-TV, ancestors of the modern cable system, as early as the late 1940s.[56] Local and regional stations followed the models set by the national networks of CBS and NBC in an attempt to appeal to wide audiences in order to increase their viewership and their advertizing dividends.[57] This practice has continued through to the present spurred on by advances in technology, especially satellites which allow for programming's dissemination over areas unprecedented in the CATV era of cable.[58] With this larger market, the appeal of programming needed to broaden, in order to draw in the most profit and influence. As Mullen is right to point out, "this imperative opposes any attempts at niche targeting."[59] Embracing the counterintuitive appeal to niche audiences is one of many steps taken that eventually would lead to the founding of modern networks like Adult Swim. Though technology has increasingly afforded cable with the opportunity to appeal to huge masses throughout history, the shift to narrowcasting was originally made possible in 1969 when the FCC released new requisites enabling "localism and minority television service"[60]

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[56] Megan Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States: Revolution or Evolution?* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 30-51.

[57] Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007), 9-13.

[58] Mullen, *Rise of Cable*, 27.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., 74

which increasingly set a precedent for niche appeal in cable television. Such "[t]argeting [of] fringe-time audiences in this way would become a significant factor in the launch of national satellite carried networks during the late 1970s," [61] according to Mullen.

With cable television reaching its first peak in the Blue Sky[62] era of the late 1960s through mid 1970s, it was only a matter of time before certain individuals harnessed the power of nationwide cultural appeal to siphon some viewers away from the traditional networks for the first time. One such trailblazer was Ted Turner, whose own local Atlanta network began broadcasting across the country in December of 1975.[63] Turner's Turner Broadcasting System[64] family expanded in the 1980s with round the clock news coverage on Cable Network News (CNN), and film screenings on Turner Network Television (TNT).[65] While he was not the first person to do so, Turner's foresight to collect regional stations into one national superstation legitimized the practice of narrowcasting.[66] Turner's creation and subsequent broadcasting of so called "content libraries"[67] of previously aired content evolved the television landscape and made networks like his more cost effective. Content libraries were formed by purchasing the rights to wide swaths of previously broadcasted programming with the explicit purpose of crafting programming blocks that could easily be repurposed for any event.[68] Cable networks could run marathons, feature special episodes of beloved programs, and even fill their

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[61] Mullen, *Rise of Cable*, 83.
[62] See chapter three in Mullen's *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States: Revolution or Evolution?* for a complete rundown of this optimistic period of cable, as this era is more relevant to television history at large than this particular slice presented here.
[63] Curtin and Shattuc, *American Television*, 15.
[64] Known locally as WTBS at the time.
[65] Curtin and Shattuc, *American Television*,15-16.
[66] There is a rich history here that this thesis does not focus on. See Mullen's *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States*, John Harrison and Martin Hurst's *Communication and New Media: From Broadcast to Narrowcast*, and other related texts for more in depth observations in this vein.
[67] Curtin and Shattuc, *American Television*, 16.
[68] Ibid.

entire broadcast day with material that had already been produced, drastically cutting the cost of producing original content.[69] This is another critical step toward the eventual creation of Adult Swim. By lowering costs and focusing their appeal to specific niche audiences, these new networks were more apt to draw viewers away from traditional, mainstream networks that only offered widely appealing, perhaps less specifically interesting programming geared towards particular viewers.

Key here is the fact that content libraries were typically composed of programs representing similar genres, and, in turn, were housed within their own networks.[70] HBO was one of the first of these networks to be launched in 1972.[71] Adult entertainment, blockbuster films, and British television reruns were some of the first members of its content library geared towards savvy cable viewers that were looking for distinguished programming.[72] 1979 saw the rise of Galavision, "the first cable-only Spanish –language network"[73] which aired its content library of recycled programming in Spanish. In the decades that followed, dozens of networks followed suit including Nickelodeon (1977), ESPN (1979), USA and BET (1980), and CSPAN (1979).[74] Each had their own content library that appealed to their own niche market. For example, BET began as a block of programming on USA and chose to showcase "sitcoms featuring African Americans and blaxplotation films from the 1960s and 1970s."[75] This notion of block programming was

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[69] Curtin and Shattuc, *American Television*, 17.
[70] One of the first cable giants to experiment with day long generic broadcasting was Pat Robertson, according to Mullen's *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States*. He was "able to carve out a distinct programming niche" inevitably growing to appeal to many Christians across the country (60). Though Adult Swim does not trace its roots to Robertson's fundamentalist Christian genre or message, one might be left to muse how it creates a sort of religion behind its own offensive brand of programming.
[71] Mullen, *Rise of Cable*, 106-108.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 119.
[74] Ibid., 119-125.
[75] Ibid. 123.

even utilized by the mainstream networks to create a distinct space for Saturday morning cartoons, thus proving that niche audiences will find their particular block of programming and stick with it.[76]

More than merely airing syndicated programs in a typical content library showcase, networks especially like those of Turner's first few decades of management, operated as cultural libraries driven by the apparent generic. If certain programs deviated from a given genre, the mere fact that the content library featured it brought it under the umbrella of a given network and its culturally imposed genre labeling. As will later be discussed, this concept will be rather important moving forward, especially with regard to Mittell's culturally based television genres within television and how, this thesis argues, Adult Swim harnesses their power in order to solidify their image as well as their own fan base.

Not only does this shun the traditional networks' process of airing a wide range of programming to draw in as many people from as many blocks of viewership as possible, but it also chooses not to market itself to viewers who are not at all interested in the content provided. These new networks only cared about who was watching, not who might be persuaded to watch. What began as a cost cutting tactic resulted in a growth of audience, according to Mullen.[77] If these networks could market to a specific demographic while leaving just a wide enough door open for other viewers, any additional boost to viewership numbers was seen as extra because narrowcasting ended up defining its audience's expectations and vice versa.[78] On the other hand, traditional

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[76] Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2nd revised edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 25-40.
[77] Mullen, 156-160.
[78] Ibid.

networks, those with the clout to drive the advancement of television up until this

juncture in time, favored programming that appealed to as wide a variety of viewers as

possible, regardless of genre. They constantly shifted their appeal by strategically

blurring the contents their programming blocks to maintain relative taste neutrality to

ideally attract all possible viewers. Such practice is still employed today, and it goes by

the same name: Least Offensive Programming (LOP).[79]

According to Curtin and Shattuc, early networks offered inoffensive, broadly

appealing programming "reasoning that mass audiences could only be built by avoiding

content that might drive away particular groups of viewers."[80] Moreover, Least Offensive

Programming embodied the following:

> the principle that guided their [traditional television networks'] primetime
> programming practices, suggesting that artistic or provocative shows might not be
> the best choice for primetime. Programmes should be amusing or intriguing, but
> above all the should be tolerable. They shouldn't provoke passionate responses,
> but should entertain and inform without giving offense to any particular audience
> segment.[81]

Adult Swim, as a network, holds these same principles at its core, except with regard to

offending viewers. While Turner's revolution did not, by any means, verge on the

beaming of heinously offensive programming into the homes of tight knit nuclear

families, it was a step away from the traditional path. Adult Swim, on the other hand,

seems to frequently find a way to offend mainstream audiences and their values, more

often than not. The result is a reinforced acceptance of the programming by the niche

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[79] Curtin and Shattuc, *American Television*, 37.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., 59.

audiences that do appreciate the offensive content because of its uniqueness and its ability to define its viewers in contrast with mainstream media consumers.[82]

It stands to reason that the programming contained within the content libraries of Turner's networks had been considered Least Offensive Programming when it originally aired on the traditional networks, which, after all, intentionally aimed at the widest swath of sociocultural demographics.[83] However, the content libraries of repackaged television programs were, invariably, displaced from their original air time. This probably alters the potential viewership base, or, at the very least, might persuade viewers to alter their viewing habits in order to tune in. This optional decision to seek out and choose to view programming, while not altogether different from previous viewing practices, reinforces concepts of choice and rewards spectator loyalty in the form of concretized communities for likeminded viewers. These trends are exacerbated as more media outlets seek to increase their own appeal among growing niche audiences that also have become more specified over time. Beyond broadcasting timeslot alterations, grander time period and culture displacement begins to impact rebroadcasted content libraries. Not only were shows from previous decades shown, regardless of their presence in the cultural memory of the populace, but films, too, were placed in a new cultural setting, that of the home or smaller local setting that contrasted drastically with movie theaters.[84] Each of these factors acts as a distancing agent, problematizing the label of Least Offensive

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[82] Again, a sort of hipster mentality, or something that looks like what might be labeled as a hipster mentality, is at work here.

[83] A brief point of order: throughout much of the early days of television, these dispositions were, for the most part, held by lower and middle class white audience members and, in more rare cases, by minorities. Does the rebroadcast of this "widely appealing" content perpetuate the problem into the 70s and 80s? Perhaps. This issue is covered elsewhere in television studies.

[84] This issue, which goes beyond the scope of this thesis' look at Adult Swim's appeal specifically, is covered in Anna McCarthy's book *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* and in many of the works of Lynn Spigel and other television theorists.

Programming and narrowing the audience appeal by recontextualizing the content under the umbrella of each narrowcasting network's content library.

Turner's offerings, intentionally, no longer satisfied the general appetites of the public. Instead of attempting to cater to mass market tastes, Turner aimed exclusively at niche audiences, smaller groups that subdivided the viewing public into discrete, though not exclusive, demographics.[85] Though in theory this practice appeared detrimental, especially since working with the largest audience meant the safest investment had been common practice since before television arrived on the scene, the Turner brands focused on their succinct target audiences to the company's benefit in the long run:

> Although none of the Turner channels could individually compete with the major networks for ratings or revenues, Turner's constellation of niche cable services underwritten by cost-efficient programming provided steady streams of income that added up each year to impressive profits. The company never attacked the big networks head-on, instead it cultivated niches that the major broadcast networks ignored due to their focus on mass audiences.[86]

In the 1980s, Turner and company, as well as his professional imitators and likeminded corporate entities, created new networks and subsumed other regional networks in the process, allowing for the genesis of new channels that appealed to a greater number of unique niche audiences.[87] If one particular viewer was not interested in CNN's news, they might be interested in any one of the other networks that Turner's burgeoning media conglomerate could provide, or any other set of cable brands for that matter. Adult Swim has served its role in this set of cable brands throughout its existence. Like the rest of Turner's assets, it has cultivated its audience who in turn expect certain content from the network.

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[85] Curtin and Shattuc, *American Television*, 17.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Mullen, *Rise of Cable*, 113-114.

Most of the previous examples of content libraries and their interactions with their audiences require repackaging on the level of programming. How does this extended history translate to Adult Swim? After all, much of their programming is original, rather than mainly re-aired content. Additionally, the Adult Swim brand name seems to find the mere idea of Least Offensive Programming an anathema, rather than something to merely distinguish themselves from. There seems to have been a shift from narrowcasting as a method of guiding content selection to narrowcasting as a method of guiding content production. Today, the network's own programming is intentionally offensive, in fact, and seems to relish the opportunity to set itself apart through its employment of its own signature variations of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia, just like *Too Many Cooks* in this thesis' introduction. In the beginning, however, this was not the case. In fact, much of the network's original programming was intentionally drawn[88] from previously existing content which had originally succeeded in attracting a wider audience than was targeted by the Adult Swim at large.

Adult Swim would not have existed if not for these early moments of cable network empire building, specifically on the part of Ted Turner, for they lead to the establishment of Cartoon Network, Adult Swim's maternal network. The popularization of content libraries and narrowcasting gave network conglomerates the tools necessary to attract niche audiences and maintain them by offering them the content they seemed to desire. Within 20 years of the 1980s cable network boom, the table was thoroughly set for the birth of Adult Swim's specific brand of logically illogical programming.

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[88] Pun intended.

Cartoon O'clock: Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, Cost Effective Experimentation, and

Flow

By 1991, over 90 percent of content aired on basic and premium cable had

previously been aired or screened elsewhere.[89] Building content libraries and

broadcasting repurposed Least Offensive Programming had become the cable norm,

thanks in part to Turner. One niche market still eluded Turner's company's scope,

however: children. Primarily, Warner Communication's Nickelodeon held court over the

dispositions of this particular market after its uplink to satellite in 1979.[90] Initially, the

channel was free to cable subscribers and commercial free as well.[91] Due to its reliance

on self produced content, as well as its commercial free nature until the mid-1980s, the

network itself was not profitable in spite of its popularity.[92] In Mullen's words,

Nickelodeon "managed to strike a balance between what children want to watch and what

parents feel is appropriate"[93] especially after the introduction in rerun-centric Nick at

Nite[94], which aired in the evening.[95] Nickelodeon was out to create timeless cartoons

from scratch to appeal to a wide range of children and adults.[96] By appealing to parents,

who trusted the network to proved non-offensive programming to their children,

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[89] Mullen, *Rise of Cable*, 9.
[90] Ibid., 119-121.
[91] Ibid., 121.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Similar to how Adult Swim exists now, Nick at Nite existed as a semi-independent content library nestled within the larger Nickelodeon network ranked independent of its maternal network in Nielsen ratings, according to Mullen. Susan Murray studies this phenomenon in greater depth in her chapter called ""TV Satisfaction Guaranteed!": Nick at Nite and TV Land's "Adult" Attractions" in Heather Hendershot's edited *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*.
[95] Mullen, *Rise of Cable,* 121.
[96] Heather Hendershot, "Introduction: Nickelodeon and the Business of Fun," in *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*, ed. Heather Hendershot (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004), 9.

Nickelodeon demonstrated how a network originally defined by a content library could shift to form its own network identity replete with new content of its own.[97]

It is interesting to note that, although Nickelodeon had crafted its own brand image and began to draw audiences away from the major networks, especially during Saturday mornings, its network image was not perfectly unified.[98] At least one show, *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991-1995), clashed with the network's brand.[99] Because this notion is discernible after the fact, it proves that Nickelodeon had indeed crafted its own brand image around new, original programming. *The Ren & Stimpy Show* is simply the exception that proves the rule. This especially seems to be the case since it had to be moved to MTV and eventually VH1 in order to find an appropriate audience for itself.[100] This is another huge step towards setting a precedent for Adult Swim. When a cable network can not only distinguish itself from mainstream media but also successfully market its brand beyond a carved out niche audience, there is potential to attract a strong, loyal fan base. Turner's Cartoon Network might be read as an imitator of this phenomenon, and in turn, a direct link between older cable network models and the modern, post-network era that Adult Swim inhabits.

Cartoon Network, which was established by Turner in 1992, desired to break into the market of appealing to children, and to profit by doing so. Scarcely a year after Turner purchased the rights to the Hannah Barbara content library, a pantheon of cheaply produced cartoons that never quite reached widespread popularity, which was merely the

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[97] Hendershot, "Business of Fun," 2.
[98] Kevin S. Sandler, "'A Kid's Gotta Do What a Kid's Gotta Do': Branding the Nickelodeon Experience," in *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004), 45-48.
[99] Ibid., 50.
[100] Ibid., 50-51.

final impetus necessary to begin the network itself, the *modus operandi* for Cartoon

Network was set: a round the clock network purely consisting of animated fare.[101] As the

name of one of its original programming blocks[102] (Boomerang) suggested, the specific

goal of Cartoon Network was to bring cartoon classics from the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s

back to its original audience, baby boomers desiring to wax nostalgic, as well as to

contemporary youths in an era when prototypical Saturday morning cartoons were

beginning to disappear from the network airwaves.[103] In an interview with online

entertainment news source IGN, Mike Lazzo, senior vice president of Adult Swim at the

time, explains the Cartoon Network phenomenon as follows:

> From the earliest ratings we got, we saw what we in fact see today – which is 2/3
> of the audience are 2-11, and 1/3 of the audience is 13 and older. When you
> examine the older aspect of the audience, it's pretty clear that half of it is adults
> watching with their children, and half of it is just adults watching because they
> love animation.[104]

It is this nostalgia, this desire to watch these cartoons and to share them with their

children that one of the Adult Swim's methods of attracting and maintaining an audience

evolved from.[105] Regarding Cartoon Network, this sort of nostalgia was readable within

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[101] M. Keith Booker, *Drawn to Television: Prime-Time Animation from* The Flintstones *to* Family Guy (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 166.

[102] Boomerang, which began its life as a block of shows early on in Cartoon Network's history became a standalone network in 2000, most likely to make room for more original programming on its sister network, and features the Hannah Barbara catalog almost exclusively, similar to the original Cartoon Network plan.

[103] A more thorough history of Cartoon Network may be found in David Perlmutter's *America Toons In: A History of Television Animation*, specifically in chapter 6. While the overarching goals of Cartoon Network are relevant to this thesis, the larger scope of bringing Cartoon Cartoons to life and other important stepping stones for the network on its way to becoming what it is today apart from Adult Swim is largely secondary.

[104] Plume, "An Interview with Mike Lazzo," 1.

[105] The notion that Adult Swim's programs are inherently nostalgic or are at least able to induce a sense of false nostalgia within the viewer will be addressed in chapter three. Instead of only creating a sense of desire within the viewer to return to simpler days, Adult Swim's revamped nostalgia corrupts, in the most positive of ways, the mechanism that inspires such emotions, potentially drawing in a more postmodern audience. Making such a statement ought not to be confused with "[c]alling television the quintessential postmodern form of culture [which] sometimes seems to have become a requisite throwaway line for critical study of the medium" (Mullen, *Rise of Cable*, 23). Postmodernism, while it does factor into the

the content of the network's programming, which allowed parents and children to spread

their fandom to other people in their lives, before the era of social media, which

undoubtedly assisted in the popularization of the network overall.

Though ad revenue was coming in from this "Hannah Barbara rerun channel,"[106]

after the merger of Time-Warner in 1996, the demand for original programming became

much greater at Cartoon Network, and the funding was now present for its production.

Because Nickelodeon had begun developing its own Nicktoons at a fevered pace,

Cartoon Network needed to even the playing field with its own original cartoons.[107] The

Turner mantra of repurposed content libraries never fully disappeared, but Cartoon

Network began to take its future into its own hands, steering towards the network

ideology center only on issues of preparing original content; the focus on appealing to

niche audiences on a shoestring budget was not lost.[108] In fact, when Lazzo was directed

to come up with cost-effective programming, he repurposed an old cartoon into a new

form, like some kind of cultural cannibalism. By so doing, Lazzo harnessed the cultural

capital and nostalgia built up within it, but also used the new product as an opportunity

for parody.[109] This idea of repurposing content, subverting its original form, and even

parodying the original content is a crucial step towards the arrival of Adult Swim. Each

of these steps has allowed Adult Swim to have more control over its network image,

which factors heavily into its appeal to audiences. Thereafter, its network's stability

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definitions this thesis will use to describe Adult Swim's content, as well as the means by which it draws in its audience, is not the subject of this thesis. Those interested in the topic are free to delve into Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and other related texts. Adult Swim may operate in a postmodern realm but the ramifications of such operations are left to further academic study.

[106] Plume, "An Interview with Mike Lazzo," 1.

[107] Sandler, "Branding the Nickelodeon Experience," 52-53.

[108] Plume, "An Interview with Mike Lazzo," 1-5.

[109] The result was *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*, which will be discussed shortly.

helped to maintain its fan base due to its consistency in programming practice and creative endeavors.

While heir to Turner's ideology that began Cartoon Network in the first place, the concept of repurposing older content into new, original content brought the network, and later Adult Swim to the forefront of the new media era, a place where content parody, sampling, and fan fiction spew forth from the minds and mouths of digitally predisposed fans and citizens.[110] The precedent for this had already been set by previous generations and their experimentation with fandom in the form of fan fiction, community building, remix culture, and even transmission of zine culture into the online world.[111] This issue, though part of the world Cartoon Network grew up in, is largely beyond the scope of this thesis, but it has been written about extensively elsewhere. In many ways, Cartoon Network became part of this new wave of creativity which imbued society with a hearty thirst for "nostalgia bait."[112] This term will be used in a positive light by this thesis, rather than with the negative connotations originally intended by John Lichman in his article which partially admonishes the repetitive nature of Adult Swim programming block circa 2012.[113] Put simply, when operating as Cartoon Network had been, the shift to

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[110] All in the spirit of Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* and the digital media environment, which enables participatory culture among fans of given media content.

[111] Henry Jenkins, "Interactive Audiences?," in *The New Media Book*, ed. Dan Harries (London, United Kingdom: British Film Institute, 2002), 157–70.

[112] John Lichman "Is Adult Swim Stuck in a Rut of Nostalgia Bait?," *Indiewire*, accessed September 3, 2014, http://www.indiewire.com/article/television/adult-swim.

[113] As much as Lichman decries the repetitive nature of Adult Swim, ratings would indicate that fans are sticking around and are continuing to flock to the network, regardless of how "tired" some reviewers find the content. The fact that Lichman is so up in arms about the network's *modus operandi* is enough to suggest that the network has effectively constructed a network identity and brand that polarizes its audience. This polarization, for a small network, does wonders in attracting disenchanted mainstream audience members while repelling overly critical individuals who might otherwise view Least Offensive Programming because they buy into the lie of innovation within each "new" season of rehashed, widely appealing shows.

repurposed creativity came at just the right time to appeal most to audiences who wanted to be more involved with the media content in which they participated.

In Lazzo's own words, "the lack of money improves your creativity. If you don't have any money, you've got to be more clever about stuff."[114] *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* (*SGC2C*) (1994-2008) was the result. It was Adult Swim's would be first show, despite the fact that the network and the late night timeslot did not yet exist. Much of the settings and characters were lifted from a cartoon under control by Turner Broadcasting entitled simply *Space Ghost* (1966-1968).[115] Lazzo and his team "digitally extracted the drawn characters, grafted them on to a newly drawn background, and added satirical original dialogue"[116] in the process of bringing the show to light. The show was not completely a shot in the dark. *Space Ghost* itself, according to Adult Swim scholar Ron Russo, was already an established cultural property, as it was relatively popular during its original, unadulterated run in the mid to late 1960s.[117] However, the odds that many fans of *SGC2C* had previously seen *Space Ghost* during its original run are slim.[118] This fact conjures up the issue of Least Offensive Programming once again. Not only was the premise of *Space Ghost* turned on its head, but the format of the program shifted into a bizarrely orchestrated late night parody that, arguably, was made intentionally more awkward than it had to be. The original characters were hardly visible in their new forms which shows just how easy subverting Least Offensive Programming can be. Though it and the rest of the content library Turner had built up for Cartoon Network were proven

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[114] Plume, "An Interview with Mike Lazzo," 5.
[115] Justin Peters, "Toon In," *Washington Monthly* 36, no. 6 (June 5, 2004): 27.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Russo, *Adult Swim and Comedy*, 25.
[118] Foreshadowing, again, the false nostalgia that Adult Swim's content can grow within a viewer. More on this in chapter three.

to appeal to a wide audience, the alterations made by Lazzo and company might have problematized its inclusion among the Least Offensive Programming collective. In order to cater to specific demographics, Adult Swim would eventually go out of its way to not appeal to groups traditionally included in mass audience for Least Offensive Programming in this manner. Ultimately, this increased the chance of offending potential viewers, which set the network apart from the mainstream. Whether deliberately done or not, this notion will remain relevant moving forward, especially considering the overwhelming success of Adult Swim over the past decade.

In any case, *SGC2C* was Cartoon Network's first show aimed specifically at an "adult"[119] audience, and it would not be the last. There was now adult appeal on a network directed primarily at the children. Cartoon Network was not the first to perform this shift in appeal. Nickelodeon, previously, had appealed to adults in its Nick at Nite timeslot.[120] At the time of the Time-Warner merger, in 1996, while Cartoon Network was still experimenting with its brand, Nickelodeon and Nick at Nite were already well defined. According to Susan Murray, Nick at Nite had already acquired an adult audience, despite the fact that it was nestled within the boundaries of a children's network.[121] Appealing to adults that were disinterested in more intense programming on mainstream networks, adults that sought escape from more intense programming on mainstream networks, and adults that viewed the re-aired content ironically, Nick at Nite

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[119] Though again outside the purview of this thesis, the issue on whether such a thing as the adult, let alone the adult television consumer even exists is a topic of much academic research. See Hye Jin Lee's thesis, once again, to find discussion on the differences between an adult and a "kidult." Note that for the rest of this thesis, the adult, while problematic, will be allowed to exist as a possible spectator.
[120] Susan Murray, "'TV Satisfaction Guaranteed!': Nick at Nite and TV Land's 'Adult' Attractions," in *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004), 69-70.
[121] Ibid., 69-70.

successfully repurposed Least Offensive Programming into a vehicle for niche appeal.[122] Often, this niche would widen, as it did during the O.J. Simpson trial in 1995; the network was able present itself as an O.J. Simpson free zone because it did not cover the trial or mention it at all, unlike every other network which profited by running on a 24-hour news cycle.[123] This kind of content library, and the manner in which it was presented, while coated with nostalgia, differs from what Cartoon Network ended up presenting. Much of Nick at Nite's programming and marketing came in the form of homage and positive references to the older content.[124] Cartoon Network, and later Adult Swim, would employ parody to problematize and mock the original content while maintaining a certain nostalgic reverence for it.

This usage of parody and nostalgia, coupled with comic absurdity evident in Cartoon Network shows like *SGC2C* can be seen to lead directly to Adult Swim and its particular style. Since *SGC2C* was a program aimed at a niche audience nestled within a niche audience, that of adults already watching Cartoon Network, its cult status was instantaneous. Coupled with its relatively inexpensive animation style, in-house voice talent from writers of the show, and star power from longtime voice actor George Lowe, its cult status was secured. Because the show was effectively cheap to produce, the Time-Warner head office brought approved of the show, and ordered new content to be produced in the same manner, eventually forming what would become Adult Swim's first lineup.[125] One might speculate that Adult Swim came into existence because its niche

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[122] Murray, "'TV Satisfaction Guaranteed!'", 70.
[123] Ibid., 71.
[124] Ibid., 72-74.
[125] John Jurgensen, "Adult Swim: How to Run a Creative Hothouse," *The Wall Street Journal (Online)*, March 13, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/adult-swim-how-to-run-a-creative-hothouse-1426199501.

market was already present but needed a more cohesive network to which it could be attached.

Much occurred between this merger in 1996 and Adult Swim's early trial runs in 2001 significant to Cartoon Network, but most of what contributed to the final realization of Adult Swim proper was already in the works by 1996. In truth, Adult Swim owes a large debt to this period of Cartoon Network's own rich history and its ability to appeal to several significant niche markets that have since transferred much of their allegiance to Adult Swim, but, for the sake of focus, such recitation, including the existence of their own programming, the likes of *Dexter's Laboratory* (1996-2003) and *The Power Puff Girls* (1998-2005), as well as the beginnings of the anime block *Toonami* are left to the reader to explore elsewhere.[126] Proto-Adult Swim was still learning the network ropes during this five year period. *SGC2C* allowed writers, animators, and producers the ability to experiment with form and content, the likes of which would evolve into Adult Swim proper. What is important to keep in mind is the following: Adult Swim came into being less than a decade after the formation of Cartoon Network, and further delved into the niche markets that were available, further problematizing the old adage of Least Offensive Programming, further prioritizing the need to create generic unity among its content as well as the need for specifically targeted appeal. Adult Swim began and continues to be a verdant pasture of parody, comic absurdity and nostalgia. This combination allows Adult Swim, as a tightly defined network entity, to captivate and retain its audience most effectively.

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[126] Cartoon Network was able to prove that the formula that would become Adult Swim worked, especially with regard to the imported Japanese animation on *Toonami*. Adult Swim, and those associated with it, was able to take a few steps in order to make the network viable for a different, more adult audience that would flock to the network without irony. Regarding Cartoon Network's programming, again see Perlmutter's *America Toons In*.

"Always I Want to Be With You / And Make Believe With You / and Live in Harmony,

Harmony, Oh Love"[127]: Adult Swim's Network Appeal

Adult Swim, as a late night lineup, premiered at 10:00 PM EST on September 2,

2001[128] and featured acquired program *Home Movies* (1999-2004), *Space Ghost Coast to*

Coast (*SGC2C*) spinoff *The Brak Show* (2001-2003), *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law*

(2000-2007)[129], *Sealab 2021* (2001-2005)[130], *SGC2C* itself, and *Toonami* favorite

Cowboy Bebop (1997-1998).[131] Over the years, the late night block shifted time slots,

expanded, and eventually became the nightly mainstay it is at present. Due in part to the

experimentation that occurred on Cartoon Network between 1992 and 1996, as Ron

Russo explains, the would-be network evolved with programming that most closely

resembles the French New Wave in that each featured, roughly, a "non objective and

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[127] Erasure, "Always," 1993, *I Say I Say I Say*, Elektra Records, 1994.

[128] Before moving on to discussing the full coming of age of the network as its own Nielsen entity, a brief pause is warranted to discuss the context in which Adult Swim was raised by its producers and fans. One cannot help but notice the close proximity of the network's official premiere and the terrorist attacks in New York City, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001. Certainly, there is more to be explored with regard to this dark coincidence, though perhaps this is not the particular bent of academic inquiry in which to do so. While much of the early formation of Adult Swim occurred pre 9/11, it inevitably shaped the predispositions of particularly younger generations, those aware of what was going on but those powerless to put forth any sort of agency to feel as if they were combating the impending doom felt by so many in the aftermath, specifically in America. Is there a way to track the impact on the viewing audience by searching for answers within Adult Swim's programming? Did Adult Swim scratch a certain itch left in the wake of such tragedy? Was Adult Swim able to recognize and attempt to soothe the fragmented state that dominated American society in the days, months, and eventually years after the event by "exemplify[ing] the fragmentation of postmodernist culture" with its distinctive programming (Booker, *Drawn to Television*, 166)? Could it be, as facetiously stated in the 2006 episode of *Metalocalypse* (2006-present) entitled "Dethkomedy," that society needed institutions like Adult Swim in order to forget about the trials faced in their own lives as well as witnessed by society (Schnepp)? A complete study of these issues is beyond the scope of this thesis, however interesting and vital they might be to the network's attraction and maintenance of an audience. As such, it is left to other film and media scholars to explore in further research.

[129] Another show, like *SGC2C* that cannibalized characters from an earlier era cartoon, *Birdman and the Galaxy Trio* (1967-1969), with added Adult Swim touches.

[130] Repurposed *Sealab 2020* (1972) animation coupled with rewritten stories that highlighted the incompetence of the underwater lab's crew.

[131] Russo, *Adult Swim*, 3.

abstracted narrative"[132] that rarely followed in logic from episode to episode. Although this connection is tenuous at best, the implications of the abstract style remain and play a large role in establishing the Adult Swim as a network constituting what looks and feels like a genre, as will be discussed in chapter two. This additional level of construction within the network allows Adult Swim to more readily appeal to and capture a rabid fan base.

While much of Adult Swim's earlier programming is quite interesting, for the sake of this historical approach, let it be noted that the network had reached, somewhat, a point of stasis in its early years. Acquired shows were performing well, such as the aforementioned *Home Movies* and *Mission Hill* (1999-2000, 2002), and in house productions like *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (*ATHF*) (2001-present) and *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law* excelled in their timeslots, each achieving their own cult success.[133] Adult Swim managed to comingle its acquired and in-house programming. In the end, the content library was cohesive once the network hit its stride. Regardless of their original standing on other networks, the network's acquired programming gained the generic markers of what was seen as a sort of Adult Swim "genre." No longer could these shows be successful off of Adult Swim. They had become part of the network's content library, and would forever be considered prototypical Adult Swim programs. This allowed Adult Swim, as a network, to become more fully engaged with its appeal to niche audiences. Whoever was watching Adult Swim, whoever enjoyed watching Adult Swim could probably only find content like Adult Swim *on* Adult Swim. This, of course, is quite an

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[132] Russo, *Adult* Swim, 6.
[133] Ibid., 9-13 and 33.

effective strategy to attract and maintain an audience. In effect, Adult Swim cornered the market on programming that intentionally problematized and berated mainstream media.

It was not until 2003 that the little timeslot became more fully realized as a focused and purposeful network entity. The cable rights to the freshly canceled Fox show *Futurama* (1999-2003, 2008-2013) were acquired for five years by Adult Swim in an attempt to draw in viewers disgruntled by the show's abrupt termination.[134] *Futurama*'s premiere on Adult Swim, occurring on January 12, 2003, garnered the network's highest ratings, at the time, only having reached such heights once previously, around the time of the network's own premiere.[135] Shortly thereafter, Adult Swim struck yet another deal with Fox to acquire the rights to rebroadcast old episodes of *Family Guy*[136], which premiered on April 20, 2003[137] with ratings that eclipsed *Futurama*'s premiere.[138] Evidently, the offensive nature of *Family Guy* was appreciated on Adult Swim, whereas it drew the ire of Fox network executives who frequently let rude comments about their own network air on *The Simpsons*.[139] *Family Guy*, then, must have been much more offensive in the eyes of mainstream media at the time, which led it to fitting right in with Adult Swim.

Why did Adult Swim bother to take a chance on these two previously canceled Fox animated cartoons? Audience members might make the jump to the upstart cable

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[134] The histories of Matt Groening's creations and Adult Swim are not only intertwined during this five year period, but also with regard to *The Simpsons'* influence over many of Adult Swim's offerings It is relevant to note that both feed the nostalgia fixes of their audience and both push their respective envelopes of animation. Once again, this topic of conversation falls outside this thesis' presented history, however relevant it might be after observing the fine points of the issue.

[135] Russo, *Adult Swim*, 22.

[136] Which had already been canceled twice by Fox.

[137] A red letter, yearly calendar date for stoner culture (4/20), by coincidence or not.

[138] Russo, *Adult Swim*, 22.

[139] Johnathan Gray, *Watching with The Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality*, Comedia (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 161-163.

network because of them, but they still existed as mainstream television network failures. This, of course, is exactly the kind of press Adult Swim needed to separate itself from the expectations of mainstream media. As evidenced by the Nielsen Ratings, their acquisition appears to have been successful. Both shows were in need of an outlet that appreciated their niche appeal to those with "droll slacker sensibility."[140] College students, according to Russo, loved the switch from Fox to Adult Swim.[141] Because Adult Swim had established itself as a hub for those who found themselves fed up with traditional networks and their mainstream programming, *Futurama* and, to an even greater extent, Seth MacFarlane's[142] shows fit right in with the rest of Adult Swim's content.

In 2005, Adult Swim's autonomy[143] was fully realized when it and Cartoon Network were split into two distinct Nielsen Rating categories, as if they were two different networks.[144] It was also in 2005 that Fox brought *Family Guy* back from indefinite hiatus, perhaps due to the killing it was making in Adult Swim's lineup, and also the season in which creator MacFarlane got his second show, *American Dad* (2005-present) green lit.[145] A deal was struck to that new episodes of both shows would premiere first on Fox, but then, several days later, on Adult Swim.[146] This fact begs the question of whether Fox felt that it was appealing to the masses when it reinstated *Family Guy*, or whether it was, as Adult Swim had done successfully, choosing to shun the

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[140] Curtin and Shattuc, 50.

[141] Russo, *Adult Swim*, 22.

[142] An interesting, albeit grim side note: Seth MacFarlane was slated to be on American Airlines Flight 11, one of the planes involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Because of this, it is difficult to avoid reading his shows as inherently postmodern, as the post-9/11 audience would most likely connect with it on this level.

[143] For the sake of simplicity, this thesis has, and will continue to refer to Adult Swim as a separate network from Cartoon Network at all points in its history due to this fact alone.

[144] John M. Higgins, "Kids by Day, Adults by Night," *Broadcasting & Cable* 135, no. 7 (February 14, 2005): 6.

[145] Russo, *Adult Swim*, 23.

[146] Ibid., 22-23.

model of Least Offensive Programming as somewhat more risqué cable content providers had previously done.[147] Regardless, Adult Swim had made its statement. It could pick and choose content that matched its own style from anywhere, whether in-house or off-network, and audiences would tune in to watch it.

2005 was a banner year for Adult Swim in more ways than content acquisition. Starting that year, the network became basic cable's number one network in the coveted young adult 18-34 Nielsen bracket, and has remained number one for 9 consecutive years, and counting.[148] Along the way, the network has expanded to a nightly programming block of 8:00 PM to 6:00 AM ET/PT, as well as developing an online presence featuring channels devoted to show marathons, a view of the aquarium at Williams Street, and, perhaps the network's most avant-garde and mysterious effort, the practically inexplicable *Toe* (2014).[149] This expansion into multimedia endeavors only increases the network's appeal in a modern, digital age. There is a certain fluidity of content between these media, something that mirrors Raymond Williams' concept of flow.

Over the course of the rise of cable television, broadcasting has shifted, predominantly, to the idea of maintaining a single thread of sequences that ought to flow

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[147] While such an answer might not be as simple as the growing need for traditional networks, in the modern television era, to distinguish themselves from each other by appealing to more specific audiences, the mystery continues to more recent times with the existence of *Animation Domination High-Def* (*ADHD*), Fox's 2013 attempt in at replicating the Adult Swim format to fill their problematic Saturday late night programming slot, a void left by the cancelation of *MADtv* in 2009, so frequently at odds with NBC's *Saturday Night Live*.

[148] Maria Saporta, "Turner Expanding Cartoon Network, Adult Swim, Boomerang Offerings," *SaportaReport*, accessed November 3, 2014, http://saportareport.com/blog/2014/02/turner-expanding-adult-swim-cartoon-network-boomerang-offerings/.

[149] It is unknown who directed this streaming channel on Adult Swim's website. As of April 2015, the stream has been taken down.

together.[150] There is uniformity to the programming block. Each show, regardless of its relation to the next, fits perfectly with the next due to their collective presence in the lineup. Furthermore, one can jump in and swim among Adult Swim's programming at any juncture, because the flow will pick them up and carry them regardless. As Williams foresaw, "the flow is always accessible."[151] Just like a content library causes its contents to merge under one pseudo generic labeling and provide for increased access, so too do cultural constrains and generic expectations glue together the various constituent programs of the Adult Swim flow and establish them as rewatchable and continuously viewable. This is the "characteristic organization, and therefore the characteristic experience"[152] that Williams posits, that one might call a pure version of his flow. This is enhanced by the short runtimes of the network's programs. With most of Adult Swim's offerings' runtimes coming in under 15 minutes, and with mostly Adult Swim bumps and ads filling the gaps in between, forced "natural breaks"[153] have been created by the network to match the short attention spans of its audience. M. Keith Booker notes, quite astutely, that "the brevity of these programs also allows an entire episode to be played out between commercial interruptions, so in some ways, the brief programs of Adult Swim are less fragmented than more conventional network programming."[154] This absence of fragmentation allows the experience of the network to encompass, more fully than on mainstream television, the runtime of its programs between commercial interruptions.

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[150] Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, ed. Ederyn Williams, 2nd ed. (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 1990), 87.
[151] Ibid., 94.
[152] Ibid., 86.
[153] Ibid., 90.
[154] Booker, "Drawn to Television," 160.

Adult Swim takes this flow to its logical conclusions with *Toe*, one of its online offerings. Streaming 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, *Toe* verges on the surreal and is most quintessential example of flow that the network offers.[155] There is little apparent rhyme or reason to the succession of still images and ambient music that, on rare occasions, becomes interrupted by rapidly edited scenes of non sequiturs including weather reports, nature programs, and a whole host of other scenes out of a fever dream. It makes little difference when one begins or ends their viewing of this program, as it will presumably flow on *ad infinutum*. It is this flow that helps Adult Swim attract and maintain audiences. Every program, to some extent, within Adult Swim's content library, contributes to it, though perhaps not as much as *Toe*. Since this flow is similar enough to mainstream media, it does not offend outright, but because it is seemingly relentless and unending, it might appeal to those that seek a permanent escape from the realm of Least Offensive Programming.

Through viewing examples like this, Adult Swim as a network seems to present, and even favor, "the general rather than the specific experience,"[156] that Williams asserts is the true way audiences intake broadcasting. The network's programming, as singular as it might appear from the outside, tends to overlap itself, tends to melt down to one ideally incoherent mess of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia. Fans of the network probably see no conflict here, but the fact remains that the flow of Adult Swim is so uniform that repetition and relative unoriginality go unpunished. The thrill is in the experience, especially with regard to viewing reruns. This explains why *Family Guy* and *King of the Hill* (1997-2010) frequently open the programming block. They help ease the viewer into

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[155] At least, it used to. Now that it has been taken down, it might be harder to explore in further academic study.

[156] Williams, *Television*, 89.

the hot bath of the network's offensive programming according to current Cartoon Network and Adult Swim president Christina Miller in an interview with the Wall Street Journal.[157]

Over the years, the network has expanded beyond television, beyond television online too, into a realm that transcends flow, or at least modifies it. Such properties that operate in this fashion are the network's video games, an *ATHF* feature film,[158] music in various forms,[159] and, perhaps the more innocuous of the bunch, various merchandising offerings in the vein of clothing, posters, etcetera, have all come out of Williams Street since the network gained popularity.[160] The video games, especially, reinforce Adult Swim's style and incorporate it into more aspects of viewer's lives, further allowing them to maintain their fandom. Most supportive of this claim are the lyrics for the selected theme song for the 2010 featured game Robot Unicorn Attack.[161] While Erasure's "Always" is tame enough on its own, lines like those quoted in this section's title[162] can be read, rather than lyrics from a mid 90s pop love song, a beckoning call from Adult Swim to potential viewers seduced by stylized animation, Robot Unicorns, and overstated carnage.[163] The subtleties of how this draws from Adult Swim's overarching style and

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[157] Jurgensen, "Adult Swim."

[158] The pseudo epic, almost constantly parodic *Aqua Teen Hunger Force Colon Movie Film for Theaters* (Matt Maiellaro and Dave Willis, 2007).

[159] Among other things, the fictitious band Dethklok of *Metalocalypse* fame has released several albums, including a rock opera, and has performed live on several occasions. The real life band members themselves, naturally, are not as out of the ordinary as their uncouth, animated counterparts. One of the series' creators, Brendan Small, actually sings lead vocals and plays much of the band's guitar and bass parts for the studio albums.

[160] Adult Swim is certainly not the first network to extend their brand in this fashion, which is why its licensed clothing offerings are the most innocuous. See Sandler's chapter in Hendershot's edited work *Nickelodeon Nation* or Sarah Banet-Weiser's edited book *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* for another example of how network brands can transcend television.

[161] Developed by Spiritonin Media Games but published by Adult Swim.

[162] "Always I want to be with you," etcetera.

[163] The game allows players two controls: jump or dash. Otherwise, the player's character runs at an increasing speed towards stars that must be dashed through and ledges that must be leapt over, lest the title

participates in the parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia that reels in audiences on

multiple media fronts becomes yet another issue worthy of further unpacking in a later

academic study. Suffice it to say that just as Adult Swim's television programming reuses

and rehashes older content to problematize mainstream media to catch the attention of

potential fans, so too do the network's sponsored or self created video games subvert

mainstream media for the same purposes.

As a transmedia artifact, there is no question of the importance of Adult Swim.

Not only has it successfully constructed itself as a network driven by sufficient flow, but

it has also spread this flow into online media and other regions of potential lifestyle. The

marketed lifestyle brand of Adult Swim which Lee discusses in "All Kids out of the

Pool!" must rely on this flow for its success. However, Adult Swim does not win over

and create addicts out of its viewers through network swagger alone. In order to craft

what Amanda Lotz calls an edge for the network, which more readily defines the borders

of the intended audience for a program, Adult Swim must construct its message beyond

merely the form of an industrially defined, broadcast company.[164] Because the flow

between programs, advertisements, and content at large is so smooth, the underlying

notion of an Adult Swim "genre"[165] must be at play in order to further entice and endear

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unicorn be disemboweled, resulting in the mechanical head to fly off in the direction of the player. This zany level of violence echoes the cartoon violence depicted in Adult Swim's animated as well as live action television programs at large. Other video game series hosted by Adult Swim's gaming website that performs on a similar level are the following: the *Amateur Surgeon* series, *Giant Boulder of Death*, *2 A.M. Truck Stop*, *Hemp Tycoon*, and the *5 Minutes to Kill (Yourself)* series. Each of these games parodies and emulates retro console gaming while pushing the boundaries of more contemporary Flash based computer games. Recently, many of these games have been made available on smart phones, further expanding the reach of Adult Swim's influence on the lives of its viewers. While this thesis skews towards discussing the television offerings of Adult Swim, it is important to note that the perpetuation of the Adult Swim style, as well as the tropes and norms of the network does not stop at the level of television.

[164] Lotz, *Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 185.

[165] It is not a traditional genre, but it does have its own generic constraints, and it does rely on generic markers. Until this issue is settled in chapter two, it is safe to assume that Adult Swim's programming constitutes one culturally defined genre.

the network's audience. This genre acts as a means to unify the content and provide a united programming front to pair with its network branding.

In many ways, each of the shows aired on the nightly block of Adult Swim carries the calling cards of the network's overarching "genre." This genre utilizes the various genres at play within each show in concert to earn the unfailing devotion of its fans. While other examples exist of networks appealing to niche audiences through the presentation of sweeping generic offerings,[166] Adult Swim, as indicated by its Nielsen Ratings over the past 13 years[167], has most effectively molded a true genre out of its content and culture libraries of Most Offensive Programming. This Adult Swim genre, whose genetic qualities will be explored later on, and its construction is the subject of chapter two.

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[166] Aside from early examples of cable networks relying on content libraries, HBO and FXX are among the collection of networks that operate with offensive programming like Adult Swim.
[167] Saporta, "Turner Expanding Cartoon Network, Adult Swim, Boomerang Offerings."

CHAPTER TWO – ADULT SWIM'S GENRE POOL

Through the various iterations of the network and its history, discussed in the previous chapter, Adult Swim as a network has been well received by its fans. Though it is simple enough to explore how such a particularly niche network grew historically, what remains to be seen is how the specific content library that the network houses draws in its viewers, and why this particular content manages to maintain its rabid fan base. This thesis now intends to delve into what particular aspects of Adult Swim's content library hooks fans into participating in the Adult Swim phenomenon so readily, and with such lasting devotion. This attraction and retention of fans cannot be bought by a sound network strategy alone. The network has evolved into a concise, well defined form in which content fans expect to receive is delivered constantly in familiar doses. This form, as will be shown, appears to look and act in a similar manner to what Rick Altman and Jason Mittell would call a genre. This chapter will build upon Adult Swim's cultural significance established thus far in order to legitimize the usage of Mittell's theories in the exploration of the Adult Swim content library and its appeal beyond the scope of a traditional genre category. Despite the fact that the network's collection of parodic, comically absurd, and nostalgic programming behaves like a genre, it need not be a genre in totality in order to use Mittell's vocabulary to productively study it.

Television "Genre" Theory

Due to Adult Swim's network cohesion, thanks in part to its secure time slot bound together by hip advertisements for the its own programming, viewers have presumably come to expect a certain type of typical Adult Swim programming when they tune in. Few other methods besides enacting something that resembles a genre could set the precedent that Adult Swim's programming has. After all, Adult Swim's "self-definition and scheduling"[168] practices are emblematic of Mittell's definition of a television genre. The creative side of the network has the freedom to operate within the network's boundaries to establish this typical brand of programming.[169] But how is it marketed? Why is an audience attracted to the network's confederacy of new and rerun programs that range from animated shorts to surrealistic half hour live action offerings that all happen to share a similar style and feel despite their outward appearance at first glance?

Under traditional genre theory, Adult Swim and its programming appear to constitute a stable, yet evolving, genre. Under Rick Altman's definitions of a genre, Adult Swim's content library performs sufficiently, but not perfectly. On the most basic level[170], Altman, in *Film/Genre* lays out four perhaps overly simplified assumptions about stable, homogeneous genres that genre theorists have relied on in their works prior

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[168] Jason Mittell, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory," *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 3.

[169] Jurgensen, "Adult Swim."

[170] Though this thesis claims that Adult Swim's content library is in fact a genre, a detailed genre study of the network is beyond the scope of this thesis' academic incursion. Dissenters might accuse this thesis of taking the ramifications of this process for granted, which is why this thesis chooses to utilize oversimplified definitions of a genre, definitions critiqued by Altman, because the issue of whether the network is a genre or not pales in comparison to how the network, utilizing generic modes, attracts its fan base. Nevertheless, it is important to establish the degree to which the network and its offerings exists as a genre in order to put the language of genre theory to work to assist in solving this thesis' hypotheses about the network's appeal. If, as will be discussed, genre has a cultural aspect to it, in that viewers will help to determine the genre over time by expecting a certain kind of product, this fact alone answers part of the issue of how the network attracts and maintains an audience, and this thesis will have completed its job.

to his own redefinitions of what genres are and how to study them.[171] If Adult Swim's

content library were indeed a genre, it would at least have to meet these requirements.

From its humble beginnings with programs like *SGC2C* to more recent shows like *The*

Jack and Triumph Show (2015-present), the content library has only ever contained

programs that, generally, fall into the generic category of the comedy. The humor of

these programs, the "droll slacker sensibility"[172] previously mentioned, is quite uniform.

Very little of what this Adult Swim "genre" provides is serious commentary, on the

surface, and as such, can be enjoyed simply as pure slapstick entertainment. This is the

blueprint that all of the network's offerings adhere to, which allows it to meet the first of

Altman's fourfold stable genre assumptions.[173]

As far as generic structure – Altman's second assumption – is concerned, most

shows, especially *ATHF* and *Superjail!* feature non-episodic narrative structures[174] in

which actions have very little lasting effect and have little to do with what follows in

subsequent episodes.[175] *Childrens Hospital* (2010-present) takes this to the next level by

creating scenes from purported previous episodes of the program to precede most

episodes and increase the overall nonsensical nature of the show.[176] This non-episodic

nature allows for these televisual units to be viewed in any particular order, which factors

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[171] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London, England: Palgrave Macmillian, 1999), 16-17.

[172] Curtain and Shattuc, *American Television*, 50.

[173] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 17.

[174] Granted, the usage of non-episodic narrative structures is not a new phenomenon. Programming on television began in this manner. For example, each episode of *The Brady Bunch* might be watched out of order without noticing any strangeness about diegetic narrative cohesion other than the fluctuation of the ages of the actors and actresses.

[175] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 17.

[176] *Arrested Development* previously performed a similar play in which purported coming attractions were shown in which actions would occur that would then not be present in subsequent episodes, though the program's overall narrative did tend to flow from episode to episode unlike most Adult Swim offerings.

into another aspect of what might be considered the network's generic structure: the timeslot itself.

Adult Swim's non-episodic and nonsensical "fractured franchises,"[177] air, as of March 2014, from 8:00 pm to 6:00 am Eastern time, every night, in 15 and 30 minute increments.[178] Structurally speaking, the "genre" Adult Swim's content library resides within affords quick, punchy comedy laced with absurdity and spiced with non sequiturs. Plots must be simplistic enough to come to fruition in about 10 minutes, or else convoluted enough to either never resolve or resolve with the random introduction of a nonsensical *deus ex machina*.[179] These moments are often purely non sequiturs, echoing the tropes portrayed in *Too Many Cooks*. Most Adult Swim programs play with continuity in this manner, and by so doing, afford their own "genre" with the expectation of subversion on a number of different fronts, including genre and content parody as well as multifaceted metatextual parody of parody and parody for parody's sake. Coupled with the late evening timeslot the network airs during, strange generic constrains and broken rules are commonplace and expected by the fans.[180]

Adult Swim's late night timeslot also allows it to possess an easily identifiable generic marker. Whether it be the sarcastic tone on most of the network's own bumps and ads or whether it be the purely zany comedy elements featured in each of the network's programs, the network is readily recognized by its own specific audience as it is being

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[177] Anthony Crupi, "Adult Swim Preps for Deeper Dive Into Prime," *AdWeek*, February 14, 2010, http://www.adweek.com/news/television/adult-swim-preps-deeper-dive-prime-114737.

[178] Bill Carter, "Adult Swim, No. 1 With Younger Adults, Is Expanding," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/04/business/media/adult-swim-no-1-with-younger-adults-is-expanding.html.

[179] Not unlike any number of Loony Tunes cartoons. Their spirit, discussed at length in Norman M. Klein's *Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*, seems to live on in Adult Swim's programming.

[180] Dan Gilgoff, "Ha Ha Ha Ha--Huh?," *U.S. News & World Report* 133, no. 20 (November 25, 2002): 48.

exhibited, which allows it to meet Altman's third genre assumption.[181] The offensive

genre elements that the network plays up also contribute to its generic borders. In turn,

the audience, the fans of Adult Swim who have bought into the network, are likely to

read the content broadcasted to them under the lens of a presumed overarching genre.[182]

They probably know which programs are from the Adult Swim content library, and they

probably know which programs are merely impostors. This increases the odds that the

network's offerings are wholly defined by a genre because it meets Altman's fourth

oversimplified genre assumption. Because of this, a biased fan base might evolve that

will most likely avoid programming that attempts to adopt similar generic overtones on

any other network.[183] At this point, the content library provided by Adult Swim as a

network certainly seems to have congealed and adopted a practically uniform set of

generic qualities which leads this thesis to call it a true genre.[184]

However, where Adult Swim's offerings begin to fail the genre test is the realm of

specificity and at the border between film and television genres. Turning towards the

television genre theory of Jason Mittell should incorporate notions of cultural formation

with regard to the limits of a given generic space into the discussion of Adult Swim's

content. This will provide the limits under which Adult Swim can continue to exist as a

genre on paper. Mittell, in his watershed work "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre

Theory," asserts that "genre theory should account for how generic processes operate

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[181] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 17.

[182] This thesis can ditch the scare quotes around genre now, since it seems like Adult Swim has the makings of a genre, whether it is or not.

[183] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 17.

[184] Because Altman sets them up as weaker guidelines, he would probably disagree that meeting them necessarily certifies the Adult Swim content library as something that might barely look like a genre. However, in order to continue moving this thesis' exploration of the means by which Adult Swim attracts and maintains and audience, these limited constraints will have to suffice. If nothing else, this should leave the door open for further genre studies of Adult Swim, a cursory goal of this thesis.

within cultural contexts, how industry and audience practice constitute genres, and how genres can be both fluid over time yet fairly coherent at any given moment."[185] In a later work, Mittell reasserts his claims by stating that "[t]elevision genres matter as *cultural categories.*"[186] This simple turn is enough to suggest that if it is evident that a culture has accepted a group of content as a genre, it can behave as a genre. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, even if the Adult Swim content library does not constitute a legitimate genre, it shall be engaged with under a lens of genre studies.

<center>Adult Swim's Genre Pool: Where Genre Mixing and Hybridity Thrive</center>

Many critics of the network have claimed that despite the outrageous one-upmanship of Adult Swim's comedy – each show seemingly seeking to outdo the next in terms of stepping over every conceivable line in the name of humor – the network has not presented many variations on their comedic themes. John Lichman goes so far as to assert that many of the programs on the network possess "numbing similarity to each other"[187] to their detriment. Three years later, however, Adult Swim still leads the pack in terms of ratings.[188]

The Adult Swim content library, as stated before, looks and acts like a genre under Mittell's definitions. While this thesis agrees with Mittell that television genres that look and behave like the Adult Swim content library are "ongoing multifaceted

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[185] Mittell, "Television Genre," 10.
[186] Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), xi.
[187] Lichman, "Is Adult Swim Stuck in a Rut of Nostalgia Bait?"
[188] Saporta, "Adult Swim."

practice[s]"[189] that are not simply defined by the textual components and expectations present in the generic content alone, the dissection and analysis to come will favor studying the network from the bottom up in order to comprehend, after the fact, the top down relationship between the network and its fans. Even Mittell recognizes that the actions of Cartoon Network, Adult Swim's parent company, constitute the formation and maintenance of a genre.[190] However, because Adult Swim has actively favored the promotion of its timeslot and the content to a greater degree than its potential genre's homogeneity, genre hybridity, as Mittell defines it, appears to be the dominant network practice.[191]

Just because Adult Swim is hybridizing genres underneath its own overarching genre banner does not mean that it fails as a genre of its own. The network's programs themselves are often rife with parody, and even parody of parody at times, but the overall timeslot still exists as a hub of extra-textual genre fusion.[192] Hybridity insinuates that there are indeed multiple genres at work within the Adult Swim content library, which is true. The base style of each program is not the same, though each program on the network might be made up of the same total of constituent genric parts in the end. For example, *The Brak Show* is recognizable as an animated cartoon, a family sitcom, as well as a comedy while *Mr. Pickles* (2014-present) has the same genre elements but, perhaps, relies more heavily on its comedy than it does its family sitcom genre qualities. Similarly, Mark Lashley, while writing for Huffington Post, discusses "genre riffing"[193] in his 2012

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[189] Mittell, *Genre and Television*, xii.
[190] Ibid., 91.
[191] Ibid., 153-154.
[192] Ibid., 154-156.
[193] Mark Lashley, "Genre Riffing on Adult Swim: *Childrens Hospital* and *NTSF:SD:SUV::*," *Huffington Post*, September 10, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-lashley/genre-riffing-on-adult-sw_b_1866076.html.

article on *Childrens Hospital* and *NTSF:SD:SUV::* (2011-present), which can be likened to this notion of hybridity. The difference is that this riffing implies a more parodic approach, which is typical of Adult Swim's programming.

In the short examples above, animated cartoon was listed as a genre defining the two programs. One might be inclined to believe that this thesis intends to argue that animation is an essential genre to Adult Swim's content library. This is not the case due to several points. Firstly, this thesis does not believe that animation, in the context of its usage on Adult Swim, is its own genre that could stand apart from the other genres it is mixed with. Cartoons, though animated, ought not be bound to the expectations of animation as a genre, despite the fact that they are animated. Animation has its tropes, but each cartoon, in this thesis' estimation, may belong to any number of genres. Adult Swim's programs, for example, all carry generic markers of animated cartoons, even the live action shows, but they would not line up well in a generic pool of animated programming alone. Typically, animation for more adult audiences has been put to the task of developing family situational comedies. Beginning with *The Flintstones* (1960-1966) and ranging as far into the future as *The Simpsons* and beyond, the family sitcom, and more broadly the sitcom alone, has been the predominant genre banner adult oriented animated cartoons have taken up.[194]

It is not much of a stretch past this point to understand, then, that most of the live action shows and shorts on Adult Swim, *Too Many Cooks* most blatantly, have taken up the tropes of animation in order to contribute to the genre hybridity present on the network in the name of generic cohesion. Because animation is not a standalone genre,

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[194] See Booker's *Drawn to Television* for more on the subject of primetime animation and their generic structures.

this is perfectly acceptable, and furthermore, it allows these live action shows to experiment with thwarting a wider range of generic conventions as both live action and cartoonish shows. Adult Swim, rather than acting as a warehouse of animation, includes animation as another genre to riff on which contributes to the network's strategy regarding the establishment and perpetuation of its own variations of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia.[195] A full dive into the history of animation would not assist in the appreciation of Adult Swim's style because, although many of its programs are in communion with animated content on the level of parody and homage, it is not a straightforward hub of animation as its maternal network, Cartoon Network, was originally intended to be.[196]

Though it displays the telltale signs of being a television genre under Mittell's genre theory, Adult Swim's content library, simply has too diverse a collection of shows to fall under one tight genre. Not all of Adult Swim's programs are sitcoms, though they do invariably place their characters, as well as the audience, in situations that create comedy. Nor could each program on the network be described as a pure comedy since the thrust of some might be construed as purely ironic with comedy served as a side dish. Take *Newsreaders* (2013-present) for example. The program parodies the format of newsmagazine programs with segments that begin as serious studies of a given issue, but

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[195] At the same time, Adult Swim does not altogether forsake its roots in animation like MTV did when it began to remove music videos from its regular programming.

[196] However, a cursory understanding of the form might help to impress upon the importance of the medium with regard to the network's appeal. Kristin Thompson's essay "Implications of the Cel Animation Technique" provides some of a background for this thesis' purposes, but will not be fully discussed here. Although most of the animated programs on Adult Swim are animated using Flash technologies, many of the notions explored by Thompson in this particular, dated essay are still relevant, including the concepts of stretch and squash. In order to encourage further study regarding the network and its animated nature, this thesis has chosen to forego an extended stopover in animation theory. Those seeking further revelations on the subject of animation theory might turn to Karen Beckman's edited work *Animating Film Theory* or Perlmutter's *America Toons In*.

then devolve into sophomoric humor. For example, a hard hitting story about a summer camp for homosexual youths devolves into an absurd parallel of the Holocaust in one particular episode.[197] Similarly, *Check it Out! With Dr. Steve Brule* (2010-present) imitates public access television in a manner that comes off more awkward than uproarious. To reiterate, the genre Adult Swim has constructed under its network labeling is not a genre in a traditional sense, though it may still be approached as one to an extent. What this thesis will do, therefore, is utilize the genre language established by Mittell to explore the blanket definition that covers the length and breadth of Adult Swim's programming. Though only like a genre, Adult Swim's content library will henceforth be described and studied as a Genre Pool.[198] What this thesis intends by Genre Pool is a collection of generic programming that, when combined, forms a practically homogenous well of material from which Adult Swim's creative personnel and viewers can sample at various depths of content ranging from mostly inoffensive at the top to extremely offensive and particular only to Adult Swim at deeper levels. In order to address the Genre Pool as a whole, it behooves this thesis to dive right into the deep end, which luckily defines most of the network's offensive content library, and approach the textual features of many of Adult Swim's programs. By undertaking this task, this thesis hopes to examine how the generic qualities of this Adult Swim Genre Pool work together to assist the network's cohesiveness in attracting and maintaining an audience.

Into the Deep End: Four Archetype Texts of the Adult Swim Genre Pool

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[197] Osmany Rodriguez and Matt Villines, "Gay Camp," *Newsreaders* (Adult Swim, February 14, 2013).
[198] The content on Adult Swim generally swims in this Genre Pool.

In chapter three, the three critical qualities of the Adult Swim Genre Pool that most readily unify the network's style and content will be explored. At this juncture, it is prudent to introduce a select handful of programs that belong, definitively, to the Pool. These programs are the following: *Robot Chicken*, *Superjail!*, *Rick and Morty*, and *Too Many Cooks*. These four programs were selected precisely because of how strongly they feature Adult Swim's unique styles of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia.

First up, chronologically, is *Robot Chicken* which began its run in 2005. Forged by creators Matt Senreich and Seth Green, *Robot Chicken* is a stop motion animated tour de force of popular and obscure culture references and parody. Described in the business as "crass, boyish, and obsessed with referencing what came before it,"[199] this show is a microcosm of Adult Swim. It has an uncanny ability to take things from mainly the 1980s and 1990s, modernize it a tad, and completely subvert its original message.[200] According to Claire Suddath of Bloomberg's *Businessweek*, "If a viewer doesn't understand one cultural reference, he'll be lost for just a few moments before the show moves on to another."[201] It is fast paced and merciless, but utterly hilarious at the same time. While it utilizes tropes popularized by shows like *Mad TV* (1995-2009) and *Saturday Night Live* (1975-present), vignettes are fired in such quick succession that audiences are only given a taste of the potential parody out of any given moment.[202]

In terms of the Adult Swim Genre Pool, *Robot Chicken* is the ideal program. It operates along the uneasy boarder between fair use and outright robbery of intellectual

[199] Claire Suddath, "SMART ALECKS," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, no. 4381 (June 2, 2014): 59.
[200] Three "special" episodes have been made since the program's inception that focus entirely on the Star Wars universe and related content. The original Star Wars parody episode predates *Family Guy*'s more famous run at the original film, showing how Adult Swim is viewed as a formula worth copying.
[201] Suddath, "SMART ALECKS," 60.
[202] "Robot Chicken's Perfect Pecking Order," *Animation* 20, no. 5 (May 2006): 27.

property to parody culturally relevant content.[203] Whether this content was relevant in the past because of its popularity or because of its unpopularity makes little difference. In the end, every parodied concept is mocked and venerated to the same degree. Operating within the limitations of aging action figures and retro toys, *Robot Chicken*'s animators at Stoopid Buddy Stoodios [*sic*] in Burbank, CA are able to work alongside writers whose goal is to mock and revere classic media content.[204] According to Seth Green, quoted in an article by Ryan Mac, *Robot Chicken* is a brand of its own within the boundaries of Adult Swim that is "making fun of things without really ever stopping loving them."[205] Embracing shared past experiences, or even the notion that everyone has a past coded with likes and dislikes regardless of whether they are similar or not, lies at the heart of what *Robot Chicken*, and in turn Adult Swim, is doing. Like a number of other Adult Swim properties, this particular program features a varied lineup of guest stars who provide voices, in some instances, to characters they portrayed that are now being comically torn to shreds.[206] Coupled with the show's approach "that takes the last 70 years of pop culture, tosses them in a blender, [and] fries them with snark,"[207] what remains is nothing less than an irreverent, albeit intelligent, cultural cannibalism that Adult Swim viewers can participate in.

Another program that most likely could not exist elsewhere on television, and as such heavily displays the qualities of the Adult Swim Genre Pool, is *Superjail!*. Created for Adult Swim as a pilot in 2007 by Christy Karacas, Stephen Warbrick, and Ben

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[203] Suddath, "SMART ALECKS," 60.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Ryan Mac, "Building a Brand from Your Living Room Couth with the Creators of Robot Chicken," *Forbes.Com*, accessed April 9, 2015, http://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanmac/2012/07/15/building-a-brand-from-your-living-room-couch-with-the-creators-of-robot-chicken/.

[206] "Robot Chicken's Perfect Pecking Order," 27.

[207] Mark A. Perigard, "'Robot Chicken' Deliciously Skewers Pop Culture," *Boston Herald (MA)*, December 24, 2009.

Gruber, *Superjail!*'s first season premiered in 2008.[208] Tom McLean is not alone when he

states that "*Superjail!* is one of the most unusual shows on Adult Swim."[209] Though its

outlandish plot is relatively straightforward compared to what actually occurs in the less

than 15 minutes it takes to transpire, the show's visuals are what speak, perhaps, loudest.

Superjail is the titular prison ensconced in a semi-active volcano operated by The Warden

and his minions. Almost every episode culminates in a cartoonishly violent gore-fest in

which practically every inmate of Superjail is eviscerated, dissolved, or otherwise

incapacitated in a psychedelically entrancing fever dream of animated blood and sinew.

Superjail! seems to favor the route of Adult Swim's comic absurdity.

Superjail!* is afforded many opportunities to parody cartoon violence itself by its

animated nature. In the nonsensical final bloodbaths, the plot is all but thrown out the

window in favor of shocking visuals.[210] Christy Karacas, one of the show's creator and its

sole director, believes that there can be no fair-weather or wishy-washy fans of

Superjail!; either they love it or they hate it.[211] This type of polarizing program fits right

at home in Adult Swim. While the program might feel lacking in the nostalgia

department, in that it rarely makes many overt cultural references, Stephen Warbrick, in

an interview with Animation Magazine, stated that the show's influences are heavily

steeped in the culture of the 1970s and 1980s, especially with regard to animation styles

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[208] In typical Adult Swim fashion, the show's second season did not premiere until 2011 and its the fourth season only just aired in 2014. There is not necessarily a set release schedule for Adult Swim programs. If they are in demand, then there is a good chance they will premiere whenever they can.

[209] Tom McLean, "Exclusive: Preview Season 4 of 'Superjail!,'" *AnimationMagazine.Net*, June 10, 2014, http://www.animationmagazine.net/tv/exclusive-preview-season-4-of-superjail/.

[210] Mercedes Milligan, "[adult Swim]min' in the Slammer," *Animation* 22, no. 9 (October 2008): 38.

[211] Mercedes Milligan, "Christy Karacas Breaks Out 'Superjail!' Season 3," *AnimationMagazine.Net*, September 28, 2012, http://www.animationmagazine.net/people/christy-karacas-breaks-out-superjail-season-3/.

and tropes however exaggerated they might be.[212] Karacas himself believes that in order

to make the show work, in spite of its computer animated nature, it has to appear to be

hand drawn, crude, malleable, and yet refined.[213] Because of this, much of the parody and

cultural exploration comes in the form of characters with a diverse range of gender and

sexual identities.[214] This sort of "otherness" no doubt contributes to viewers who would

label it as subversive with regard to mainstream culture, and therefore consumable.[215]

Because it pushes the envelope in the realm of what can be depicted on television, let

alone Adult Swim, and because it is overwhelmingly absurd, *Superjail!* is yet another

brilliant program to hold up as a prime example of Adult Swim's Genre Pool.

    In the second half of Adult Swim's lifespan, at a point beginning around 2007, the

network began incorporating a greater degree of live action programs into its lineup.[216]

These programs are fascinating in their own regard and manage to continue displaying

the Adult Swim style, but because they stick very close to the network's current script,

highlighting them would be redundant after mentioning *Robot Chicken* and *Superjail!*.

Rather, this thesis will draw examples of one of the newer animated shows that has risen

to surprisingly mainstream popularity in recent years on the network, which seemingly

shifts the Adult Swim agenda. This particular program is the creation of Dan Harmon and

Justin Roiland and is called *Rick and Morty*.[217] Cited in an article from the online version

of The Wall Street Journal, Christina Miller, current president of Cartoon Network and

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[212] Milligan, "Christy Karacas Breaks Out."

[213] McLean, "Season 4 of 'Superjail!'"

[214] Kevin Burra, "Christy Karacas, 'Superjail!' Co-Creator, And Janine DiTullio, Writing Director, Discuss Beloved Adult Swim Show," *Huffington Post*, July 11, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/10/christy-karacas-superjail-janine-ditullio_n_1662124.html?1342019945.

[215] In an ironic hipster sense, as explored in the work of Schiermer.

[216] Ryan Ball, "Live Action Invades [adult swim]," *Animation* 21, no. 3 (March 2007): 28.

[217] Jurgensen, "Adult Swim."

Adult Swim, expresses that Adult Swim as a network wants to expand its appeal into

earlier night hours, verging on primetime, "without losing the Adult Swim sensibility."[218]

Seemingly the first foray into this venture is *Rick and Morty* which possesses a slightly

more mainstream feel, as well as a full 30 minute runtime, unlike its more off the wall

Adult Swim cousins.[219]

Dan Harmon, who got most of his fame working as showrunner for NBC's

Community (2009-present), feels that the show aims at a slightly younger audience than

Adult Swim usually does.[220] Perhaps this is because of the dynamic between the two

titular characters. Rick is Morty's brilliant, alcoholic, cynical scientist/inventor

grandfather. From the show's inception, Rick drags Morty along on his haphazard

adventures through multiple parallel universes and countless inhospitable planets. Justin

Roland, in an interview with in *Animation Magazine*, states that each individual episode

is set up to feel like its own stand alone film that play with science, fiction, and morality

in a similar way to how episodes of the original series of *Star Trek* operated.[221] Although

this might appear to indicate that the show is bright and cheery, it is decidedly the

opposite most of the time. *Rick and Morty* is a dark program, even by Adult Swim's

standards. Harmon describes the program as such in an interview with *Adweek*: "Science

rules supreme, marriages are on the rocks, and things get so chaotic that it does boil down

to the petty, emotional issues of humanity. And the moral is that we're all pretty

insignificant."[222] While the show might appeal more to a younger audience because its

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[218] Jurgensen, "Adult Swim.".
[219] Ibid.
[220] Sam Thielman, "Dan Harmon," *Adweek* 54, no. 43 (December 2, 2013): 12.
[221] Ramin Zahed, "The Inspired Madness of 'Rick and Morty,'" *Animation*, December 2, 2013, http://www.animationmagazine.net/tv/intergalactic-travels-grandpa/.
[222] Thielman, "Dan Harmon."

humor skews more towards the likes of Roiland's other show, Cartoon Network's

Adventure Time (2010-present), it certainly helps to reinforce the cynical attitudes many

Adult Swim fans bring to the table when they tune in. The binary between the optimism

of scientific adventure and the pessimism brought on by the burden of knowledge gained

from such endeavors drives this program.[223] The show is exuberantly awe inspiring one

second, then jarringly realistic the next.[224] For example, Morty's parents can be looking

through one of Rick's inventions to see into a parallel universe one second and the next,

Morty attempts to convince his sister to not run away from home with the following

argument: "nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody's gonna die.

Come watch TV?"[225] In this manner, *Rick and Morty* successfully demonstrates its own

motives and qualities while maintaining the expected subset of Adult Swim Genre Pool's

versions of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia.

Lastly, *Too Many Cooks* offers this thesis the most recent and perhaps most

expressive example of Adult Swim's generic qualities working to their potential. It, along

with *Robot Chicken*, *Superjail!*, and *Rick and Morty* define the deep end of Adult Swim's

Genre Pool. Each program is emblematic of the tradition of subverting traditional Least

Offensive Programming which allows them to mock and revere the original content at

will. Rather than solely driving fans away, this unique Adult Swim approach to

broadcasting might be seen to target only the most rabid of fans who want to be offended,

who can take the jabs at society, who seek to distance themselves from mainstream

culture. Perhaps this due to the audience's sense of irony, or perhaps their tastes are just

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[223] Thielman, "Dan Harmon.".
[224] Zahed, "The Inspired Madness of 'Rick and Morty.'"
[225] Bryan Newton, "Rixty Minutes," *Rick and Morty* (Adult Swim, March 17, 2014).

not satisfied by typical primetime entertainment anymore.[226] Regardless, the audience is watching and has reason to watch. The network's establishment and perpetuation of itself and its Genre Pool are the direct cause of this. Contrary to Mittell's wishes, the remainder of this thesis will, with the aid of additional theorists and philosophers, study the textual components of the Adult Swim content library to establish the importance of nostalgia in the network's plan to attract and maintain audiences.

By citing "micro-instances of generic discourses in historically specific moments,"[227] this thesis will demonstrate how Adult Swim's content maintains homogeneity which might be what lures in much of its viewership and why it might have reached the level of success and acclaim it has. What follows in chapter three is a healthy investigation of the work performed by the main generic quirks of the network's program offerings over the course of the network's relatively short existence. These quirks are mediated by the network's own versions of three distinct qualities: parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia. As will be shown, programs like *Robot Chicken, Superjail!, Rick and Morty*, and *Too Many Cooks* are distinct Adult Swim offerings. They probably could not exist off the network.[228] Likewise, there are countless programs that might not ever be shown on Adult Swim. The key is that Adult Swim's programs contain the unique aforementioned qualities at such a degree that the programs themselves become reprehensible when removed from the constructed confines of the network. Off-network programs might display these qualities, but they will almost always be discernible in Adult Swim's core programming.

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[226] Schiermer, "Late-Modern Hipsters," 171–173.

[227] Mittell, "Television Genre," 10.

[228] Abroad, Adult Swim programs are shown on a multitude of channels, but they still retain the generic markers that align them most readily with the main Adult Swim network. Viewers can readily identify which programs are like the others, and which are decidedly from the Pool.

CHAPTER THREE – "AT WHICH DO YOU MOST CAN'T THE LEAST?"[229]:

PARODY, COMIC ABSURDITY, AND NOSTALGIA IN ADULT SWIM'S GENRE

POOL

On one level, there is little novelty to the individual methods Adult Swim

employs to appeal to its audience. Adult Swim constructs itself as a network in order to

satisfy the industrial imperatives necessary to further its cable broadcasting endeavors.

This network establishes itself as the benevolent source that grants subversive content to

its subjects who have grown tired of straight laced, traditional television offerings. This

content is delivered in the form of a tightly constructed Genre Pool that manifests itself in

a manner almost indistinguishable from a multitude of other mainstream, genre-oriented

media content. What is unique about Adult Swim is that it finds madness in its method, as

well as method in its madness, both of which allow it to constantly push the boundaries

of its cultivated taste and style. This final chapter seeks to describe, using relevant

scholarly research and salient textual examples, the versions of parody, comic absurdity,

and nostalgia that qualify the Adult Swim Genre Pool. These qualities, as was the case in

the viral success of *Too Many Cooks*, are the tools with which Adult Swim attracts and

maintains its audience and which make possible a finely balanced symbiosis of mockery

and reverence for the content that it reclaims and subverts.

Laughter and Adult Swim's Comedy

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[229] Joe Schnepp, "Murdering Outside the Box," *Metalocalypse* (Adult Swim, October 22, 2006).

At the base of the quintessentially Adult Swim usage of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia is comedy itself, that which makes human beings laugh. Every individual has their own temperament, and as such, issues of the comic are notoriously nebulous. Since both Adult Swim's network construction and Genre Pool discussed previously operate in the vein of comedy, it is worth exploring the notion of comedy briefly to create a base from which this thesis can summit the three quintessentially Adult Swim qualities that are the subject of this chapter. While the subject of this thesis is not comedy, this thesis recognizes comedy as the binding agent of the network's content, and therefore, is relevant to touch upon. For this thesis' purposes, French philosopher Henri Bergson's landmark work *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* will provide a majority of this base, a source on which countless works have drawn as a basis before establishing their own terms and conditions of what they deem comical. This thesis will be no different in this regard.

Comedy writer Freddy Syborn asserts that "[f]riends create a shared sense of humour,"[230] so too does this thesis assert that Adult Swim's audience is brought together by comedy into one social group of viewers with a shared interest in the network's content. This thesis could plumb the depths of theory on comedy from its Greek origins with Aristotle to much more specific studies by Bakhtin about the carnivalesque, but in the end, the issue would be moot.[231] Comedy theory seeks to understand why comical

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[230] Freddy Syborn, *A Good Bullet: Comedy, Violence and All the Terrible Things That Make Us Laugh* (London, United Kingdom: Short Books, 2013), 15.

[231] To reiterate, explorations of comedy to the extent found in such works as Andrew Stott's *Comedy* or Eli Rozik's *Comedy: A Critical Introduction* are beyond the scope of this thesis. Even such works as Daniel Wickberg's *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*, Nancy Walker's *What's So Funny?: Humor in American Culture*, or Paul Lewis' *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*, while more specific to comedy in American culture and the understanding of the finer differences between laughter and humor, reach for a broader understanding of what is comical than what this thesis intends to rely upon for the rest of its study. Bergson's definitions, while imperfect, happen to resonate with much of

things are funny to human beings at large.[232] In the past 25 years or so, academic research

into humor has complicated earlier understandings of comedy and its effects "[b]y

demonstrating that humor is not uni- but multidimensional."[233] Rather than become

trapped in that mire, this thesis merely wishes to understand why Adult Swim's

programming is so enduringly attractive to its audience.

      Bergson, and a select group of other theorists, will be used to highlight

overarching comedic aspects of Adult Swim's programming. Since Bergson's definitions

are so far reaching, and perhaps even ahead of their time, and since they seem to color so

many of the other sources this thesis has chosen to draw upon for clarification and

reinforcement, they will be taken as sufficiently substantial for this thesis' purposes.

Bergson's understanding of comedy is not perfect, but it is relevant to the slant this thesis

takes when dissecting Adult Swim's own versions of parody, comic absurdity, and

nostalgia that define its overarching Genre Pool. Definitions of comedy and/or humor are

also imperfect. Comedy[234] even has the ability to align itself with serious matters[235],

which it often does on Adult Swim.[236] Hence, a brief exploration of comedy with Adult

Swim in mind is warranted.

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what Adult Swim offers enough to set the table for exploring parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia, which
are more pertinent to the network's methods of attracting and maintaining an audience.

[232] Andrew Stott, *Comedy*, The New Critical Idiom (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 14.

[233] Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago
Press, 2006), 112-113.

[234] This thesis intends the broadest definition here. Comedy might be humor, laughter, or any other related
term. It is not strictly taken as the opposite of tragedy, nor is it strictly implied to be funny in all cases. All
this thesis intends to engage with is the contemporary, general understanding of comedy as a vague
concept, regardless of how thorough its history is. Adult Swim, though it relies heavily on the past, is
largely a vehicle of the present day, a contemporary media artifact that this thesis has and will continue to
explore utilizing contemporary terms and tools.

[235] Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell
University Press, 1998), 200-201.

[236] Thielman, "Dan Harmon."

The most sweeping point Bergson explores is that "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*"[237] (Bergson's emphasis) Every comedic moment or notion flows from human beings and their perception of themselves and their species. Audiences laugh at *ATHF's* Master Shake because, although he is some form of sentient milkshake, he is a lazy oaf of a person hell bent on asserting his social and physical dominance with the least amount of effort possible. Audiences laugh at Pigeon of *Mike Tyson Mysteries* (2014-present), not simply because he happens to be a talking pigeon, but more so because he is a crass, alcoholic divorcee who occasionally employs his own dumb luck to assist Mike Tyson solve mysteries. Audiences laugh at S.A.M. from *NTSF:SD:SUV::*[238] because under his robotic exterior, he's prone to inaccuracy and flights of fancy like any average human being. Each of these characters and many more are riddled with personification, possibly in order to more readily enable audience identification. In order to escape from their daily lives, the audience of Adult Swim's programming seeks the comfort of familiar foibles, relatable characters, only they are able to find them in the most unlikely of heroes: a sentient side order of fries, a rock-and-roll clown addicted to cocaine, or even a robot whose sole purpose in life is to pass butter at the dinner table. All of these characters would be deplorable in real life, but because they are subject to the style of Adult Swim's entertainment, viewers are offered a glimpse of people far worse in their roles in society than themselves. If solace can be found within the lovable losers on Adult Swim, perhaps one's real life is not as difficult as one makes it out to be.

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[237] Bergson, *Laughter*, 3.
[238] *National Terrorism Strike Force: San Diego: Sport Utility Vehicle::*.

Dependent on their characteristics alone, Bergson might contest that Adult Swim

fans find these characters funny because of their attempts to appear as humans in costume

or as humans mimicking physical deformity.[239] Even in the failures of Adult Swim's

characters, the network's audience can find laughter.[240] What audiences really see in

Adult Swim's characters, however, are themselves. They see their inner hipster shiftless

geek. Because all of these bizarre Adult Swim characters are, in some form or another,

"*imitating* social convention,"[241] (Syborn's emphasis) they are comical, as well as

polarizing. Audiences will either latch onto them and adore them and their faults, or they

will be appalled by them and tune to some other, less offensive programming. Adult

Swim appears to gauge the interest of its fans by offending everyone and waiting for the

dust to settle. It seems like a huge risk, but whoever can take the jokes will stay.[242] By

continuously pressing the comedic envelope with unrelenting urgency, Adult Swim

separates itself from the pack, which supposedly catches the attention of potential

viewers seeking an alternative to mainstream Least Offensive Programming.

Adult Swim is able to utilize its humor to further a key layer of operation that

Bergson identifies as a basic element of the comic: repetition. In Bergson's words, "*[i]n a*

comic repetition of words we generally find two terms: a repressed feeling which goes off

like a spring, and an idea that delights in repressing the feeling anew"[243] (Bergson's

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[239] Bergson, *Laughter*, 22-27.

[240] Eli Rozik, *Comedy: A Critical Introduction* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), 35.

[241] Syborn, *A Good Bullet*, 38.

[242] One potential quality Adult Swim fans might possess, rather than a specific type of humor, is wit, more associated with a culture of comic proclivities, as it is researched and unpacked by Wickberg in chapter two of his work *The Senses of Humor*, but again, this speculation is beyond the scope of this thesis. Another likely candidate to describe the tendencies of the Adult Swim audience is that they too, in addition to the programming, possess a specific sensibility, another variation/offshoot from humor researched by Wickberg. This thesis encourages the further study of these distinctions with regard to Adult Swim and its programming.

[243] Bergson, *Laughter*, 73.

emphasis). In a cycle between anticipation, joke, payoff, laughter, and a resetting of one's

expectations or anticipation, there is the comic. The same can be said of observing

repeated acts or gags. It is a cycle of laughter, shock or confusion at what one has

laughed at, and an accompanying washing-of-hands that acts as a subtle approval and half

hearted dismissal of the material. This way, the viewer is not culpable, in their own mind,

for insensitively laughing at Carl's New Jersey accent or Space Ghost's social ineptitude.

Granted, there are dark implications here, such as the potential to misconstrue comedy in

Black Jesus or *The Boondocks* as a justification for racism, for example, but it is clear

that the network itself does not endorse such a reading, nor would it ever perpetuate such

negativity.[244]

The turn to the cyclical patterns of humor provides for a repetitive patch of life

that seems disjointed from life itself: the protracted adolescence that many

twentysomethings experience.[245] Instead of passing time, the individual so amused

constructively wastes it in the form of play, a capacity to indulge in enjoyable lessons or

repetitive learning exercises chosen as vital to survival by evolution.[246] Joseph D.

Anderson's, who studies cognitive film theory with a biological slant, discussion of

individuals' ability to "set apart certain of our activities as having special status"[247] is

helpful for understanding why Adult Swim's fans are choosing to indulge in the

network's programming. They are given the chance to play with concepts like sexism and

racism but are knowledgeable of the fact that these are undesirable traits. Therefore, in

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[244] James Poniewozik, "Review: *Black Jesus* Laughs With, More Than At, Its Son of God," *Time*, August 7, 2014, http://time.com/3086811/review-black-jesus-adult-swim/.

[245] Samantha Henig and Robin Marantz Henig, *Twentysomething: Why Do Young Adults Seem Stuck?*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Penguin Group (USA) LLC, 2012).

[246] Joseph D Anderson, *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 113-120.

[247] Ibid., 113.

addition to uncovering their uselessness, these –isms themselves can be made fun of along with the situations in which they arise in the network's content.

Along with embracing moments of what Anderson calls play, Adult Swim's fans might be embracing certain other subcultures. Mike Lazzo and company find it funny that viewers and critics associate their network's brand of comedy with stoner comedy and drug culture.[248] The truth seems to be that Adult Swim's fans, regardless of their possible proclivity for recreational drug usage, are tuning in and sticking around. More likely than not, the genre elements of the network's Genre Pool keep them coming back for more every night, not stoner culture alone. Apathy and passivity, coupled with occasional bouts of fervent passion are well associated with drug culture, as well as with the overly simplified understandings of Adult Swim's audience.[249] Given the desire to play, Adult Swim's audience sounds ready and willing to buy into the nonsensical programming block.

To summarize, the qualities of Adult Swim's Genre Pool evolve from these notions of comedy. Humor establishes a common ground and language for a community of likeminded viewers with similar tastes and sensibilities that are not offended by the network's offensive comedy. Members of this community audience are presumed to be in on the joke, members of the collective "we" subject of the presented humor.[250] This, coupled with the repetitive nature of comedy, relieves some of the culpability for laughing at most of the outlandish jokes present on the network. In the end, the comedy present on Adult Swim is not unlike much of the comedy present in the contemporary

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[248] Sean Fennessey, "The 'Bold, Crazy' World of Adult Swim," *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 2011, http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/20/entertainment/la-ca-adult-swim-20110220.
[249] Elkins, "Cultural Identity and Subcultural Forums," 602.
[250] Lewis, *Cracking Up*, 2.

American cultural sphere, at least in form. For many jokes made in the modern day, "no lasting impact is desired,"[251] according to Paul Lewis.[252] While Adult Swim's comic nature tends to repeatedly offend, no lasting impact, beyond a renewed sense of nostalgia, is demanded of its audience.

One final helpful piece of information this thesis can draw from Bergson is his belief that "the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness."[253] This notion opens the door for comic absurdity, the logical illogic first introduced in this thesis' introduction. Because it is up to the wielder of this comic spirit to determine the logic, Adult Swim has the ability not only to craft its own version of comic absurdity, but it is able to invent its own vision of parody and nostalgia as well.

"[R]igidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective"[254]: How and Why Adult Swim's

Parody Subverts and Problematizes

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[251] Lewis, *Cracking Up*, 2.

[252] Lewis' study in *Cracking Up* is right to point out, frequently, the harm humor can do. This becomes especially poignant in his conclusion when he speaks about bullying in the contemporary school system. One summation he makes on page 205 of his book is most poignant with regard to this line of study, and is presented as follows: "humor is not a universal experience that necessarily draws humankind together but a malleable force in communication: a source of delight brought by pins, jokes, comic genres, and spontaneous wit, a cure to relax, a way of reaching out to others, and a sign of intelligence, to be sure, but also an effective tool of denigration, misdirection, and attack." While it is not enough to absolve Adult Swim of any wrongdoing, this thesis' stance is that the network is not intentionally trying to harm anyone with its particular styles of humor in any malicious sense. Individuals have every right to be offended, and Adult Swim's goal is to offend, but their intention is not to put down individuals for the sake of putting them down. This is only another instance which signals that comedy at large is outside the scope of this thesis. Once again, this thesis encourages further study in the area in which comedy and violence overlap. William Keough's *Punchlines: The Violence of American Humor* might act as a catalyst for such a study.

[253] Bergson, *Laughter*, 2.

[254] Ibid., 21

Parody is the first of the three uniquely crafted qualities of Adult Swim's Genre Pool that this thesis will observe in order to determine how it is utilized in the network's generic appeal to its viewers. Its definition is diffuse and widely up for debate.[255] Fortunately, since all of Adult Swim's programming cannot help but be parodic, due to its need to live up to its offensive nature, the network has developed its own version of parody that can be explored using content from the Genre Pool as exemplary of it. 126b.   Simon Dentith, in his work simply titled *Parody*, states that "parody is one of the many forms of intertextual allusion out of which texts are produced."[256] This is a suitable baseline from which to begin operating. Parody takes one particular text and produces a new text out of it. In his reading of Gérard Genette's work, Seymour Chatman defines parody to be the act of making fun of a previously constructed text by substituting serious aspects of the original text with new comically poignant aspects that subvert or make a comment on the original content.[257] By his conclusion, Dentith posits that parody begins to recycle itself after a given point and begins to look like karaoke culture, a reproduction of culture for the sake of reproducing culture.[258] Surely, this is not the point that Adult Swim has reached. Truth be told, *SGC2C* was first created for the sole purpose of filling a late night timeslot, but the network has evolved past that, and is now providing parodic content on a consistent basis for the purpose of entertainment and profit.[259] Adult Swim's version of parody is more along the lines of what Chatman calls parody. In his work, Chatman attempts to condense the vast conglomeration of modern and postmodern

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[255] Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*, Literature, Culture, Theory 5 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1.
[256] Simon Dentith, *Parody*, The New Critical Idiom (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 6.
[257] Seymour Benjamin Chatman, "Parody and Style," *Poetics Today* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 28-29.
[258] Dentith, *Parody*, 183-185.
[259] Jurgensen, "Adult Swim."

discourse on parody into a more streamlined understanding of the term.[260] "[A] parody *must* use enough of the target text to be recognizable to its audience,"[261] according to Chatman. Adult Swim's parody is certainly legible.[262] Had *Robot Chicken*'s three *Star Wars* specials not been explicitly called *Star Wars* specials, audiences would most likely have recognized the many cultural icons associated with the saga within the parody, as all of the names and most of the mannerisms are maintained.[263]

At this point, it would be fruitful to be clear about what this thesis considers parody and what it does not. Dan Harries' exploration of parody as a "canonical process"[264] that have begun to replace, or at least supplant the importance of, the original, classic text is tantamount to this thesis' interpretation.[265] While programs in Adult Swim's Genre Pool sometimes seem to parody content in a malicious fashion, these assaults are usually intended to ironically preserve and venerate the original texts. Would Disney have purchased the rights to create a new *Star Wars* series if it were not for the renewed importance within the zeitgeist of the classical content in the first place? This renewal of relevancy was partially brought on by the parodies created by *Robot Chicken* and others that primarily castigated the new trilogy of films that were released in the early 2000s. Nearly a decade later, many individuals have had their first exposure to *Star Wars* content through this and other moments of parody, hence the need for new, original content. Even Lucasfilm got in on the parody action with its licensing of the *Lego Star*

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[260] Chatman, "Parody and Style," 25.
[261] Ibid., 28.
[262] Although, there are instances where individuals might not be well read enough with regard to what is being parodied to comprehend the joke. Adult Swim compensates for this fact by introducing false nostalgia into the mix, a feature of the Genre Pool which will be discussed later in this chapter.
[263] Or, in many cases, exaggerated, which results in some of the comic absurdity associated with the program.
[264] Dan Harries, *Film Parody* (London, United Kingdom: British Film Institute, 2000), 7.
[265] Ibid., 4-8.

Wars series of video games, which often pokes subtle fun at its own content.[266] To be sure, Adult Swim performs its parody in a similar, loving manner.[267] What the network does not perform within its programs, in spite of this reverence for the original text, are pastiche or burlesque or simple send-ups, terms Chatman explains are associated with parody within "heady postmodern seas,"[268] but are altogether different in slight but significant ways.[269]

Parody can be as simple as "a verbal or visual joke,"[270] according to Chatman, or anything in new content that makes aspects of older content humorous in order to critique the older content, according to Esther Milne.[271] Accepting that each of these assessments of what parody is and is not are based in formalist and poststructuralist theory, this thesis will rely on these more recent solutions to parody as a literary device to explain parody within Adult Swim's Genre Pool. Primarily, the network's content will be analyzed according to Harries' six methods of film parody, in which he explores in detail in the second part of his book from 2000 entitled *Film Parody*. For the sake of argument, though his book is on the subject of film parody, there is sufficient precedent within academic circles that would suggest that parody operates in a similar enough manner across all media to consider each form identical. Milne discusses parody within both social media as well as the music and publishing industries.[272] Most poignantly, Ziva Ben-Porat, even in 1979, asserts that while parody can be utilized in literature, comic

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[266] Iain Simons, "Come out of the Bedroom!," *Entertainment Review* 134, no. 4758 (September 9, 2015): 40–42.
[267] Often because the network's content creators have nostalgia for what they are parodying.
[268] Chatman, "Parody and Style," 28.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid., 29.
[271] Esther Milne, "Parody: Affective Registers, Amateur Aesthetics and Intellectual Property," *Cultural Studes Review* 19, no. 1 (March 2013): 200.
[272] Ibid., 198-210.

strip art, and television, that the parody inherent even in the form of television makes television series the perfect locations for parody.[273] Therefore, this thesis will now study Adult Swim's own variation of parody, which could be an ideal variation of the ideal TV series version of parody noted by Ben-Porat, and demonstrate how it contributes to the network overall.

How might Adult Swim's fans read the Genre Pool's parodic content, and why might it attract them? Margaret A. Rose lists a plethora of differences between the parodic text and the parodied text in her work *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*. What follows is but a minute collection of said concepts and relates to the possible manners in which viewers can interact with the content as a whole:

> [A]bsurd changes to the message or subject-matter of the original […] of a more meaningful, ironic, or satiric and comic character. […] Changes to the choice of words and/or to the literal and metaphoric functions of words taken from the original. […] Changes to the associations of the imitated text made by the new context and other co-textual changes. […] Comments on the parodied text or on the author of the parody, or on their readers.[274]

As such, parody is in direct contact with absurdity[275], plays with the comic on multiple levels, manipulates ones relationship with the original text, and performs on a metatextual level that requires the audience to be moved and problematized just as much as the parodied text itself. "Shock or surprise, and humour, from conflict with expectations about the text parodied"[276] is the result drawn out of the observer of the parodic text. Adult Swim, though its methods of parody are not necessarily new, brings media and culture full circle and offers its viewers the chance to engage with a wide variety of past

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[273] Ziva Ben-Porat, "Method in Madness: Notes on the Structure of Parody, Based on MAD TV Satires," *Poetics Today* 1, no. 1/2 (Autumn 1979): 245.

[274] Rose, *Parody*, 37-38.

[275] The second uniquely crafted Adult Swim Genre Pool quality, which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

[276] Rose, *Parody*, 38.

content in a new, parodic form that complicates and yet reinforces the original content. Adult Swim's version of parody, then, acts like a digital medium ought to in that it is a database of older content begging for reclassification and problematization.[277]

Zooming out from parodying content alone, Adult Swim's parody is ensconced in the Genre Pool's fascination and obsession with mixing what Mittell would identify as television genres. Adult Swim's parody operates as cultural cannibalism. It seemingly encourages its content to engage in dialogue with as many different generic traditions as possible to increase the overall effect of the experiment. *Robot Chicken* first demonstrated this on the network in its first season by crossing superhero cartoons with MTV's *The Real World* (1992-present).[278] Henry Jenkins, on his internet blog, called this particular instance of parody "sophomoric (in the best and worst senses of the word)."[279] One of many other instances on *Robot Chicken* that performed a similar genre mixing task was a segment that parodied David Fincher's 1995 film *Se7en* with a *CSI*-style murder investigation performed among the Smurfs.[280] However, *Too Many Cooks*, perhaps, illustrates this point best, as the murderer literally consumes his victims across several different generic backgrounds.[281] Like the murderer, Adult Swim fans feast off of the cultural concoctions provided by the Genre Pool.

Adult Swim manipulates generic content through its manner of parody, and the results are comical. For Bergson, the comic is always recognizable in the

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[277] This conclusion, however, is beyond the scope of this thesis, but would be the right place to begin a new project that incorporates Lev Manovich's theories from *The Language of New Media*, as well as his other works.

[278] Seth Green, "The Deep End," *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, April 10, 2005).

[279] Henry Jenkins, "Ode to Robot Chicken," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, June 20, 2006, http://henryjenkins.org/2006/06/ode_to_robot_chicken.html.

[280] Matthew Senreich, "Atta Toy," *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, May 22, 2005).

[281] Kelly, "Too Many Cooks."

absentmindedness of others.[282] When one makes an error in judgment, either without

thinking or intentionally as part of an act, human intelligence deduces comedic

implications.[283] Bergson deduces this out of the human condition. One laughs at a person

who has fallen[284] because "of physical obstinacy, *as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of*

momentum"[285] (Bergson's emphasis). Because the action was continued in spite of a call

for a change in procedure, whether environmental or mental or otherwise, the accident

occurs. For Bergson, the human mind finds moments of "*mechanical inelasticity*"[286]

(Bergson's emphasis) particularly humorous. As a result of our body's tendency to rely

on mechanical underpinnings in our movements or thoughts, human beings are ripe for

comic mishap. Adult Swim is performing this same task with genres and preexisting

content rather than rigid human beings. If comedy arises when individuals "begin to

regard themselves as works of art,"[287] according to Bergson, then parody can arise when

genres or established content begin to regard themselves in a similar light. It is this thesis'

assertion that when genres become taken too seriously, when their boarders are clearly

defined and they are stable under both Altman and Mittell's definitions, they become ripe

for parody, for subversion. Adult Swim thrives at this point.

Parody, rather than conflating reality and poking fun at mechanical rigidity,

manipulates and lampoons generic constraints and narrative boundaries. This ought not

be confused with the postmodern paracinema that Beth E. Bonnstetter discusses with

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[282] Bergson, *Laughter*, 146.
[283] Ibid., 9-13.
[284] If one laughs at a person who has fallen, that is. Bergson believes one would.
[285] Bergson, *Laughter*, 9.
[286] Ibid., 10.
[287] Ibid., 20.

regard to *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* (*MST3K*) (1988-1999).[288] In Bonnstetter's

words, "*MST3K*, like paracinema, is ambivalent towards its films."[289] Adult Swim and its

parody, by comparison, are fully invested in the parodic and the parodied texts. The hosts

and robot commentators on *MST3K* regularly imply certain improprieties within a given

bad movie universe, ranging anywhere from sexual misconduct to poor television show

preferences.[290] Adult Swim, on the other hand, lets wild accusations evolve into full

fledged incidents and then has the original characters, now parodied, try to get through

the situation. For example, rather than just implying that *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk

engaged in sexual activities with numerous alien life forms given his masculinity and

promiscuity in the original series, *Robot Chicken* inflicts him with "stage three space

herpes."[291] Rather than fight it, the show's parodied version of Kirk proceeds to inform

his past sexual partners, including the Gorn and a tribble,[292] of the STD.[293]

One factor of comedy relating to this parody that Bergson does not recognize,

according to Eli Rozik, is "the fact that people not only laugh *at* the object of laughter,

but also *with* the agent of laughter."[294] Not only is the audience laughing at and buying

into the parody being shelled out by Adult Swim, but they are also laughing with the

creators of the show as well. The sense of shared comprehension of the parodied program

as well as perhaps even affection for the parodied program bonds viewer and content

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[288] Beth E. Bonnstetter, "The Legacy of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*: Text, Textual Production, Paracinema, and Media Literacy," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 40, no. 2 (2012): 94–104.
[289] Ibid.," 97.
[290] Ibid., 98-99.
[291] Zeb Wells, "In Bed Surrounded by Loved Ones," *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, October 28, 2012).
[292] Both of which carry weight within the Star Trek Universe, and thus are familiar objects that can easily be recognized and subverted.
[293] Wells, "In Bed Surrounded by Loved Ones."
[294] Rozik, *Comedy*, 34.

creator. This affection for the programming is brought on by nostalgia, the third signature

quality of Adult Swim's Genre Pool which will be discussed shortly.

This sort of mixed opposition and reinforcement is broached by Linda Hutcheon

in her 1985 work *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*.

She questions the longstanding acceptance of parody as solely a source of texts put in

complete opposition to the source text by pointing out that the origins of the term very

well could also have meant "besides" or aligned with, rather than simply counter to.[295]

Harries addresses this issue as well in his work, believing that in modern parody, many

seem to ignore the oppositional nature of parody in favor of "accord" between parody and

parodied texts.[296] In either case, Adult Swim's parodic texts seem utilize parody to both

mock and revere the parodied text. Therefore, it is this thesis' stance that both opposition

and accord are present within Adult Swim's parody. Though there is not much gore to be

found in heavy metal culture, *Metalocalypse* does seem to provide the correct "brutal"

imagery in line with that fan base. Similarly, as much as *The Venture Bros.* (2004-

present) parodies overused comic book tropes, even down to stilted speeches made on the

part of both heroes and villains, the overall form of the program sticks very close to

presenting a televisual version of a comic book with its seamless transition to subsequent

and parallel scenes as if a page has been turned.

In summation, Adult Swim's own unique version of parody comes into contact

with a number of theories on parody that help frame the manner in which its programs

work to attract and maintain a stable, loyal viewership. Adult Swim's parody attempts to

stick as close to the parodied text as possible, within reason, so that it will be legible as

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[295] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York, NY: Methuen, 1985), 32.
[296] Harries, *Film Parody*, 5.

both a new comical creation as well as a loving criticism of the original content, which

keeps it in line under Chatman's definition of certain types of parody.[297] What's more,

Adult Swim's parody straddles the boundary between opposing and aligning with the

original content, something Hutcheon suggests parody should be capable of doing given

its status as a problematizing notion in the first place.[298] Lastly, and most broadly, Adult

Swim's parody uses typical tactics of television to parody television programs, which

Ben-Porat states TV is uniquely capable of performing.[299] This only contributes to the

notion that much of Adult Swim's audience might be embracing ironic viewpoints of self

obsession and self loathing.[300]

　　What specifically defines Adult Swim's parody, and sets it apart from other

efforts elsewhere on television, is that it is practically ubiquitous and constant within the

boundaries of the network's programming. Rather than serving as a means to structure

the content, Adult Swim's parody is its content and its structure. This is the reason why

"the "narratives" have a jagged quality that practically begs for Ritalin,"[301] in the words

of Rob Walker of New York Times Magazine. The network's parody is unrelenting, and,

in the end, it is so over the top that it does end up reaching the level of canon, just as

Harries posits in his work.[302] He rightly agrees with Hutcheon's assertion that most

contemporary versions of parody "become critically vibrant by harnessing the social

'sanctionness' of established canon."[303] Because Adult Swim's variation of parody is so

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[297] Chatman, "Parody and Style," 29.
[298] Hutcheon, *A Theory in Parody*, 32.
[299] Ben-Porat, "Method in Madness," 246.
[300] Schiermer, "Late-modern Hipsters."
[301] Rob Walker, "The Celebration of Commercial Detritus Is a Reasonable Explanation for Everything in the 'Adult Swim' Canon," *New York Times Magazine*, January 18, 2004.
[302] Harries, *Film Parody*, 3.
[303] Ibid., 124.

incredibly over the top, it sanctions the parodied content that much more readily, placing it on a pedestal by subverting the degree to which it is constructed to such a wild extreme.

One issue regarding how Adult Swim utilizes parody that has not been covered by this section, intentionally, is the notion that "it is possible to miss parodic intent of a work if one is unfamiliar with the cultural references,"[304] as noted by Milne. This issue is bound up in the Genre Pool's nostalgic aspects, and will thus be discussed later. For now, it is relatively safe to assume that the audience, whether it is familiar with the parodied content or not, is aware of the overwhelmingly parodic nature of the Genre Pool's content Adult Swim's fans have been driven from mainstream television programming due to the latter's overdetermined and rigid structure and safe format. By laughing at the parodied content, audiences might begin to see its rigidity exposed by comedy, at once leaving the canon up for further parodic revision and placing the original content on a pedestal to be simultaneously venerated and mocked. Ultimately, this leaves the parodied content intact, but does add the parody to its canon.

In order to determine whether Adult Swim's brand of parody is effective, this thesis will now feature specifically poignant examples of the network's version of parodic content and hold them up to successful examples of Harries' six methods of film parody. These methods are as follows: reiteration, inversion, misdirection, literalization, extraneous inclusion, and exaggeration.[305] Although Adult Swim's parody is different, ever so slightly, from Harries' theory on parody, Adult Swim's parody does appear to follow these same 6 methods.

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[304] Milne, "Parody," 197.
[305] Harries, *Film Parody*, 37-39.

Reiteration is Harries' first method of parody. It represents "evocation or quotation of particular elements from the targeted text"[306] which allows the parody text to mimic restrictive elements of the parodied text as well as to set up expectations for the audience as to how the parody text will operate. Plot points of *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) are reiterated when Rick and Morty are trapped in multiple levels of dreams.[307] Because of the predictable outcomes of their actions, as if they were in the parodied films with the knowledge of their construction, Rick and Morty are able to turn the tables and enter the dreams of Scary Terry, an obvious Freddy Kruger parody, and inspire him to help them wake up.[308] While this method of parody only reintroduces ideas from the parodied text, it is intended to pique the interest of potential audience members who are aware of the original text.[309] This still leaves the possibility open for ridicule of the parodied text, which would satisfy Chatman's definition of parody while problematizing Hutcheon's.[310] Since the Adult Swim audience is already desirous of content that would offend a mainstream audience, there is no conflict with regard to the network's approach to parody. In fact, because the network often reiterates content that is fairly unknown in the popular zeitgeist, like Hannah Barbera cartoons from the 1960s and 1970s, those particularly infatuated with unfamiliar content[311] may be attracted by Adult Swim's parody and subsequently choose to watch the programs to interact with the unfamiliar reiterated content. As a result, Adult Swim and its parent company benefit in a monetary sense because much of the original

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[306] Harries, *Film Parody*, 43.
[307] John Rice, "Lawnmower Dog," *Rick and Morty* (Adult Swim, December 9, 2013).
[308] Ibid.
[309] Harries, *Film Parody*, 45-53.
[310] Chatman, "Parody and Style," 33.
[311] Here, notions of hipster culture as noted by Schiermer are again relevant.

content that the network reclaims and re-popularizes through parody is owned by Turner and Time-Warner.

In terms of subverting parodied texts, inversion is the method Harries suggests upsets "established norms"[312] most readily. All of Adult Swim does this. By taking a horror film and turning it into a comedy or "by placing stars in stock character roles,"[313] for example, a parodic text can invert the text it is parodying. Perhaps the most clear example of this method is *Sealab 2021* which takes the competent scientists and explorers from *Sealab 2020* and turns them into incompetent, squabbling boobs. *Robot Chicken* frequently hosts guest stars that voice just about any character, and not always the lead in a particular segment, which is tantamount to Harries' inversion. What's more, Harries' vision of stylistic inversion occurs in practically every *Robot Chicken* sketch because almost none of the parodied texts were produced using the same stop motion animation found on Seth Green and Matthew Senreich's program, nor do their parodied texts announce themselves as parodic as *Robot Chicken* does.[314] One specific example of this is the prequel to *Parent Trap* (Nancy Meyers, 1998) created in a particular *Robot Chicken* episode. In this parodic film trailer, the parents of the original twins are seen agreeing to split up their unborn children after their impending divorce, vowing never to speak of the incident again.[315] The biting tagline of this film is "Sometimes happy endings have truly horrifying, glossed over beginnings."[316] While this last bit of comedy is not necessarily inversion, it does bring up and parody the Disney logic of happy endings which makes one wonder about whether the characters in the original film were

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[312] Harries, *Film Parody*, 55.
[313] Ibid., 56.
[314] Ibid., 61.
[315] Zeb Wells, "Legion of Super-Gyros," *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, May 11, 2014).
[316] Ibid.

played honestly or not. This is just another hidden subtext that the parodic content feeds its viewer.[317] Adult Swim readily assumes that its audience has exposure to problematic issues like Disney logic, and once again, offers them an alternative to it in their programming.

Reiteration returns to assist misdirection, Harries' third method of parody, in "creating ironic incongruity"[318] between the parodic and parodied texts. Misdirection occurs when "[a] viewer of a parody is presented with a setting which looks very similar to the one in the protext [the parodied text], yet turns out to be a complete fabrication."[319] Often, entire episodes of *Superjail!* will transpire with half of the episode dedicated to a useless plot, which not only defies the parody of the setting established, but also acts as a misdirection of the form of television. When a bloodsport arena is discovered underneath Superjail, the Warden begins a series of gladiatorial fights through which one prisoner will be able to win their freedom, perhaps a parody of the deal made by Maximus in *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), or the concept of *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku Kinji, 2000), or the premise of the Thunderdome in *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (George Miller and George Ogilvie 1985), or any other similar film.[320] These gory battles are intercut with Jailbot, Superjail's security robot, chasing a small scorpion that was randomly unearthed along with the arena.[321] Near the end of the episode, Jailbot corners the scorpion, which turns into a corporeal Aztec god and promises Jailbot anything he desires.[322] Jailbot immediately shoots him with a pistol.[323] Nothing is gained from this

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[317] Chatman, "Parody and Style," 35.
[318] Harries, *Film Genre*, 62.
[319] Ibid.
[320] Christy Karacas, "Combaticus," *Superjail!* (Adult Swim, October 5, 2008).
[321] Ibid.
[322] Ibid.
[323] Ibid.

misdirection except the knowledge of how much a red herring the chase actually was. How ironic that, after being promised anything in the world, Jailbot would only want to kill his would be genie. Here, animation's limitless potential is purposefully snubbed in favor of pointless and gratuitous violence.

No clearer example of misdirection within Adult Swim's Genre Pool could be found, however, than *Too Many Cooks*. Though the short begins innocently enough, once it begins to expose faults and comical aspects of 1980s family sitcoms, its form begins to unravel until it breaks the fourth wall when one of the cast members escapes into the back lot to hide from the murderer who has begun eviscerating the overpopulated cast.[324] Breaking the fourth wall happens to be one of Harries' examples of misdirection.[325] The narrative and stylistic twists within *Too Many Cooks* also qualify as moments of parodic misdirection. Non sequitur shifts to a police procedural type program, *G.I. Joe* type animated program, and space opera are clearly playing with genre form.[326] Perhaps this misdirection is an indictment of television form as a whole, something Ben-Porat believes television is right to assault.[327] No matter what the genre, the episodic form of television has become too repetitive, too much like a pure art, that it has become ripe for parody.

Another method of parody that Adult Swim's Genre Pool seems to excel in is what Harries calls literalization. Puns constitute the crux of this method.[328] In addition to the numerous puns made with regard to the title of *Too Many Cooks*, there are many examples of this within the network's content. A magician produces spaghetti coated in

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[324] Kelly, "Too Many Cooks."
[325] Harries, *Film Parody*, 63.
[326] Kelly, "Too Many Cooks."
[327] Ben-Porat, "Method in Madness," 246-248.
[328] Harries, *Film Parody*, 71.

pesto sauce after saying "Presto!" in his 8 second long magic act in an episode of *Robot Chicken*'s sixth season.[329]

But in terms of literalization, the main draw of audiences most likely lies in the way the network parodies television and film culture. In an episode of *Rick and Morty*, the titular characters watch television programs from all conceivable alternate realities, which allows the show's creators to flex their parodic muscles and poke fun without reproach.[330] While watching a film trailer, Rick reacts, using an improvisational tone, to the improvisational tone of the announcer.[331] This action is performed while the frame is centered on Rick and Morty sitting on the couch, which effectively breaks the fourth wall and calls out perpetrators of this tendency in real life.[332] In the same episode, Morty reacts negatively to an overly violent breakfast cereal commercial in which a parody of the Trix rabbit and the Lucky Charms mascot has his stomach cut open by a pair of sleepy eyed children who then feast on the sugary cereal which is saturated with acid.[333] Not only is this a parody on the level of corporate mascots and marketing, but it also acts as a bit of a callback, for audience members, to overhyped cereal commercials they may have seen during marathons of Saturday morning cartoons, or simply to that cultural image. This intertextuality and multilayered nature corresponds, again, with paracinema, except it is still chooses active approval over ambivalence toward its subject.[334] Due to this intertextuality, as well as multivalenced parodies across these methods, Adult Swim tends to always operate in a parodic mode, rather than offering straightforward content in

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[329] Zeb Wells, "Collateral Damage in Gang Turf War," *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, November 18, 2012).
[330] Bryan Newton, "Rixty Minutes."
[331] Ibid.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid.
[334] Bonnstetter, "*Mystery Science Theater 3000*," 97.

the vein of Least Offensive Programming. Because of this, fans respect Adult Swim for

sticking to their guns, not succumbing to the very tendencies of mainstream media that

they make fun of constantly.

Because almost all of Adult Swim is parodic by its own network's definition,

Harries' fifth method of parody, extraneous inclusion, defines the entire network quite

effectively. Extraneous inclusion is a catch all method, given that it can be seen whenever

a parodic text attempts to "disrupt expected conventional associations"[335] by adding in

content or stylistic elements that have no relationship with the parodied text.[336]

Practically everything on *Robot Chicken* gets this treatment. One example is as follows:

Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan (Nicholas Meyer, 1982) is needlessly complicated when it is

re-imagined as an Italian opera.[337] More than is needed to understand the original text is

encrusted onto it by the parodic text in this instance. In the case of the opera, the

tendency to overact in space operas[338] is revealed and exaggerated by the extraneous

addition of outside genre elements in which the actors must perform.[339] More to the point,

it seems logical that *Star Trek II* could not be screened on Adult Swim without some sort

of extraneous inclusion to deflect it from a mainstream presentation of the film. It needs

to have extra levels of parody attached to it, otherwise it would just be traditional media,

something Adult Swim strives to distance itself from on the level of content. The network

is not just delivering pastiche or homage, but rather, it seeks to venerate previous content

by exposing it to ridicule and mockery in order to prove that it can stand up to such a

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[335] Harries, *Film Parody*, 77.

[336] One of Harries' examples is the inclusion of Santa Claus, apropos of nothing, in a number of films he studies.

[337] Chris McKay, "Two Weeks Without Food," *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, January 25, 2009).

[338] Here a generic label, rather than an opera conduced in outer space. The writers of *Robot Chicken* might just be making this pun, too, fulfilling their parody quota in that manner.

[339] In this fashion, this sketch might also be tapping into inversion, though if operas and space operas are not polar opposites, the rationale for this choice of parodic method might not be present.

challenge. Adult Swim, and its parody, thrive on going the extra mile. The consistency with which this excessive comedy is pursued again suggests a purposeful generic strategy which reinforces specific expectations and tastes within the network's audience.

The inclusion of extraneous character types are also a part of this method of parody.[340] While the tendency in *Superjail!* to include huge masses of expendable characters that are wiped out in every episode seems to fit this type of parody, it does not exactly. Since the mass of prisoners can be read as one cohesive unit, it is not extraneous to the plot of the show, regardless of how absurd the plot becomes. Rather, the cast of *Too Many Cooks* demonstrates this method of parody more clearly. Not only is the pun of there being literally too many Cooks on the program working towards parodic goals, but the sheer number of extraneously included cast members is parodic in its own right. The endless opening credit sequence of *Too Many Cooks*, in stylistic terms, "generate[s] ironic distance"[341] between the viewer and the parodic content. There are more than a few spurious characters introduced in the short, including "Lars Von Trier" as the voice of an apple pie, named Pie, that happens to be a detective.[342] Pie, in addition to the animated characters introduced and many other cast members, does not even appear in the less than 30 seconds of actual show time the audience is privy to before the inevitable "too be continued" trope is inserted for comedic effect.[343] The entirety of *Too Many Cooks* is extraneous inclusion, making it the closest realization of Adult Swim's over the top version of parody at present.

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[340] Harries, *Film Parody*, 78.
[341] Ibid., 81.
[342] Kelly, "Too Many Cooks."
[343] Ibid.

All of this parody is effective because there are seemingly no set limits on it. Audiences appear to be intrigued by Adult Swim's willingness to go beyond every established limit of mockery and comedy. By existing as an entity so separate from traditional methods of broadcasting, those at the margins and those unsatisfied by Least Offensive programming willingly tune in to Adult Swim, and most will not be offended by the network's frequently vulgar and occasionally shocking humor. The key to Adult Swim's separation from mainstream media is its boundless version of parody. Jonathan Grey, in his study *Watching with* The Simpsons*: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality*, states that "*The Simpsons* is not just parody."[344] As a program, *The Simpsons* might be considered a prototype of the form that Adult Swim has taken in the present day. Matt Groening's creation, though relatively close to what amounts to Least Offensive Programming, subverted and parodied a wide variety of topics, but it always returned to normalcy. What makes Adult Swim's content different is that it is usually *only* parodic. This level of parody verges on the absurd, which leads this thesis to the next quality of Adult Swim that allows it to efficiently attract and maintain an audience: comic absurdity. Exaggeration, Harries' final method of parody, also falls within this related quality of Adult Swim's Genre Pool.

In Harries' words, "exaggeration functions by targeting lexical, syntactic, and stylistic elements of the prototext [the parodied text] and extending them beyond their conventionally expected limits."[345] More than extending elements from the parodied text above and beyond their conventional limits, Adult Swim's version of parody shatters the mould and repackages the subverted original content in an absurd fashion. *Too Many*

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[344] Gray, *Watching with The Simpsons*, 12.
[345] Harries, *Film Parody*, 83.

Cooks exaggerates sitcom opening credit sequences to an absurd degree, and "violates temporal and spatial expectations"[346] inherent within family sitcoms of the 1980s just as Harries asserts the opening credits of *Spaceballs* (Mel Brooks, 1987) parody the *Star Wars* saga.[347] *Superjail!* frequently exaggerates cartoon violence to an absurd degree in its extended fantasy brawl sequences. *Robot Chicken* almost constantly exaggerates every piece of content it chooses to parody, and often does so repeatedly.[348]

Individual examples simply are not sufficient to capture the sheer level of insanity displayed in the absurd parodies Adult Swim concocts for its adoring fans. However, it is worth exploring one specific example for the sake of argument. In *Rick and Morty*, multiverse theory is parodied, frequently, often in the form of exaggeration. Because of the nature of these universes – which Rick has access to through implementation of one of his many inventions – literally anything is possible at any given point in time. The result is Abradolf Lincler, one of Rick's science experiments.[349] In an attempt to create a morally neutral leader, Rick splices the DNA of Abraham Lincoln and Adolf Hitler which he has presumably gathered from some parallel universes.[350] Eventually, in the first season finale of the show, Lincler returns to take revenge on Rick. His catch phrase? "Prepare to be emancipated by your own inferior genes!"[351] Lincler stands as a prime example of how *Rick and Morty*, and Adult Swim at large, is able to exaggerate a given concept beyond every conceivable limitation, whether it be a through experiment or simply a ridiculous "what if" scenario. The result of this is absurdity, visually represented

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[346] Harries, *Film Parody*, 85.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Much of what occurs in the three *Star Wars* specials amounts to exaggerations of the various characters' personalities, as well as other parodic methods.
[349] Stephen Sandoval, "Ricksy Business," *Rick and Morty* (Adult Swim, April 14, 2014).
[350] Ibid.
[351] Ibid.

by Abradolf Lincler sporting the facial hair of both of his genetic progenitors.[352] *Rick and Morty* dials up this exaggeration further when Lincler has a change of heart and helps the titular duo escape from literal "Testicle Monsters."[353] Unable to escape, it is implied that the testicle monsters imprison Lincler and turn him into an object of sexual pleasure.[354] At this point, the parodic elements of Lincler subside and are overtaken by pure comedic absurdity. This logically illogical nonsense is a binding agent that holds Adult Swim's parody and nostalgia together.

"Not "ha-ha" funny, more "stab-stab" funny"[355]: Absurdity, Comic Absurdity, and Absurd Parody

While investigating the potential of embezzlement within the ranks of their employees, death metal band Dethklok interviews their underlings by asking a series of questions.[356] One in particular stands out from the rest and can be seen in this chapter's title.[357] Though the plot from this episode of Brendan Small and Tony Blacha's *Metalocalypse* is sufficiently bizarre, Swedish guitarist Skwisgaar's hilariously incomplete mastery of English grammar is but one way the show plays on themes of the comically absurd, the second important defining characteristic of the Adult Swim Genre Pool.[358] Skwisgaar's question, which drummer Pickles reads aloud and immediately assumes was written by the Swede, is utter nonsense despite the fact that the interviewee

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[352] Sandoval, "Ricksy Business."
[353] Ibid.
[354] Ibid.
[355] Chris McKay, "But Not in That Way," *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, February 1, 2009).
[356] Schnepp, "Murdering Outside the Box."
[357] "At which do you most can't the least?"
[358] Schnepp, "Murdering Outside the Box."

does respond, though in an equally illogical manner: "what I most can't the least would be do not a bad job and always a good."[359] This, apart from the parody of Scandinavian rock stars, is a prime example of comic absurdity, the second quality that defines content within the Adult Swim Genre Pool.

Practically every article or review of a program from Adult Swim's Pool utilizes the potent adjective "absurd" or the loaded noun "absurdity." Definitions for this phenomenon traditionally arise out of antiquity, though modern theorists have boiled it down into several, more easily digestible portions. As read by Matthew Bowker, "absurdity is an inexorable conflict, a property of the fractured relationship between humanity and the world."[360] For Albert Camus, the absurd is primarily that which is strange or utterly inhuman in our environment and our experiences therein over the course of our finite lives.[361] Moreover, "our knowledge of the world is inescapably limited to what we can understand 'only in human terms.'"[362] Absurdity, then, is the unknowable, that which is completely foreign to our human experience that, nevertheless, infringes on our experience more often than we would prefer. What does this have to do with Adult Swim's content? Like comedy on Adult Swim, absurdity is repetitive.

Bob Plant explains in plain terms that repetition is permanently intertwined with absurdity.[363] Though life is primarily a linear journey trudged through, the repetitive nature of our daily routines defines absurdity within our own lives, though more because the end date of this brand of repetition is unknowable: "[t]hat we are continually at the

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[359] Schnepp, "Murdering Outside the Box."
[360] Matthew H. Bowker, *Rethinking the Politics of Absurdity: Albert Camus, Postmodernity, and the Survival of Innocence*, Routledge Innovations in Political Theory 55 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 19.
[361] Bob Plant, "Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter," *Philosophy* 84, no. 01 (January 2009): 116.
[362] Ibid., 117.
[363] Ibid., 118.

mercy of contingency is further evidence of the absurd."[364] The classic example of this

type of absurdity is the myth of Sisyphus, who was doomed to roll a rock up a mountain

for all eternity, only to have it roll down the slope at the close of each day.[365]

Absurdity is most readily felt in moments of dread or nonsensical violence,

according to Bowker.[366] In the wake of 9/11, an absurd event, Generation Y was looking

for some sort of language with which to translate the unknowable, the unfathomable in

the world into something legible, something that could be dealt with. It is possible that,

for some, Adult Swim's comedy, in the form of parody, provides that translation.[367]

Comedy is a key by which one can translate the absurd into comprehendible experience.

For Plant, as well as other theorists, "absurdity arises at the *juncture* of the world and

human experience; it is *relational* – neither purely objective *nor* subjective."[368] Comedy,

according to Bergson, lies at a similar juncture between human life and life as art.

Because the two can coexist, one can translate for the other. In this fashion, comedy

allows humanity to comprehend the unknowable world in humorous terms, which are

much easier to fathom than the soul crushing unknowable. What happens, then, is

comedic absurdity, not just comedy or absurdity alone, combats the absurdity one

experiences in real life. This allows for commentators to decree that Adult Swim is full of

absurdity, since they actually mean this comedic absurdity.[369]

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[364] Plant, "Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter," 118.
[365] Bowker, *Politics of Absurdity*, 12.
[366] Ibid., 1-3.
[367] Here, it is worth noting, again, how an additional study of the audience of Adult Swim is warranted. Certainly, not all in the audience are American, though even those from other countries were nevertheless effected, albeit in different ways, by the terrorist attacks in September of 2001. Moreover, comedy itself changed after 9/11, if only in much of America.
[368] Plant, "Absurdity," 119.
[369] Bowker, *Politics of Absurdity*, 1-2.

Adult Swim, in order to separate itself from the pack, takes its comedy and parody to absurd limits and beyond. The Genre Pool presents a "*play of ideas*"[370] (Bergson's emphasis) that combines dozens of comedic styles together and bombards countless scenarios and rigid characters together to produce some of the wildest absurd humor and parody imaginable, as evidenced in the examples of parody explored previously. Much of the humor and events portrayed on the network make absolutely no sense intentionally. If they did, there would not be as stark a difference between real life, unknowable absurdity and Adult Swim's comic absurdity. In this manner, not only is comic absurdity a vital quality of the Adult Swim Genre Pool, but it is also the degree to which all of its other qualities are taken to which contrasts its content from mainstream Least Offensive Programming. For example, *Superjail!* would not be effective when it presents a scenario in which the Warden will grant freedom to whoever wins the Superjail Grand Prix if not for the exaggerated gore and cartoon violence that accompanies it.[371] This race takes the standard *Speed Racer* (1967-1968) gauntlet and flings it into absurdity by giving each driver weapons to kill their enemies.[372] Because the network is absurd and offensive in this manner, it catches the eyes of niche audiences that may want to distinguish themselves from the norm.

This off the wall comic absurdity in most elements of Adult Swim's programming block mimics the play of ideas found within dreams. In fact, according to Bergson, "*[c]omic absurdity is of the same nature as that of dreams*"[373] (Bergson's emphasis). Even though he wrote this statement over a century ago, it is true in the present. This

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[370] Bergson, *Laughter*, 187.
[371] Christy Karacas, "Superjail Grand Prix," *Superjail!* (Adult Swim, June 5, 2011).
[372] Ibid.
[373] Bergson, *Laughter*, 186.

logically illogical dream logic that Adult Swim utilizes in its absurd programming,

furthermore, reinforces the elements of Anderson's play mentioned previously. While

dreaming, or playing for that matter, the mind is able to take the constituent pieces of

whatever issue might be at hand, mostly sources of stress or unknowable absurdity from

one's waking life, and experiment with them without consequence.[374] The dream need

not make sense, and in fact, the dreamer expects the dream might confound their waking

logic. The same goes for Adult Swim's content. In one instance, Eric André destroys the

entire set of his talk show during the opening credits, only to have it built back up for him

again seconds later.[375] There is a certain futility in attempting to comprehend this

destruction, because there is not much reason for it to have happened in the first place. It

is patently absurd. In another instance, Optimus Prime might be getting a prostate

exam[376], the next minute Bones might be giving Captain Kirk a prostate exam.[377] Why

these characters are receiving prostate exams is irrelevant, because it ought not make

sense for it to be comical. Whether these *Robot Chicken* sketches are exposing a lurking

fear within the minds of the head writers of the program, or whether prostate exams are

inherently funny to those not experiencing them, Adult Swim has found a method of

presenting absurd content at this gratuitous level and audiences are consuming it.

  Absurdity, therefore, by this thesis' definition, is inherently dreamlike. It makes

sense that it makes very little sense. Because it is logically illogical, it is inherently

transgressive, which attracts an audience from the fringes of Least Offensive

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[374] Anderson, *Reality of Illusion*, 113-115.
[375] Eric André and Kitao Sakurai, "Russell Brand," *The Eric André Show* (Adult Swim, May 27, 2012).
[376] Chris Finnegan and Matthew Senreich, "Junk in the Trunk," *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, February 20, 2005).
[377] Zeb Wells, "Snarfer Image," *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, May 25, 2014).

Programming's appeal who have grown tired of typically safe content.[378] While comedy

alone, according to Syborn, can be used to interrupt reality and open up new fantastic

possibilities, the comic absurd, with its dream logic, allows the network to offer exotic

humor that offends easily and troubles often, intentionally.[379] Because Adult Swim has

few limits on how insane or inexplicable this comic absurdity can become, there are few

limits on how much one's life can be interrupted by watching it, which yields a form of

escape from daily life. Of course, this statement is problematic considering this thesis has

no wholesale knowledge of the motivations of each audience member. However, because

of the outrageous nature of the comic absurdity, and the unified presence of it throughout

Adult Swim's Genre Pool, there are plenty of opportunities for a viewer to escape,

whether they choose to or not. The prospect of this extreme, escapist humor, which is

unlike much of what appears elsewhere on television, seems to draw in the network's

audience. Those who are able to weather this storm of offensive content are more likely

to remain devoted fans. Once one understands the crucial need for logical illogic in Adult

Swim's operating procedure, it is not difficult to understand why most, but not all, of the

network's content is animated.

Animation offers comedic absurdity a pasture ripe for harvest for it too has dream

logic. The comic absurdity of animation hinges on its ability to manipulate spacetime

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[378] A related phenomenon has been occurring on mainstream television as well, so what Adult Swim is doing is not unique. In October of 2014, an international conference was convened at the Embassy of the United States in Vienna to discuss, as the conference's title indicates "Transgressive Television: Politics, Crime, and Citizenship in 21st-Century American TV Series." So called "Quality TV" like *House of Cards*, *The Americans*, and *Mad Men* were discussed as content that attempts to break with traditional televisual form and present more risqué content, regardless of the effects on its viewership. Because people are still viewing this content, and because it is being approved by mainstream television networks, this thesis still views Adult Swim as a slightly different phenomenon that continues to push the boundaries of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia, even after finding a happy medium. "Quality TV" might offend occasionally, but it still provides entertainment without having to constantly offend viewers like Adult Swim does. Information on this conference can be found at the following website: http://tvseries.univie.ac.at/

[379] Syborn, *A Good Bullet*, 186.

within the boundaries of its cartoon world. What Thompson calls "the temporal

equivalents of stretch and squash in spatial relations,"[380] in her critical essay "The

Implications of the Cel Animation Technique" are the key figures and capabilities of

animation that allow for heightened levels of absurdity within cartoons.[381] Adult Swim's

live action shows tend to adopt these same absurd tools to present bizarre realities.[382]

As is typical for Adult Swim, even its comic absurdity can be ramped up to an

absurd degree. The dream logic of the network's absurd content seems to present material

in a surrealistic fashion. André Breton, one of the founders of the Surrealist movement,

"believe[d] in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are

seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*."[383] According to

Maurice Nadeau, who wrote a definitive history of the surrealist movement, "[t]he

current accepted usage of "surrealist" to designate something crazy, dreamlike, and funny

strikes surprisingly close to the truth,"[384] though it is not perfectly accurate. The logical

illogic of Adult Swim's comedic absurdity adheres to surrealism's call for the

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[380] Kristin Thompson, "Implications of the Cel Animation Technique," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa De Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 116.

[381] For the sake of argument, let it be understood that although this essay was written well before many of the technological advancements that have allowed animated programs to shift away from hand drawn cels almost entirely, the tropes Thompson discusses are still alive and well in the Flash animations found on Adult Swim, as well as in animated content elsewhere.

[382] Another issue that lies outside the scope of this thesis is this notion, that Adult Swim's content is gradually shifting to include more live action programming without losing its characteristic style which relies quite heavily on animated aesthetics. While it remains to be seen whether this is a factor that helps the network attract and maintain an audience, it is apparent that there are relevant inroads to exploring this topic given Klein's *Seven Minutes*, which explores the unique form and style of typical cartoons. Adult Swim's style and format is similar in tendency, in that most of its programs are 11 minute long, rather than 7, and most of its programs present legible signs of an underlying structure and mannerism that allows each program to appear like every other program on the network while retaining its own unique qualities. To reiterate, many of Adult Swim's live action programs appear to exist within the tradition of animated cartoons dating back to the beginning of cinema. This topic is worthy of further research that extends beyond the frame of this particular academic inquiry.

[383] André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 14.

[384] Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 12.

dismantling of logic itself.[385] While the original surrealist movement was "deeply

embedded in the period between the two world wars,"[386] Adult Swim's Genre Pool and

its own brand of surrealistic content are quintessentially indicative of the post-9/11 era of

nebulous global conflict, rapidly expanding media forms, and social change.

Because Adult Swim's content is comical, it allows surrealistic elements freer rein

to operate as the original Surrealists might have indented. According to Nadeau, coloring

surrealism with humor brought about conditions under which the surrealists "produced

their most genuine and imaginative works."[387] Furthermore, according to Nadeau,

"humor permits man to take revenge on life and on death"[388] in the context of surrealism.

Taking comic absurdity to its logically illogical conclusion, Adult Swim has brought

television humor, perhaps not for the first time, to surrealistic state.[389] One might

question, at this point, what Adult Swim's occasional surrealistic tendencies have to do

with the network's ability to draw in and maintain an interested fan base. Surrealism was

practiced to breed nonconformity.[390] Adult Swim's dabbling in surrealistic content, by

taking parody and comic absurdity to the lofty heights that it often does, has tapped into

this alternate method of distancing itself from maintstream media.[391] Because its content

is absurd and because it experiments with presenting content that might be construed to

be surrealistic, Adult Swim attracts audiences that desire significant stylistic difference

from Least Offensive Programming's spirit of inclusivity. Adult Swim has practically

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[385] Nadeau, *Histories of Surrealism*, 49.
[386] Ibid., 43.
[387] Ibid., 24.
[388] Ibid., 223.
[389] Here, again, this thesis must admit that the larger issues of the surrealistic qualities of Adult Swim are beyond the scope of this academic inquiry.
[390] Nadeau, *Histories of Surrealism*, 47.
[391] Whether one might consider the original Surrealists progenitors of hipster culture is ill advised, but perhaps not as tenuous as it appears. Until further study is undertaken regarding these two cultural forms, this thesis will refrain from making such a point.

established itself as an exclusive location for off the wall, over the top comedy, and its

fans appreciate this, regardless of how offensive it might be to mainstream viewers.

In order to clarify these points about Adult Swim's comic absurdity, this thesis

will explore a few textual examples from the network's content. *Superjail!*, on the whole,

is a primarily "visual and psychedelic"[392] program in which anything goes. The Twins,

trans-dimensional androgynous brothers that pop in and out of the *Superjail!* universe at

their discretion, frequently cause mayhem and plot distraction wherever they appear. In

this fashion, comic absurdity seems to take on the task of leading the charge of disrupting

one's sense of understanding of the program.[393] Because of the animated nature of the

program, the Twins can summon an infinite number of tools or entire situations that

Superjail's inmates and staff must contend with. In one episode, one of the twins

undergoes a crystalline budding process that acts as a sort of accelerated pregnancy

which yields a "baby" warbuxx.[394] Before Alice, Superjail's head of security who the

twins recruit as a sort of godmother, is able to pick up the warbuxx, the twins devour half

of the offspring because it is allegedly one of the most tasty objects in the universe.[395]

This dramatic turn of events, and play with the grotesque, is quintessentially absurd.

What's more absurd is that the warbuxx is never mentioned again, leaving it as a sort of

extended non-sequitur within a universe of absurd non-sequiturs that defines both

Superjail! and much of Adult Swim's content library.

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[392] Burra, "Christy Karacas."
[393] This subversion only escalates the subversion present on the network due to its perpetual state of parody.
[394] Christy Karacas, "The Budding of the Warbuxx," *Superjail!* (Adult Swim, May 22, 2011).
[395] Ibid.

Similarly, after Morty asks Rick for a potion that will get his long time crush to fall in love with him, absurdity ensues.[396] Eventually, an obsessive lust for Morty becomes an airborn virus that turns everyone into Morty-crazed zombies.[397] In Rick's attempts to cure this disease, the entire populace ends up "Cronenberged," which turns them into grotesque blobs of fleshy mass and nonsensical external organs, in reference to the films of David Cronenberg.[398] Luckily, because there are an infinite amount of universes still in play, Rick and Morty travel to a parallel universe in which their alternate selves have just been killed.[399] This dark twist on top of an already absurd level of consequences is very typical within Adult Swim's Genre Pool. As luck would have it, Cronenberg Rick and Cronenberg Morty arrive in the Cronenberged universe at the conclusion of the episode, having just turned everyone in their own universe into normal human beings.[400] Not only has *Rick and Morty* raised the stakes by involving theories on multiple universes to take its comedy beyond absurd limits, but it further pushes its own boundaries in order to express how literally anything is possible, whether absurd or not, within the limitless structure of Adult Swim's absurd content library.

Most of the comically absurd content on Adult Swim, however distinct it might be from mainstream media, is usually in the form of parody. No matter how extreme the level of absurdity is, the network nevertheless more frequently bases it in previously existing content. Taking Anderson's writings into account, perhaps this lack of total novelty on the network assists in retaining viewership. If indeed Adult Swim is recognized as a realm of play, in Anderson's sense of the word, then:

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[396] Stephen Sandoval, "Rick Potion #9," *Rick and Morty* (Adult Swim, January 27, 2014).
[397] Ibid.
[398] Ibid.
[399] Ibid.
[400] Ibid.

> The stimulation must be something that can connect to existing schemata but will modify them only slightly, stretching them a little bit – not something so novel as to have no associations, no sense of familiarity in any way whatsoever, with nothing to relate to or connect to in our attempts to assimilate the new information.[401]

This allows nostalgia to play a hand in the comic absurd and parody. In order to play most effectively, to explore one's surroundings mentally and physically without real life ramifications, one must be fed relatively new material, but not entirely revolutionary information. The comedy must be kept close to home, however exaggerated it becomes. Hence nostalgia. Adult Swim must root its outrageous parody comedic absurdity in nostalgia so as to refrain from introducing radical humor that its audience will balk at. Therefore, regardless of how offensive Adult Swim might become, it will always have some sense of nostalgia to ground it. The source of this nostalgia, however, marks Adult Swim as a rare breed of television media entity. After distinguishing itself from typical television content, Adult Swim's Genre Pool has the extraordinary, but not altogether unheard of, ability to evoke nostalgia from its audience. This final quality of Adult Swim's Genre Pool is its most crucial, as it will firmly establish the network as a realm of play in which audiences are free to reminisce in childhoods that they never even experienced in the first place. Moreover, the nostalgia evoked by Adult Swim allows viewers to engage with both the parody and parodied content in a reciprocal relationship of mockery and simultaneous reverence.

Evoking Nostalgia

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[401] Anderson, *Reality of Illusion*, 118.

Life is lousy with stress and weighty decisions. Over the course of history,

entertainment has, to some extent, quelled the noise from these real world intrusions, if

only for a short time. Gen Y "kidults," though no different from other groups of

consumers apart from, arguably, the strangeness of their daily lives, desire to break free

from similar pressures and consequences of the nature of their decisions, to rebel from

life's serious nature so that they might gain some sense of escape. Bergson describes the

issue as follows:

> Life presents itself to us as evolution in time and complexity in space. Regarded
> in time, it is the continuous evolution of a being ever growing older; it never goes
> backwards and never repeats anything.[402]

The counterpoint, that which one must escape to, is a state of mind in which to rest one's

weary aging self: nostalgia.[403] Perhaps this is why Adult Swim's Genre Pool strives to

evoke nostalgia within its viewership, in order to offer a place of escape, a "sanctuary of

meaning" where the issues of real life can be put on hold and matters of childhood can be

revisited. If this is the case, viewers would have plenty of reason to tune in and view the

network's programming on a frequent basis.

Detractors have critiqued Adult Swim since its inception, believing that all that is

being provided are rehashed jokes and "nostalgia bait."[404] On the contrary, nostalgia is a

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[402] Bergson, *Laughter*, 88.

[403] Don Draper, played by Jon Hamm on AMC's *Mad Men*, perhaps presents the clearest example of nostalgia for our modern times – which is ironic because he speaks the perspective of a writer from the early 2000s crafting the sentiments of an advertising director from the early 1960s. This conflates the meaning of fondness for one's past because the source of the past is both present and, in some ways, the future of the various perspectives of individuals viewing the show and living in the story world. Regardless, what Draper has to say about nostalgia is relevant to the discussion to follow. While presenting a new ad strategy for a new slide projector to Eastman Kodak, Draper quips that nostalgia is "a twinge in your heart, far more powerful than memory alone" (Matthew Weiner, "The Wheel," *Mad Men* (AMC, October 18, 2007)). A few seasons later, while drunkenly stumbling through a Life cereal pitch, Draper sounds a bit more philosophical, in spite of his inebriation: "Nostalgia… How you remember something in the past. It feels good, but it's a little bit painful, like when you were kid" (Scott Hornbacher, "Waldorf Stories," *Mad Men* (AMC, August 29, 2010)).

[404] Lichman, "Is Adult Swim Stuck in a Rut of Nostalgia Bait?"

great benefit for Adult Swim and of great value to its target audience. Bergson offers up the perfect defense of nostalgia, without actually naming it as such, in *Laughter* that lines up with this thesis' estimation of the importance of it on Adult Swim:

> And yet, how many of our present pleasures, were we to examine them closely, would shrink into nothing more than memories of past ones! What would there be left of many of our emotions were we to reduce them to the exact quantum of pure feeling they contain, by subtracting from them all that is merely reminiscence? Indeed, it seems possible that, after a certain age, we become impervious to all fresh or novel forms of joy, and the sweetest pleasures of the middle-aged man are perhaps nothing more than a revival of the sensations of childhood, a balmy zephyr wafted in fainter and fainter breaths by a past that is ever receding.[405]

Nostalgia, in fact, tends to subsume all desires to return to simpler times, whether it be childhood or young adulthood, or, often, even an idealized version of the present.[406] Unlike most nostalgic content on television in the modern era, Adult Swim's content is not overtly nostalgic but it almost always intends to evoke nostalgia within each viewer. This process opens up an entirely new mode of participating in Adult Swim's Genre Pool.

Janelle L. Wilson begins her book *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* with the following statement: "[n]ostalgia has gotten a bad rap. Those who seem to live in the past often face criticism from others. Many pundits and scholars associate nostalgia with reactionary thought."[407] However, criticism of nostalgia and nostalgic qualities do not define the term alone. Rather, the commonly accepted origin of the term lies with a Swiss physician named Johannes Hoffer. Quoted in Wilson's text, Hoffer, defines nostalgia as, among other phrases, "a mild type of insanity, caused by disappointment and a

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[405] Bergson, *Laughter*, 68.

[406] This final notion, nostalgia for the present, was coined by Jameson in his work *Postmodernity*.

[407] Janelle L. Wilson, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 7.

continuous longing for home."[408] Over the years, this definition has been altered, mainly

due to effects ranging from the Enlightenment to modernization according to Helmut

Illbruck's philosophical and historical study on the subject titled *Nostalgia: Origins and*

Ends of an Unenlightened Disease.[409] What was once "pathologized for its seemingly

recalcitrant, feeble-minded, or atavistic character,"[410] in Illbruck's estimation, has

evolved into an increasingly complicated and contested term, especially since the era of

postmodern thought. Perhaps there, when theorists like Svetlana Boym and Frederick

Jameson begin to explore the term, is where Wilson finds nostalgia has gotten a bad rap.

In her study of memory and nostalgia in mainly British television, Amy

Holdsworth sees Jameson's critique of nostalgia as a backward looking method

dependent on economic demands over culture.[411] She goes on, in a footnote quoting the

original edition of Jameson's 1991work *Postmodernism*[412], to explain that "[n]ostalgia, in

Jameson's terms, is ahistorical, sentimentalising and represents the decline in 'our lived

possibility of experiencing history in some active way' (1991, p. 21)."[413] The nostalgia

found on Adult Swim is somewhat different. For the sake of argument, the Adult Swim

brand of nostalgia is similar to Holdsworth's estimation of how memory and nostalgia are

"as symptomatic of the current state of television,"[414] but it relies more upon how it

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[408] Wilson, *Nostalgia*, 21.

[409] Helmut Illbruck, *Nostalgia: Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Disease* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012).

[410] Ibid., 197.

[411] Amy Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), 98.

[412] This is the first point at which Adult Swim's brand of nostalgia differs from mainstream academic discourse. As will be discussed, Adult Swim's content evokes nostalgia within its audience which does allow them to actively experience historical content in a new setting by both mocking and revering the original content through means of cultural cannibalism and absurd parody.

[413] Holdsworth, *Television, Memory, and Nostalgia*, 155.

[414] Ibid., 5.

transcends this current state of television in order to deliver content that differs from the mainstream in order to more effectively attract and maintain an audience for the network.

Arguments on the exact definition of nostalgia aside, this thesis chooses to take Wilson's understanding of the term as the clearest and most straightforward. It is also her interpretation of nostalgia that Adult Swim's version looks most like. Nostalgia, in Wilson's estimation, is a deeper emotion than reminiscence and sentimentality.[415] There is a component of escapism to nostalgia, "a form of leisure that need not necessarily take much time or require many resources."[416] This notion gels quite well with comedy's escapist goals, which means the two can work together. Further, Wilson believes that "nostalgia can be resistant to outside manipulation, for nostalgia has to strike a chord somewhere,"[417] allowing for the site of nostalgia to shift from strictly the content provided to a location within the emotional confines of the media consumer.

In short, for Wilson and for this thesis, nostalgia is more than just "a longing to recapture a mood or spirit of a previous time."[418] It is about reinterpreting this previous mood or spirit.[419] This parallels Hutcheon's assertion that parody can act as both an antagonistic and supportive force.[420] Furthermore, nostalgia creates a "sanctuary of meaning," a term Wilson borrows from Roger Aden's 1995 work "Nostalgic Commnication as Temporal Escape: *When It Was a Game*'s Re-construction of a Baseball/Work Community" which enables nostalgia to become, in Wilson's words, "a place where one feels she knows herself; where identity has safe harbor."[421] Not only is

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[415] Wilson, *Nostalgia*, 29.
[416] Ibid., 29.
[417] Ibid.
[418] Ibid., 26.
[419] Ibid.
[420] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 32.
[421] Wilson, *Nostalgia*, 10.

nostalgia an emotional connection between a viewer and a text, but it is a mental

embodiment of the place that the individual's nostalgia yearns to return tow. Adult Swim,

through its absurd parody, predisposes its viewers to possibly engender this definition of

nostalgia. It is not the nostalgic content on the network, or even its comical

reinterpretation that attracts and maintains its audience. Rather the network, unlike in

most contemporary media, makes possible the evocation of nostalgia within the audience,

nurturing within them the seeds of collective reverence for the very material that they

want to see parodied to so absurd a degree.

In order to understand how Adult Swim differs from the mainstream in this

fashion, this thesis will now look at how nostalgia is utilized by contemporary media. For

the most part, content itself is marketed as having the markers of being nostalgic. Most

films and television programs bank on there being a sufficient audience available that

will hold nostalgic feelings regarding the content that is being reissued. Film has utilized

nostalgia in a number of different ways. Vera Dika's *Recycled Culture in Contemporary*

Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia explores the manner in which pastiche and nostalgia

can change or alter the original canon that it is trying to play off of.[422] According to Pam

Cook, film has provided nostalgic content for over half of its existence as a medium.[423]

Cook goes on to state that nostalgia belongs in a kind of spectrum of memory of film and

cinematic history itself.[424] Both of these works, however, seem to agree that film tends to

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[422] Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia*, Cambridge Studies in Film (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.
[423] Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005).
[424] Ibid.

present nostalgic content rather than evoke nostalgia from within a viewer. It should be noted that the latter trait is not entirely impossible, but it is rare.[425]

From the dawn of content libraries in the age of Turner and the first superstations, the rerun has laid claim to a majority of television's nostalgic content, according to Derek Kompare.[426] In some respects, television as a cultural practice has always been nostalgic to varying degrees.[427] Moreover, television as a site of nostalgia, offers an entire genre of nostalgic television.[428] This is apparent in what Holdsworth terms "'television about television'"[429] in scare quotes. The pervasive tendency on British television, but also in American broadcasting as well, to compile best-of lists or collections of highlights from various television programs is one of the main ways that television can attempt to force the issue of nostalgia.[430] This content, rather than evoking nostalgia, exploits the fact that there is an audience within the larger pool of potential viewers that will have some sort of nostalgic connection to the compiled material. In terms of Illbruck's work, unlike most contemporary nostalgia, this type of nostalgic content is not unsure of what home or past

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[425] Rather, this thesis believes that, while film might appear to evoke nostalgia for its own content, what is more at work is the evocation of nostalgia for the filmic medium, which is an entirely different issue. Adult Swim evokes nostalgia for the content that it parodies, which allows viewers to participate in the parody and to know and revere the original content. Adult Swim does not, explicitly, evoke nostalgia for the medium of television, especially since it seeks to separate itself from the quintessential nostalgic element of televisual form: Least Offensive Programming.

[426] Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 34.

[427] See Kompare's *Rerun Nation* and Holdsworth's *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, and Carlen Lavigne's edited book *Remake Television: Reboot, Re-use, Recycle* for more information on the topics of nostalgia for television and nostalgic television content. Additionally, Murry's chapter in Hendershot's edited *Nickelodeon Nation* on Nick at Nite and TV Land offers a more in depth account of a nostalgic network, a topic Ryan Lizardi later mentions in his chapter within Lavigne's *Remake Television*. These nostalgic networks are different from Adult Swim in that they repackage and re-air content which people have nostalgic feelings for whereas Adult Swim recontextualizes and parodies content which few people have nostalgic feelings for. In the process of recontextualizing and parodying this content, the network evokes a nostalgic response from its viewership whereas nostalgic networks rely on preexisting nostalgic relationships with their chosen texts.

[428] Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, 96-102.

[429] Ibid., 102.

[430] Ibid., 97-103.

its embracers long for.[431] It lies in their own past in which the remixed content originated from. Effectively, most television does this rather than teaching its audience how to be nostalgic as Adult Swim does.

Television creates nostalgic content to appeal to certain audiences in another crucial way: the remake/reboot. Ryan Lizardi cites, among others, contemporary iterations of *Hawaii Five-0* (2010-present) and *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009) as prime examples of rebooted programs that offer nostalgia to an audience that viewed the original properties in the 70s and 80s, as well as offering a modern spin to attract a new audience without nostalgia.[432] After all, if these programs did not attract a wide audience, specifically the larger audience without nostalgia for the original content, it would not be Least Offensive Programming. Lizardi also adds the Sherlock Holmes remakes *Sherlock* (2010-present) *and Elementary* (2012-present) as part of "the nostalgic revolution"[433] he sees occurring on television which perpetuate nostalgic content aimed at nostalgic audiences.[434] This revolution, however, is a "neutering force,"[435] one that limits one's interaction with the original text. Rather, the new nostalgic content, in the form of a remake/reboot, is held up by a given television network as the new source for engagement. Indeed, Lizardi associates Adult Swim with this pattern which he dubs "melancholic nostalgia."[436]

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[431] Illbruck *Nostalgia*, 217.
[432] Ryan Lizardi, "The Nostalgic Revolution Will Be Televised," in *Remake Television: Reboot, Re-Use, Recycle*, ed. Carlen Lavigne (New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2014), 40.
[433] Ibid., 37.
[434] Ibid., 40-41.
[435] Ibid., 38.
[436] Ibid., 37.

Typifying this kind of nostalgic content is a notion of television's "'panicky self cannibalism'"[437] according to Charlotte Brunsdon. However panicked networks might be in their creation of this nostalgic content, Lizardi states that presenting it is a "safe bet for programming."[438] Mainstream television's nostalgic content also holds true to Jameson's definitions of nostalgia because, in Lizardi's words, it does not "encourage an adaptive and critical mindset."[439] Nostalgic content, contemporary reboots that merely begin with previously issued content but form themselves as new entities, is therefore Least Offensive programming because of its wide appeal. This type of television simply is not what Adult Swim seeks to transmit to its audience.

Rather, the cultural cannibalism that occurs on the Adult Swim screen works to further the fusion of absurd parody and nostalgic reverence within the viewer after. In this manner, Adult Swim's nostalgia does tie in with traditional television with regard to its ability to "reaffirm a belief in the progress of the present" in addition to idealizing the past and removing one's self from the present.[440] Beyond this, however, the manner in which Adult swim evokes nostalgia is relatively dissimilar from mainstream television. The network does not and cannot assume that its audience possesses any nostalgic emotion for *Space Ghost*, *Birdman and the Galaxy Trio*, *Sealab 2020*, or any other previously existing content that is either parodied or reworked on the network because the nostalgia for this content, even if it is beyond the memory and scope of experience of a given individual, is enabled to grow within the viewer as a result of watching Adult Swim. When coupled with nostalgia, the unknowable absurdity of an idealized former

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[437] Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, 99.
[438] Lizardi, "The Nostalgic Revolution," 48.
[439] Ibid., 49.
[440] Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, 103.

childhood which contains all the original content that Adult Swim parodies becomes legible, just as absurdity is made readable by the language of comedy. The nostalgia potentially evoked within Adult Swim's audience, therefore, is most likely a false nostalgia, a nostalgia for something beyond the viewer's actual experiences. This false nostalgia allows for viewers to comprehend a wider array of jokes, especially those that rely on parody of content unfamiliar to them which they should not understand, as Milne points out in Hutcheon's work.[441]

Nevertheless, the promise of this idealized, never known childhood is the vision that Wilson posits members of Gen Y are searching for.[442] It is precisely the "interesting mix between Boomer and [Generation] Xer popular culture,"[443] an act of what this thesis calls cultural cannibalism, that Wilson believes could come to define Gen Y's version of nostalgia. This is the nostalgia that Adult Swim engenders within its audience. This, ultimately, may be what lures so many to the network and establishes them as devoted fans.

Theoretically speaking, if most of the content on Adult Swim can evoke nostalgia in the manner in which this thesis does, then the viewer can gain nostalgic feelings for every example that has been discussed in this chapter thus far. For the sake of impressing upon the importance of evoked nostalgia, two striking examples will be discussed at this juncture. *Robot Chicken* goes out of its way to pay homage to pop culture and dredge up feelings of nostalgia by creating its episodes by manipulating any number of toys and

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[441] Milne, "Parody," 197.
[442] Wilson, *Nostalgia*, 159.
[443] Ibid.

action figures from the 70s, 80s, 90s, and early 2000s using stop motion animation.[444] A

prime example of the program's ability to evoke nostalgia occurs early on in the series

when characters from several cartoons, video games, and 1980s television programs enter

into a no holds barred, all out race along with an action figure version of Vin Diesel.[445]

During the course of the race, Mario of *Super Mario* fame launches a blue tortoise shell

to kill the leader of the race, Speed Racer makes an offhand comment about motion and

the cost of animation, the Dukes of Hazard drive off a cliff, KITT from *Knight Rider*

(1982-1986) crashes into the side of a hill, and practically every car is horribly, albeit

comically, mangled.[446] Each of these moments, on their own, is simply a call back joke,

one that relies on people knowing what is being referenced and parodied. When brought

together, however, the sum total of what they represent speaks to something that typical

audiences of Adult Swim have missed out on. Looking at Adult Swim's ratings, the

largest proportion of viewers are between the ages of 18-34, as stated previously. If this is

the case, many in the audience have no recollection of Michael Knight or *Cannonball*

Run (Hal Needham, 1981) or even the original *Mario Kart* which came out in 1992.

Many, however, might be familiar with the format of the *Fast and Furious* film franchise

that this scene also parodies. For those with fond memories of this original content,

nostalgia is easily responsible for their enjoyment of the zany festivities, but only if they

were able to look past the offensive spin that *Robot Chicken* adds to the mix. Those

without nostalgic feelings for these programs and games are simply left out of the joke.

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[444] Dave Itzkoff, "Big Boys' Dream Job: Getting Paid to Play with Toys," *The New York Times*, September 17, 2006, sec. Arts / Television, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/17/arts/television/17itzk.html.
[445] Tom Root, "Gold Dust Gasoline," *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, March 6, 2005).
[446] Ibid.

Individuals do not enjoy being left out of the joke. Because they have no nostalgia for much of the content on Adult Swim, these viewers are lacking the proper cultural credentials to comprehend much of the network's humor. Syborn asks and answers the following rhetorical question: "Why do we love a call-back? Because it returns us to a place that we've been before."[447] If viewers are deprived of the appreciation of this call-back to previous content, they are denied nostalgia and all the positive emotions and mental escape afforded by it. In order to lessen this effect, the Adult Swim Genre Pool heavily relies on content that, by its definition, will attempt to educate viewers about itself. By placing so many references to preexisting content into its programs, Adult Swim encourages its audience to develop a false sense of nostalgia over content that they are unfamiliar with but that the overarching genre itself advocates as worthy of reverence in a nostalgic fashion. The style of Adult Swim tends to appeal to those who are more likely to cannibalize culture in order to get in on the joke. In order to appreciate the network's offerings, the nostalgic qualities of the genre offer themselves up as a home to which one can long for and return to even if it is an entirely new home, which fits within Wilson's definition of nostalgia.[448] False nostalgia is then simply nostalgia but for an unknowable place, like the idealized childhood that Adult Swim draws its content from. Because viewers tune in, whether directly as a result of the nostalgia the network encourages or not, an active choice is made to engage with the content and its nostalgic qualities. This engagement is contrary to what Jameson believes nostalgia is capable of, and therefore, is quite ingenious.

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[447] Syborn, *A Good Bullet*, 270.
[448] Wilson, *Nostalgia*, 11.

Though Adult Swim's methods of encouraging the growth of nostalgia within its fan base through utilizing its nostalgic genre differ from mainstream media, it is not unique in attempting to appeal to audiences in this same fashion. The longevity of certain film series, especially the James Bond "saga," have allowed them to nostalgize their earlier days. In doing this, rather than becoming nostalgic content themselves, they might entice viewers to return to older films in the series in order to gain a better grasp on the more contemporary releases. Adam West functions as the mayor of Quahog in *Family Guy*, which relies upon understanding his role in the original *Batman* (1966-1968) television series and how his mannerisms align and contrast with his previous persona as the caped crusader. Younger viewers might not have ever seen him in this role, but knowing about it and adding it to the contemporary cultural moment only enriches the experience. Lizardi writes about commercials that attempt to evoke nostalgia, rather than simply acting as nostalgic content, in order to sell their products.[449] Further studies have explored this same phenomenon from a marketing standpoint.[450] Even types of furniture can "evoke nostalgia."[451] What all of these examples have in common is that as individual products, they are not nostalgic, like much of the nostalgic television discussed previously. Rather, it is only when their context in the cultural present is taken into account, they have the ability to provide the necessary paths towards growing a nostalgic response to them.

Perhaps the most interesting parallel to Adult Swim's method of converting fans to its genre utilizing nostalgic cues is House on the Rock. In a meticulously yet

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[449] Lizardi, "The Nostalgic Revolution," 43-46.

[450] Altaf Merchant et al., "How Strong Is the Pull of the Past?: Measuring Personal Nostalgia Evoked by Advertising," *Journal of Advertising Research* 53, no. 2 (June 2013): 150–65.

[451] Cindy W. Hodnett, "New Upholstery Designs Evoke Nostalgia," *Furniture/Today* 39, no. 4 (September 22, 2014): 35.

haphazardly designed space, Alex Jordan Jr. has amassed a massive collection of collections.[452] According to Mary Titus, "[v]isitors to House on the Rock sometimes revel in, but are more often exhausted by, the enormity of its contents."[453] Somehow, despite its wide range of odds and ends, it evokes nostalgia for its seemingly impossible contents: huge collections of dolls, animatronic instruments, music boxes, the supposed world's largest fireplace, and a gigantic carousel which features horses with mismatched body parts.[454] The evidence to support the claim that House on the Rock encourages nostalgia for its grotesque and carnivalesque collections lies in its yearly profits raked in from the thousands of visitors that jump at the chance to visit such a bizarre wonder spot.[455] Certainly, Adult Swim is making a profit by collecting aged content and recontextualizing it as well in order to build a kind of nostalgic cache which its viewers can bask in. What is interesting about House on the Rock is that it too, like Adult Swim, has parody as one of its primary modes of communication.[456] Furthermore, Titus notes that both homage and mockery are relevant terms to understanding what this attraction does to gain prestige.[457] As such, it allows this thesis to transition to discussing Adult Swim's final method of attracting and maintaining an audience: the merging of its own versions of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia into one emblematic emotional practice.

With Mockery and Reverence: When Absurd Parody and False Nostalgia Collide

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[452] Mary Titus, "Collection and Parody: Taliesin and House on the Rock," in *Contemporary Collecting: Objects, Practices, and the Fate of Things*, ed. Kevin M. Moist and David Banash (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 213.
[453] Ibid.
[454] Ibid., 213-220.
[455] Ibid., 216.
[456] Ibid., 213.
[457] Ibid., 217.

In the previous sections, this thesis put forth the notion that Adult Swim seems to attract and maintain its audience by manipulating the qualities of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia within its content. While each quality can stand on its own and serve as a beacon to potential disenchanted viewers of Least Offensive Programming, their attractive force when combined becomes much more alluring. According to James Poniewozik, there is a specific "Gen X – Gen Y brand of nostalgia: affectionate derision for the junk of one's youth."[458] There is comfort in remembering one's past, even if it was not perfect, and especially if it is worthy of parody. Adult Swim, therefore, has the potential to become, like nostalgia itself, a sanctuary of meaning which takes content from an idealized childhood which contains all past content and mocks it for the entertainment of its fans. Like a comedic roast, Adult Swim puts content that almost anyone could learn to be nostalgic for up for criticism through various parodic methods, and the end result is comedy. A fondness grows out of this, for the parodied content, regardless of how absurd the parody becomes. In fact, the more absurd the parody, the more nostalgically endearing the parodied content becomes for the viewer.

Take Captain Kirk, for example. Audiences might already view him as a figure to be respected due to his military acumen and suave political skills within his own diegetic world, but after they see him riddled with sexually transmitted disease, they might consider him one of their own, someone to be admired not for his difference, but because, in parody, Captain Kirk is just a shiftless geek after all. The same can be said about just about any other example given in this thesis previously. As touching as the nostalgia for

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[458] James Poniewozik, "Hey, Look! Manimation," *Time*, November 17, 2003, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,543789,00.html.

this content might be, its mockery is just as satisfying. In this fashion, ironically, the new canon is self loathing, self aggrandizing, and enamored with itself, as if Narcissus became infatuated with a caricature of himself. Harries' observation of parody becoming canon, then, is the process underway on Adult Swim.[459] This sort of irony, perhaps, best situates Adult Swim within hipster culture, further warranting further research into that topic in particular.

Overall, further research is also indeed needed on the topic of a merging of parody and nostalgia into a simultaneous mocking and reverence for content from an idealized past that can be reclaimed by watching Adult Swim in an act of cultural cannibalism that parallels the cannibalistic murderer from *Too Many Cooks*.[460] This thesis presents this theory as a challenge for further academic engagement. What can be said, without further research, are the following comments. House on the Rock operates in this same manner. Because it constantly attempts to evoke nostalgia within its visitors by flaunting its collections while simultaneously parodying the form of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin, which is just down the road, it comingles mockery and reverence into one emotional exchange between visitor and content.[461]

In the contemporary media environment, there have been similar attempts to merge absurd parody and nostalgia before, but Adult Swim has seemingly separated itself from them in order to traverse its own path away from Least Offensive Programming. *Saturday Night Live* might be a lot more like Adult Swim if it were to rest more of its comedy on parodying nostalgic content. Most of its parody comes at the expense of culture and mannerisms of society contemporaneous with a given sketch. For example,

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[459] Harries, *Film Parody*, 3.
[460] Kelly, "Too Many Cooks."
[461] Titus, *Collection and Parody*, 213-225.

SNL frequently parodies political figures, but whether there were a way to determine whether *SNL* viewers enjoyed both the mockery and reverence for the voting process, and whether that influenced their own political engagement, remains to be seen. *Night Flight* (1981-1988, 1990-1996), a late night program dedicated to music and music appreciation also seems to both love its subject and love berating its subject, according to Kevin C. Smith's essay posted on a blog website called Dangerous Minds.[462] By appealing to music lovers and music novices alike, the program, slightly before the time of MTV, was able to evoke an appreciation for a wide range of mainstream music, as well as niche music, while parody served as just another method of discovering new content, not unlike the opportunity that Adult Swim offers its viewers.[463] In light of the recent announcement of the return of *The X-Files* after 13 years, the series' original second to last episode can be considered a locus of both mockery and reverence for previous content.[464] In the episode, a telepath has the ability to transform the interior of his house into the set of *The Brady Bunch*.[465] However, the episode is largely unsuccessful in playing to the nostalgia of both *The Brady Bunch* and *The X-Files* despite its somewhat successful parody of the forms of both programs. For this reason, the reverence is not strong enough to compliment the mockery and the program remains as limp as the rest of the Least Offensive Programming offered in the same vein. Because Adult Swim is able to keep its programming offensive, the balance between mockery and reverence is maintained in a sort of masochistic way for viewers to take upon themselves as they see fit.

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[462] Kevin C. Smith, "'Do You Remember "Night Flight"?,'" *Dangerous Minds*, April 10, 2015, http://dangerousminds.net/comments/do_you_remember_night_flight.
[463] Ibid.
[464] James Hibberd, "The X-Files, Reopened!," *Entertainment Weekly*, no. 1375 (April 3, 2015): 14.
[465] Vince Gilligan, "Sunshine Days," *The X-Files* (Fox, May 12, 2000).

Lastly, Cartoon Network has seemingly been trying to acclimate its aging viewers to Adult Swim's style with several programs that air right before the late night block begins. *Regular Show* (2010-present), *Adventure Time*, and *The Amazing World of Gumball* (2011-present) each seem to be working as Adult Swim Lite. Each seems to be attempting to introduce more adult themes and playing with nostalgia and parody and absurdity at the same time. On *Regular Show*, two friends, a blue jay and a raccoon, work menial jobs at a park for their boss who happens to be a sentient gumball machine. When they're not working, the protagonists are staying up way too late playing video games and drinking way too much soda. It is nt a huge leap to translate this to a typical Adult Swim program, especially since there are already numerous subtle adult references hidden inside the show's background, and since the protagonists frequently wake up with hangovers after drinking way too much "soda."[466] These programs, however close they might be to evoking nostalgia and cannibalizing culture at the level of Adult Swim, are just beyond the scope of this thesis. As such, they can only serve as examples of how media might be trending towards employing Adult Swim's methods to attract and maintain audiences.[467]

Adult Swim's own unique blend of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia grant the network's viewers a sense of belonging. Rather than settling for mainstream culture's Least Offensive Programming, the Adult Swim fan can buy into the network's, as well as the Genre Pool's style in order to become distinguished from the norm themselves. They

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[466] Lucia Moses, "First Mover J.G. Quintel," *Adweek* 54, no. 15 (April 15, 2013): 6.

[467] In line with Adult Swim's offensive content and parodic nature is *South Park* (1997-present). Since its relationship to Adult Swim is quite interesting, it would be too much to mention here in this final chapter. Rather, it is left to further academic study to compare and contrast the two. Brian Cogan's edited book *Deconstructing* South Park*: Critical Examination of Animated Transgression* serves as a solid introduction to *South Park*. A study that would look at these two offensive media objects together would certainly have to deal with issues of animation, transgression on television, and perhaps even violence on television.

can gain a sense of false nostalgia that grants them the feeling of having lived beyond their years. They are satisfied by the raunchy, sophomoric comedy presented on the network for the very reason that it makes little sense. They get to witness the subversion of timeless content for the sake of calling everything into question. Each of these reactions helps to reinforce the cynicism inherent within the viewing audience. Rather than trying to make do with what the world and its culture has to offer, Adult Swim's Genre Pool fosters rebellious tendencies within an audience jaded by their daily lives. Viewers participate in both reverence and mockery of classical content in order to add it to their cultural awareness all the while weathering a storm of offensive content that sends many potential viewers packing.

The effectiveness of this method of attraction and maintenance for an audience is relevant and is indeed striking. When one considers how direct imitators of Adult Swim fare in ratings, however, the plot thickens. Networks and individual programs that attempt to replicate, whether intentionally or not, the qualities inherent within Adult Swim's Genre Pool never quite seem to earn the same draw as those programs contained within Adult Swim proper. These programs, whose style attempts to mimic Adult Swim's, are the subject of this thesis' conclusion. Because Adult Swim is successful while its imitators stumble, the means by which the network's Genre Pool welcomes and secures its audience are all the more fascinating.

CONCLUSION – MOST OFFENSIVE PROGRAMMING: WHY ADULT SWIM

WORKS WHILE OTHERS FLOUNDER

Over the course of this thesis, the calculated efforts which Adult Swim undertakes in order to attract and maintain a loyal audience have been brought to light. Thanks to the development of narrowcasting and content libraries in the decades leading up to its founding, Adult Swim is able to present itself as a stable network which provides its own brand of entertainment that might as well be lumped into one overarching genre. This genre's specifically tuned versions of parody, comic absurdity, and nostalgia work in tandem to entice audiences disillusioned with mainstream culture and to lock them in as lifetime fans. Because the Adult Swim Genre Pool has been so successful in drawing in such a loyal following it stands not only as a rich locus of academic study but also as a field ripe for imitators to harvest. Those who have attempted to replicate the style with which Adult Swim builds and secures its viewership, however, have thus far failed. In order to suggest inroads for further study in this area, this thesis concludes with a discussion of these other media outlets that attempt to forego Least Offensive Programming to achieve the success that Adult Swim has.

Lizardi maintains that a network called The Hub mimics Adult Swim's format, to a point.[468] Originally owned by Discovery Communications and Hasbro, the Hub began its broadcast in 2010 as "an outlet for some of Hasbro's best-known toy brands, including G.I. Joe, Transformers, and My Little Pony."[469] Along with new entries into the various

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[468] Lizardi, "The Nostalgic Revolution," 42.
[469] Joe Flint, Keach Hagey, and Paul Ziobro, "Discovery to Take Control of Hub Children's Network," *The Wall Street Journal (Online)*, September 17, 2014, http://www.wsj.com/articles/discovery-to-take-control-of-the-hub-network-1410979842.

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Hasbro brand series, the Hub offered its share of original, nostalgic content including

"shows like *Batman* (1966-68), *Happy Days* (1974-84), *Mork and Mindy* (1978-82),

Doogie Howser, M.D. (1989-93), and *The Wonder Years* (1988-93)."[470] Although the

Hub attempted to attract both an audience of children and nostalgic adults like the pairing

of Cartoon Network and Adult Swim, it was only ever nostalgic content, and that put it

directly into competition with Nick at Nite and TV Land.

Justin Peters might call this "mimicking the format while failing to understand the

form."[471] The form, in this case, seems to require that the content look sufficiently

different from its original form to allow for parody and mockery to enrich the nostalgic

emotions inherent within it, as on Adult Swim. New G.I. Joe cartoons most likely cannot

evoke nostalgia within a new generation of children because they are still living their

childhood, rather than the shiftless teens watching Adult Swim who feel that they have

missed out on the ideal childhood that the network so masterfully twists and subverts. In

order to attract a larger, more mainstream audience to combat the networks disappointing

performance, the Hub rebranded in 2014 to become Discovery Family, meaning its

potential to air subversive content like Adult Swim has *carte blanche* to has drastically

declined.[472] By widening its appeal, Discovery Family more fully adopts the mantra of

Least Offensive Programming, something that Adult Swim has seemingly rejected

outright in order to find its success.

Much of the grief encountered by the Hub's initial failure was caused by

emerging digital platforms and streaming websites, like Netflix, and their ability to buy

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[470] Lizardi, "The Nostalgic Revolution," 42.
[471] Peters, "Toon In."
[472] Flint, Hagey, and Ziobro, "Hub Children's Network."

into children's entertainment.[473] Because the Hub was not able to perform across a

variety of media, and because other companies beat them to building more significant

cross-platform brands, all it had was its generic nostalgic content which could only carry

the network's series so far.[474] Adult Swim, as evidenced by its online presence and its

impressive ratings, has apparently secured its brand's reputation, even with its offensive

content. Perhaps, more than any quality explored in this thesis alone, the offensive nature

of Adult Swim's content is its main selling point. To be sure, what has been lurking at the

fringes of this thesis is the notion that Adult Swim, in transcending Least Offensive

Programming has built a new throne for itself. The name for such a position might be

called Most Offensive Programming because it goes out of its way to offend so as to only

attract audience members hungry for its brand of cultural cannibalism. One show that has

attempted to reach this classification of Most Offensive Programming might be *South

Park*, a program that Adult Swim's creative teams cited as ground breaking and offensive

to its benefit.[475] Since Most Offensive Programming works, as evidenced by Adult Swim,

there is obviously some room for other programming to arrive on the scene to challenge

the network for its title.

Fox's Animation Domination High-Def (ADHD) did just this when it launched in

2013.[476] ADHD was Fox's attempt to create a late night block of entertainment aimed at

males aged 18 to 34 comprised of wacky cartoon programming from "outside the

traditional animation pipelines."[477] If this formula sounds familiar, it ought to. Nick

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[473] Flint, Hagey, and Ziobro, "Hub Children's Network."
[474] Albiniak, "Successful Series Are Good; Big Brands Are Better."
[475] Ramin Zahed, "Geeks Bearing Gifts," *Animation* 20, no. 5 (May 2006), 30.
[476] Jon Caramanica, "Fox's Experiment in Animated Living," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2013, sec. Arts / Television, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/arts/television/foxs-experiment-in-animated-living.html.
[477] Ibid.

Weidenfeld, one of the head developers of ADHD, was originally in the employ of Adult Swim before he was recruited by Fox to establish the network's new experiment.[478] No doubt, Weidenfeld brought much of the formula necessary to sustain Adult Swim over to his new project, but there were a number of tweaks. Chief among them, according to Waldenfeld himself, was to be the total "lack of cynicism"[479] within the ADHD content library, which, in an interview with The New York Times, he claims sets them apart from Adult Swim. In practice, however, offensive programming was the name of the game, or at least more offensive programming than mainstream Least Offensive Programming. Waldenfeld is also on record stating that ADHD's model for success was built upon "the paramount importance of youth and love and friendship and hanging out and being awesome — not ironically awesome, just awesome."[480] ADHD wanted to become the chill, fun loving network Adult Swim had so effortlessly – seemingly – become.

In the end, ADHD became too bound up in its own established mores of awesomeness. Perhaps the network did not consider the flow or interconnectivity between their relatively disparate programs. The audience ADHD was looking for was not, as some of the Fox brass assumed, "playing Xbox, [or] partying with their friends"[481] during the program block. Instead, they were watching Adult Swim, or they just were not watching ADHD. Overall, there was a lack of interplay between nostalgia and parody, mockery and reverence in its programs. Without this, the network could not have gotten too offensive without just appearing to be offensive for the sake of appearing offensive. Granted, the project was not a complete failure. As of 2015, ADHD has been shunted

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[478] Caramanica, "Fox's Experiment in Animated Living."
[479] Ibid.
[480] Ibid.
[481] Ibid.

over to Fox's FXX as a sort of content incubator.[482] Adult Swim, on the other hand, was

never just a network for offensive programming, nor was it ever just a content incubator.

Throughout its history, Adult Swim has balanced parody, comic absurdity, nostalgia,

mockery, and reverence for content of days gone past. All of this happened under a label

of Most Offensive Programming. Perhaps this is why ADHD floundered while Adult

Swim swam on. There can, by definition, only ever be one *most* offensive programming

block at a time.

While "you can never have too many COOKS,"[483] it does seem apparent that you

can have too many hubs of Most Offensive Programming. At the same time, it would be

foolish to assume that Adult Swim can exist forever, or that it will remain unopposed in

this particular sphere of entertainment. Despite Peters' optimism about the network in

2004 when he wrote that [n]o golden age lasts forever, but the good news is that with this

one, the best may be yet to come,"[484] an end might be on the horizon for Adult Swim.

Eventually, if its popularity were to grow as it has over the past 14 or so years, would not

Adult Swim eventually achieve mainstream status, and thereby lose its cache as the

pinnacle of offensive, absurdly parodic, and ironically nostalgic television? *Robot

Chicken* and *Childrens Hospital* have already won Emmy awards, after all, though this

does not necessarily signal mainstream taste. Hypothetically, if the goal of the network

were to appeal to a sensibility within the public that shuns normalcy, eventually it would

become the new normalcy. At this point, other content could potentially arise to dethrone

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[482] Michael O'Connell, "Fox Plans Animation Domination HD for Primetime in 2015, Nixes Late Night," *The Hollywood Reporter*, accessed September 3, 2014, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/fox-plans-animation-domination-hd-697392.
[483] Kelly, *Too Many Cooks*.
[484] Peters, "Toon In."

Adult Swim. For the time being, Adult Swim reigns, and its content and fans deserve further study.

Adult Swim's Genre Pool is capable of evoking a sense of nostalgia within its fan base. In the cultural cannibalism that occurs during scenes of parody throughout the network's content, a viewer can delight in the subversion and disembowelment of things that they hold dear in their minds from their childhood as well as things they have no previous encounter with. Rather than purely derisive, what lies at the heart of this parody is its reverence for the original content, something rare in mainstream media's overt attempts to appeal strictly to the most accessible audience at a given time. Out of this reverence comes the power to draw nostalgia from viewers. Through this sense of nostalgia, whether false or genuine, viewers enter into a shared space with other fans of Adult Swim and experience a wider range of content than mainstream media's search for inoffensive programming could ever provide. This shared space is sacred ground from which viewers witness excessive jibbing at the expense of classic cultural content, which endears them to both the parodic and parodied texts. Though nostalgia and mockery appear to be at opposite ends of a complicated spectrum of content and participation, within Adult Swim's broadcasting block, both are intertwined in a single gesture of veneration for content particularly reserved for younger audiences, content that grown "kidults" no longer have appropriate access to because of their adulthood. Adult Swim kids because it loves, and its fans bask in the warm glow of their favorite cartoons, action figures, and cultural heroes getting their comeuppance and, simultaneously, the spotlight they deserve.

Adult Swim has attracted such a devout following in its short existence due in large part to this combination of parody and nostalgia. So long as its content continues to encourage these feelings, it will most likely continue to maintain its loyal fan base. Such a draw might not have been possible without first having established a network to localize the content required to draw these emotions out of an audience, then forming a genre within which absurd parody could spread its wings and soar above and beyond its call of duty. If the adage "You are what you eat" has any merit, certainly the media that one consumes must define one as well. Therefore, Adult Swim's audience, who have been attracted by its offering of nostalgia and a chance at a glimpse of an ideal childhood, have become the "kidults" they are accused of being.

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