Over the last four decades the study of animation has expanded with the popularity of computer animation and CGI. Prior to this expansion, animation’s marginalized past within the age of cinema included the modern legacy of cel animation and cartoons, which at times overshadowed other animation techniques and designations and distinguished itself from live-action film. This legacy cannot be explained exclusively through technological or industrial histories because it is also an aesthetic history. Scott Bukatman, for instance, finds that cartoons and comics serve as an archetype for other “genres in which physics and conditions of everyday life are transposed into a new register (and sometimes simply revoked).” These media “set about overturning established orders and hierarchies, frequently pausing to meditate on their own possibilities.”1 The prevalence of interpretations and theories of animation that focus on the transposition of the physical “conditions of everyday life” and focus on subversion and reflexivity mark an obvious fact that is often overlooked or taken for granted in studies of animation: that many of the films and cartoons that shape animation traditions address aesthetic experience explicitly. They are able to address aesthetic experience through characterization and world-building but also through the expectation that these films will break
with order and challenge hierarchies. For this reason the treatment of animation as different from other moving image media, even when it could refer to all such media, draws attention to the dynamic relationship between aesthetics and judgment.

This is not to say that animated films tend to be about encounters with art but rather that they frequently depict or explore aesthesis, the making sense of sense experience, a process that integrates thought and feeling. Perhaps all art addresses aesthetic experience by definition, but the metamorphoses, the visual metaphors, the caricatured characters, and the fantastic worlds of animated films have distinct purchase on the dynamics between sensorial perception and conceptual understanding. This address is partly established through the absence of the sensing human body or, more precisely, through the presence of human performance that has been substantially mediated by drawings, software, and puppets. This extra mediation draws attention to the process through which perception and sense experience lead to a meaningful sense of world. Furthermore, it is not just the films doing the work. Audiences, artists, producers, critics, and theorists frequently discuss animation and create animated films with descriptions like Bukatman’s in mind. This is evident in distinctions like that made by Tom Gunning between “animation1,” which refers to “all cinematic moving images,” and “animation2,” which refers to “the genre of animation” distinct from live-action film. While animation can include any genre, Gunning’s distinction presupposes an interpretive community in which the two definitions make sense. Such accounts delineate an animation tradition that has been quite dominant in the United States and in commercial animation more generally. To clarify my own terminology: I will use the term animation to refer to the generation of movement, broadly speaking, and animated film to refer to the moving-image productions that are commonly designated animation.

The intersection of audience interpretation and animation performance, which is central to addressing aesthetic experience, has come into greater relief thanks to Donald Crafton’s recent study of American
animated film in the 1930s and 1940s. Crafton develops the idea of “animation performativity,” or “the aesthetic functioning of bodies in ways that cause events to happen onscreen, as well as the functioning of movie audience members as coanimators, as fellow performers of the films.”

This organizing principle intimates the close relationship between animated film’s formal aesthetics and the human body’s own “aesthetic functioning,” which includes perception and sense experience. Indeed, Crafton’s history illuminates the significant role of embodied, sensorial knowledge in developing animated characters and worlds, and he consistently discusses these characters and worlds as interacting with audiences.

My own use of the term address is meant to describe multiple relations between audiences, contexts, and animated films and to denote multiple directions of response and influence. Addressivity suggests understanding films as reacting to and pointing toward their contexts. Films generate original audience experiences, but films respond to and point to other experiences for audiences to consider in relation to their own. An address is an action, a direction, and a location.

But what does it really mean to say that animated films have addressed aesthetic experience both through characters and worlds and through interpretive communities and traditions? First, I do not think that animated films address aesthetic experience exclusively or systematically or that live-action films do not address aesthetic experience as well. What I do think is that animated films have functioned as an opportunity to see media differently, to watch moving images in a less scripted mode, which, of course, can become a script in itself. The imprecise, tautological term animated film functions similarly to Gunning’s “animation” in that it emphasizes cultural and aesthetic connotations over technical connotations. After all, in the digital age, film rarely refers to a material, and animated broadly denotes the generation of movement. But the term also approaches Suzanne Buchan’s theorization of “animated worlds” to the extent that animated film refers to the prominent display and experience of fabricated worlds. The open-ended term does not describe a category but instead serves as a means for designating a
cinematic mode or tradition of storytelling focused on interactions between fabricated characters and worlds.

Visual style is fundamental in this mode, but so, too, are narratives and characters that we watch move. We watch and listen to artificial characters interacting, often in surprising ways, with and within artificial worlds. The affordance of animated film, which is related to motion photography in general, includes the capacity to present and dramatize an alternative sensorial integration between subject and world. This challenge to normal sense experience accords with the general idea that animated film has been a minor form in film and media studies, at least to the extent that aesthetic experience is conceived as an exception to routine, instrumental, and procedural experience. But the standardization and massification of audiovisual aesthetics in commercial cel animation, for instance, suggests that these media are not rare exceptions but familiar alternatives. Whatever shifts in audience expectation and spectator modes of judgment can be associated with animated films, these remain largely commonplace and commercialized—even if the expectation is for overturning hierarchy and order.

To better delineate and articulate the tradition of animated films to which I refer, this chapter examines multiple theories of animation and several key animation experiences, all of which suggest that animated films address aesthetics and judgment through an interrogation of nature and a relief of conceptual burdens. Many of the films produced by Pixar Animation Studios build on this legacy of animation. Despite an ongoing interest in realistic animation, Pixar’s early features indicate that the digital era does not amount to a fixation on simulation or the suppression of playful, cartoon presentations. Whether depicting a boy frightened by his toys coming to life or a rat becoming a great chef, these films express the challenges of living in a plural world in which knowledge is limited and nature is subject to change. Furthermore, these explorations of epistemological confusion and conversion remain highly profitable and culturally relevant. This thesis complicates assumptions that family films are inherently conservative or subversive. Instead, the address of
aesthetic experience afforded by and depicted in animated films serves as an opportunity for a dialectical form of criticism engaged with the complexity and uncertainty of recent historical, cultural contexts.

AESTHETIC STORYTELLING

John Lasseter, chief creative officer at Pixar and Walt Disney Animation Studios, explains that his primary goal and artistic passion is to provide entertainment for children and families. Lasseter has described Pixar’s mode of production as one in which storytelling drives technological innovation, believability is preferable to realism, and emotion-ally compelling character growth serves as the foundation to every film. According to Lasseter, the creative process at Pixar is about building an animated world around this emotional core and finding ways of telling the story visually.6 This approach to making animated films is indebted to the Disney animation tradition, Hollywood cinematic conventions, and character animation more broadly.

Pixar’s emphasis on storytelling is historically quite significant given that it leads the industry in what Alla Gadassik refers to as the “story defense” of animation. This defense is a response to the propensity for computer animation, and its commentators, to eclipse the embodied artistic practices of animators by focusing on technical labor, automation, and simulation.7 The story defense contends that the humanity and human trace of the medium persists through the story and characters. It also dovetails with claims that digital cinema retains the legacy of film through audiovisual narrative conventions.8 In the case of Pixar the response to the highly automated, digital, disembodied context of computer-based production leans heavily on the character animation tradition. Lasseter’s emphasis on believability over realism echoes the “illusion of life” approach articulated by Disney animators Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas. As Lasseter describes it, this approach makes obvious to an audience a level of artifice that prevents mistaking the moving images for reality or live-action film, yet this approach aims at creating
movements, characters, and stories that are captivating enough for audiences to forget about that explicit artificiality to varying degrees. This approach to animated film constitutes an aesthetic storytelling that features a stylized realism suitable for bildungsroman narratives and the presentation of worlds with rules to be discovered by both characters and audiences. Such a mode of presentation expresses both the disruption and exploration associated with aesthetics and new experiences.

In general, aesthetics opposes utilitarian, procedural, or routine modes of relating to the world and the things within it. But the opposition between aesthetic and determinative judgments is hardly fixed and pure. Film, whether digital or analog, is one of the best examples of how fluidly these modes operate in modern contexts in that moving images have the capacity to be experienced as a precise historical trace but are not confined to this experience. Consider, for example, how many instructors explain film theory’s adoption of the concept of the index by referring to bullet holes and footprints, which bear an imprint of a past impression comparable to chemical photography. Bullet holes and footprints can serve as compelling evidence of past events, but they do not need to be read this way. To refer to the event of encountering a footprint as an aesthetic experience means considering that the print’s appearance could just as well resemble a face or conjure up any sort of image, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Aesthetics is about the particularity of such subjective experiences, but, as historians and theorists have described, experience is shot through with numerous historical, cultural, and bodily factors. The particulars of unique individual experience intersect with generalizable accounts.

For example, Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *The Railway Journey* is a frequent referent in cinema and media studies because he describes historically how people learned to see through the window of a moving train through a kind of “panoramic perception,” and this mode of looking lent itself to a variety of commercial and technological modes of seeing and relating to the world. The specific feelings and affects prompted by looking out a train window are generalized to mark the age of modernity. This kind of
historical argument accords with the history of cinema presented in Mary Ann Doane’s *Emergence of Cinematic Time*, which attributes cinema’s fascination with indexicality and contingency to the context of modernity. The rationalization of time under capitalism and industrialization created conditions that made film’s indexical capacity particularly meaningful in the sense that film enables people to think about the contingency of time by witnessing and presenting the seemingly arbitrary details of temporal life and reality. Of course, Doane details how this function of cinema is also a modern form of rationalization.\(^\text{10}\) The point here is that experience is itself contingent on historical and cultural variables, and more specifically, cinema, even after narrative forms became dominant, addresses modernity by facilitating the contemplation of modernity—that is, the rationalization of time and space among other aspects.

In relation to the arguments of Schivelbusch and Doane, cel animation (and other profilmic techniques with frame-by-frame manipulation) seems equally invested in modernity and the rationalization of time given its construction of moving characters and things in space and time. Live action, then, is not cinema’s (or animation’s) only mode of contemplating modernity. As with the basic footprint and bullet hole examples of indexicality, the moving image entails multiple modes of contemplation. It can crystallize the chaos of reality in a recorded order, and it can generate dreamlike free movement through highly regimented fabrications. How moving images are judged, assessed, valued, and used depends on numerous contextual relationships. One person’s view of contingency could be another person’s view of cosmic order or vice versa or both at the same time, depending on the context and the belief systems involved. I raise this point because, as Bukatman’s comment intimates, animated films have on many occasions been judged differently from live-action film even when they share a basic photographic ontology. In other words, in the context of modernity animated films have become central to aesthetic and technical styles that challenge the hierarchy and fixedness of concepts and rules. This tendency can in turn suspend a viewer’s judgment of that world. This
formulation implies that a subject relying on a given mode of knowing a world could very well be wrong, which further implies a case of pluralism (multiple viewpoints and worlds) or epistemological vulnerability. And as animation and cinema technologies conflate in the digital age, storytelling conventions become more significant as guiding elements for audience expectations and evaluations.

The issue of judgment is often raised in modern contexts that suffer from relativism or the complexities of multicultural democracy in which the goal of inclusivity brings with it the challenge of incommensurability. Judgment commonly refers to the process of reconciling particulars—experiences, cases, events, actions, and so forth—with generalizable concepts or rules. As networks of media and migration alter national demographics and opinions, it can be incredibly difficult to locate stable traditions and values that are widely accepted. How are particular cases, events, and actions to be judged reasonably in such a postfoundational political climate when it is very difficult to find shared lines of reasoning? This diagnosis often leads political theorists to concerns over heightened conflicts between subcultures, cultures, and nation-states. But the issue of judgment within modernity is even broader when we consider the challenges brought about by rapid technological innovation. Not only do these include social and psychological challenges but legal challenges, too, as legislation struggles to keep pace with technical practices.

Animated films have become a mode for explicitly addressing the instabilities involved in processes of judging, for knowing and evaluating the particulars of the world. This mode resembles descriptions of aesthetic judgment as an activity lacking determinative concepts. Furthermore, the activity of judging artificial worlds, or not knowing precisely how to judge them, is an exercise for dealing with constant newness and a lack of tradition. This correlates with philosophical and political discussions surrounding modernity and epistemological difficulties, and it approaches claims found in film theory more generally. The aesthetic storytelling of animated films becomes a conventional mode for contemplating the unconventional. As the following discussion
will elaborate in more detail, this formulation gains distinct character in the history of animation theory. And in subsequent chapters this formulation crystallizes through specific aesthetic concepts read through Pixar’s films. But first, I want to clarify my conception of aesthetics and how it will serve as a critical methodology throughout this project. This will set up the question of how exactly animation’s address of aesthetic judgment has been articulated in animation and film theory.

PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS AND CRITICISM

Without committing to a single definition or theory of aesthetics, this project is influenced by recent strands of scholarship in philosophical aesthetics, all of which owe considerable debt to the formulation of aesthetic judgment in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. When making the case for thinking of aesthetic experience as a critical resource, the basic claim is that aesthetic experience challenges habits of thought and action, and it illuminates how experience itself is constructed. In this vein *Critique of Judgment* has been read as a work that attempts to reconcile Kant’s moral philosophy with an aesthetic relation to the world and as a work that initiates a critique of Kant’s own transcendental logic and subject-oriented position. Steven Shaviro argues that this “critical aestheticism” can be observed in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze and that it offers valuable insight into contemporary developments in media, art, technology, science, and economics.14

In these philosophical accounts, instead of a subject who thinks and legislates, the subject of aesthetic experience feels and responds.15 According to Kant’s well-known formulation, aesthetic judgments are disinterested and reflective. A person judging a beautiful object, for example, has no interest in it and finds no purpose for it but likes it all the same. Furthermore, that person finds no concept, no practical theory learned from society or science to explain the liking of the object. It is not that the qualities of beauty reside in the object, but the judgment is ultimately based on subjective feelings informed by a particular
experience with the world, and, in Kant’s formulation, this leads to sup-
positions about shared feelings or a sensus communis.\textsuperscript{16} Philosophers such as Whitehead and Deleuze are not Kantians, but they build on Kantian aesthetics to critique philosophy itself. The aesthetic idea (especially beauty) is that the world and the things in it give shape to our subjectiv-
ity and experience regardless of whether we know these things rationally. This radical empiricism revises philosophical distinctions between epistemology and ontology by claiming that experience and existence are not so different at the level of objects affecting each other.

What I take from this discourse is the notion that aesthetic experi-
ence provides opportunities to critique dominant forms of overrational-
ized experience and existence but also that new phenomena and envi-
ronmental changes are registered aesthetically every day. This everyday perceptual and emotional knowledge informs a variety of performances and art practices, including character animation. In turn, aesthetics as criticism refers to the process of examining these performances and the knowledge informing them. Unlike the radical empiricism of Deleuze and Whitehead, however, my approach retains the concept of judgment as an aesthetic activity that is proper to spectators and theorists and is often raised by animated films, especially Pixar’s.

Sianne Ngai’s work on the aesthetic categories and “ugly feelings” that pervade late capitalism is the most developed deployment of aes-
thetics as a critical methodology to date. Ngai’s work recasts the philos-
ophy of aesthetics around the feelings and emotions typical of modern consumer life. Instead of analyzing these through the well-trod concepts of beauty and the sublime, Ngai considers diminutive concepts. Many of these—for example, animatedness, cuteness, and zaniness—resonate with the growth of animated media, and they affirm the relevance of animation for diagnosing recent cultural developments. While I do not believe that the Pixar films I analyze square with Ngai’s accounts precisely, my articulation of the relationship between aesthetic experience and judgment does follow Ngai’s description of aesthetic objectification or the bond between form and judgment.\textsuperscript{17}
In short, experience and judgment function together, but we tend to describe (and obscure) them in a two-part process that occurs when we contemplate and discuss our feelings and sensations. First, there are the feelings and the affects of experience, and then there is the objectification of those feelings and affects involved in communication and judgment. A person experiences beauty or cuteness or interest, and then the person tells others (or herself) about the experience or the thing that triggered it. The experience has become an object, and this objectification binds the experience (beauty or cuteness or interest) to the initial object—the beautiful flower, the cute child, or the interesting painting. Art, then, can serve as a way to think about experience itself by displaying its objectification. At a basic level we make objects when we talk about feelings. The activity of judging inheres in the naming of our feelings and the events that trigger them and then in the communication of that with others. This typically includes the presumption that what is true for me should or could be true for others. Furthermore, the activity of objectification and judgment can generate new feelings and redirect ongoing sensations. Breaking this process into parts actually misrepresents the continuous and cumulative nature of experience and judgment. There is no clear line where experience ends and judgment begins.

Animated films display objectified feelings and affects through characters but also through fabricated worlds with undisclosed norms and rules, and this presentation asks audiences to recalibrate their expectations and interpretative skills for the fictional world. The narratives that take place in these worlds likewise portray characters reconfiguring how they understand their world after having encounters with new and surprising phenomena that challenge their established worldview. These stories of discovery and transformation are certainly designed to appeal to children learning about their environments, but they also suspend mature judgment to the extent that judgment relies on criteria (or expectations) and understanding (interpretation). The activity of judging artificial worlds, or not knowing precisely how to judge them, and then watching characters engaged in comparable dilemmas serves
as an exercise for audiences dealing with newness and a lack of tradition. It presents the imagination, that which reflects on what is not present, as a creative resource not just for making and imagining new worlds but for adjusting to a constantly changing world. As the critical readings of Pixar films mentioned in this book’s introduction bear out, this exercise of the imagination dovetails with the ethos of the creative class working within entertainment and technology industries. But while this aesthetic culture generates new market opportunities and encourages worker innovation and flexibility, it also embeds foundational ideas about political possibility that are not invested in reproducing neoliberal culture or post-Fordist economic practices.

For one thing, this address of aesthetics is not implied or latent in the films. It is explicit and beckons criticism. It is not surprising that Ed Catmull discusses training employees at Pixar to see the world as artists or, in other words, to develop the aesthetic side of judgment. Such training is a form of discipline appropriate to the neoliberal era given its emphasis on individual creativity. Perhaps more than ever, creativity and ingenuity are understood as the responsibility of labor, and the technology industries amplify this through the production of new tools for producing tools and by leaving the potential uses of said tools for consumers (laborers) to discover. The address of aesthetic experience and creativity that occurs in popular media like that of Pixar certainly acculturates audiences to the labor of creativity, but it also presents this culture to audiences in distorted and dramatized forms for their own contemplation. The idea here is that the films are a form of entertainment art that serves as a metadiscourse and facilitates an exploration or interrogation of customs and habits. Poplar entertainment often presents metacommentary on the function of entertainment in culture, and Pixar’s productions demonstrate this through their narratives and characters, as well as digital aesthetics. In short, to better see and sense how pervasive the role of aesthetics is in our highly mediated, digital, global, and neoliberal context, what better way than to analyze highly aestheticized, obviously artificial, synthetic worlds that tend to feature narratives about aesthetic experience?
Of course, animated film, or any art form for that matter, does not have a monopoly on aesthetic experience. Objects in general cannot be judged exclusively in utilitarian terms. There is always the possibility to remove an object from the realm of utility or consumption and to judge it aesthetically. This does not mean placing your hammer in an art gallery, but it may mean noticing that your hammer has a pleasant, even beautiful, look that has nothing to do with an appreciation of its function. Such a transformation of the relation between subject and object prompts questions about the appearance of the world: how do these relations and the concepts that organize them change? Creative media often reflect on such experiences, but animated films have offered overt references to this experience through depictions of metamorphosis and visual gags, as well as through their created worlds. Animated film has a tradition of making obvious the aesthetic worlding of an aesthetic world. The creation of diegetic time and space through cinematic and animation techniques is a kind of worlding, but so, too, is the revision and creation of perceptual and conceptual rules and routines. This is an abstract way of describing animated worlds like that of the television show *The Flintstones*, in which elephant trunks serve as gasoline pumps and so on. This kind of animation offers an aesthetic experience about the role of aesthetic experience in everyday life. It investigates or plays with the process of developing concepts and rules about how the world works, and it makes explicit that such rules can be revised when our experience demands it or when we are inclined to use our imaginations to do so. In short, there are multiple experiences of interest here: the experience of watching animated film and the experience of characters depicted within the animated diegesis, as well as how the latter resonates with the former.

**MUSICAL WHALES AND HUNGRY DINOSAURS**

There are plenty of examples of this kind of storytelling, but a rather straightforward case is the Disney cartoon *The Whale Who Wanted to Sing at
A Tradition and Theory of Animated Film

The Met (1946). In this animated short a whale possesses the remarkable ability to sing and is eventually harpooned and killed by a ship captain who believes the whale swallowed multiple opera singers. Other human characters who hear the whale are enthralled with pleasure from the music. The cartoon humorously exaggerates the notion that whale communication is a kind of singing, and it explores the power of music, song, and voice. The short imagines what it would mean socially and audiovisually if a whale could really sing. This includes a depiction of Willie the whale on stage that challenges performance customs and the laws of physics (Figure 2). And this fantastic sequence includes depictions of the whale’s impact on the senses of the audience (Figure 3). Sense experience is central to understanding the humorous cartoon physics and social commentary. This story adumbrates Pixar’s Ratatouille, which depicts a rat...
who is a great chef and explores how the reality of a rat-chef would challenge assumptions about taste—in both the sensorial and social senses.

An earlier example of interest is Winsor McCay’s *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), which develops several important tropes, including the animation of legendary creatures and the interjection of the animator into the animated world. The hyperbolic, fictional encounter between McCay and Gertie raises the question of what new experiences are possible in the modern, cinematic era. It does this by portraying a dinosaur character interacting with its drawn environment and with its creator, and it is worth noting that Gertie’s first actions upon emerging from her cave include eating a large rock and then a tree (Figure 4). This illuminates how McCay imagines his dinosaur feeling (and feeling about) its world: the world is food that the dinosaur likes to eat.
This rather obvious formulation gains new meaning in the digital era in the film *Jurassic Park* (1993), which includes an homage to McCay’s *Gertie*. *Jurassic Park* introduces the cloning and modification of dinosaur DNA to its main characters and its audience through a short explanatory film that features cartoon animation. Alluding to showmanship reminiscent of McCay, the character John Hammond sets up and interacts with the short film (Figure 5). Figure 6 shows the extent to which the cartoon dinosaur presented in Hammond’s short film resembles a Gertie-like dinosaur possibly making her way back to a cave. Even though there is not much CGI in *Jurassic Park*, the use of CGI effectively parallels the creation of dinosaurs in the diegesis. Both are forms of animation, and Hammond’s short film associates both of these with the historical marker of McCay’s Gertie. The final parallel is that, like Gertie, the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park see their new environment as
Figure 5 (Top). *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1993). John Hammond as showman interacts with Jurassic Park’s introductory short film. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2012. DVD.

Figure 6 (Bottom). *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1993). The cartoon dinosaur in the park’s introductory film resembles Gertie. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2012. DVD.
one that can be eaten. In addition to the drama of dinosaurs eating the human characters, the film includes a scene in which a triceratops has fallen ill after eating the nonnative plants in the park. The question of the dinosaurs’ fit within the modern world is one of the film’s fundamental tensions.

The thematic and visual parallels of these examples involve explorations of couplings between physical environmental rules and social, cultural, and artistic conventions. Focused on taste and eating, these examples are representative of how characters explore worlds through their senses. Furthermore, these examples—cross-species interactions, singing whales, cooking rats, and genetically engineered dinosaurs—highlight animation’s association with the creation of life and an association with the transformation of life and all of the norms and rules we deploy to organize it. Animated worlds do not need to depict fantasy or science fiction, but when addressing aesthetic experience, they have tended to depict processes of becoming, of transformation, and of the failure of epistemological mastery. That is, not only do they depict the experience of learning the rules of an environment, or of a community (e.g., what to eat and what not to eat); they also depict moments in which characters discover that they have been wrong about what they thought the rules were. This builds on the humor and freedom associated with animated films. This is not the freedom of a sovereign subject permitted to act as she pleases, however. Instead, such depictions refer to the freedom of a subject who must use her imagination to reckon with a plural world, a world made up of things and relations that are not of a person’s choosing. These characters are seemingly thrown into worlds, and they must use their perception and senses to learn about their environment and community. I am tempted to refer to Jurassic Park as an animated film given its themes about humans and dinosaurs misjudging their environment. As will become clear in the subsequent discussion, however, live-action elements ground the film in conceptually significant ways.
ANIMATION HISTORY: A FEW NOTABLE EXPERIENCES AND THEORIES

Although I recognize that animation scholars are keen to avoid comparing animated film to live-action film because this obscures animated film’s distinct vocabulary or film’s status as a form of animation, I also recognize that animated film’s distinct terms, conventions, and effects develop in dialogue with other media. The foregoing discussion of aesthetic experience in animated films emphasizes exploration and acknowledges rules and laws that are subject to change and revision. For some readers this treatment may evoke the role of animation in video games. While I trust that this discussion has purchase on that field, my current considerations do not include the complications raised by interactive gameplay. In fact, the scope of this project is decidedly narrow given the expansion of moving image media more generally, and this scope is informed by specific theories and commentaries from the history of animation. A brief survey of these, rather than working through a number of individual films and shorts, will better delineate how this animation tradition is generated through reception and production dynamics.

The current global, commercial, and convergent structure of popular entertainment provides its own series of suggestions for how to watch animated films. This includes building on the legacy of photo-indexicality and the myth of total cinema through the photorealism goals of computer animation and digital capture. But the emergence of computer animation into the feature film platform during the 1990s and 2000s did not serve these goals exclusively. It also presented an opportunity for challenging the fixation on simulating photographic cinema, but this tends to garner less attention from scholars and audiences given the marketing and media hype surrounding photorealism and the uncanny valley, or those presentations that trouble discernment between biological and mechanical movement. These foment a lucrative technological race to produce images that simulate human perception and discernment of photographic film or even real life. The pursuit
of photorealism through computer animation can be considered an ironic reversal of the early history of cinema in which the photographic nature of film prompted some audiences to question its status as an artistic medium. This in turn led many filmmakers to conspicuously display their craft and creativity through cinematic illusion and tricks. In reverse order many computer animators conspicuously simulate photographic realism to achieve recognition in visual media fields. Photography may have relieved human hands from the work of visually recording reality and enabled them to pursue abstraction, but the computer has renewed interest in the mythic quest to draw reality.

But then many studios, including Pixar, employ a stylized realism that utilizes cartoonish exaggeration as well as the simulation of naturally occurring movement. Pixar’s stylized realism will at times simulate the look of natural phenomena, such as flowing water, with impressive precision but then feature anthropomorphic animal characters with caricatured features. The first act of WALL-E presents a meticulous level of photorealism in depicting a desolate, waste-filled Earth that functions in tension with the cartoonish humans who appear in the film’s second act. This stylized realism differs significantly from straight photorealism, which is problematically exemplified by the 2001 production Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within (Sakaguchi and Sakakibara). Final Fantasy remains a prominent historical marker because it received significant attention from scholars and computer animation aficionados for claiming to fully commit to photorealism and then failing—in terms of aesthetic goals and box office.

Intrigued by this failure in juxtaposition to the success of other early computer-animated films, Vivian Sobchack asks: “If we’re willing to accept animation’s ‘irreality’ in its representation of human beings (a tradition that continues in the CGI of Toy Story and Monsters, Inc.), why, then, is there such a problem with accepting Final Fantasy’s ‘hyper-real’ simulation of human beings?”26 In addition to identifying Pixar’s productions as adhering to an alternative tradition from that of strict simulation, this question leads Sobchack into an analysis of audience
expectations and judgment and to two further questions: What do we want from animation? And what does animation want for itself? These are inferential questions in which general expectations and desires are derived from particular examples, but they also illuminate animation’s address of aesthetics. To answer the first question, Sobchack quotes a comment by Miguel Angel Diaz Gonzales on IMDb that explains why Final Fantasy failed:

Animation films are entertaining when we know that they are animation films. They are something different from reality, and all the imperfections we find in them don’t count. All the holes we ... find are filled with our imagination.... But, when the level of perfection of an animation film crosses the line between animation and reality, then we change our scale of values, and we judge the film by comparing it with non-animation film. [This] is when we notice ... that there is still an abyss between a real and a virtual actor.27

Diaz Gonzales’s comment offers a clear distinction in expectations between animation and nonanimation and how these expectations influence the way audiences assess what they view. This notion of different expectations runs through Sobchack’s essay, and it runs through traditional distinctions between animation and live action within film studies and film theory. Sobchack’s elaboration on Diaz Gonzales’s comment is also worth quoting:

What the majority of spectators seem to want and value from animation is not a gloss on “metaphysical effort” but rather, as film theorist Noël Carroll has said of “trick films,” “metaphysical release”—that is, the vicarious playing out of the “plasmatic” possibilities for subverting and/or substituting the laws of physics (and here I might add, the laws of mathematical calculation) with the laws of imagination.28

Animation’s substitution of the laws of physics for those of the imagination can certainly elicit something like “metaphysical release,” but an animated world is of a larger spatiotemporal order than a momentary, situational gag. A sustained animated world, as Diaz Gonzales and Sobchack indicate, produces expectations that differ from films with
fantasy components or hybridized features with live action and animation. The laws of a fully animated world are discovered over the course of the film to a substantially greater degree than live action. Sobchack’s use of the IMDb comment reveals the functionality of distinct interpretive traditions for animated and nonanimated films, and it shows that this tradition of judging animation involves dispelling many assumptions about the givenness of physical laws and standards of measure—“the imperfections we find in them don’t count.”

To answer what does animation want, Sobchack, following classic animated films such as Pinocchio (Luske, Sharpsteen, et al. 1940), as well as Final Fantasy, concludes that it is either to become real or to become the ultimate illusion, indecipherable from reality. The rhetoric of ultimate illusion contributes significantly to the downfall of Final Fantasy, in addition to its internal diegetic contradictions, as Sobchack explains: “we, as viewers, also get caught up in the film’s ‘argument of unlimited (photorealist) development.’ And thus we spend a large portion of our own time (dare I pun?) ‘rendering’ judgment and ‘splitting’ ontological hairs. Unfortunately, then, our attention—and that of the filmmakers—is greatly misdirected from a focus on ‘the illusion of life’ to the ‘dis-illusion of life’.”

Given that the film’s promotion and marketing hinged on interest in photorealism (especially the protagonist’s hair), it was hyperbolically judged according to photorealism, which is incongruous with the animation tradition based on fewer or alternative laws and standards. Sobchack’s focus on the effect of this rhetoric on viewing experience reminds us of the film’s industrial context but also the tensions within film history around perfecting technologies of illusion and adhering to dramatic conventions. Clearly, studios and producers want to navigate this field profitably—they are supposed to know their audiences. The failure of Final Fantasy and its viewers to build on the illusion-of-life cartooning tradition to which Sobchack alludes is not simply a commercial failure. When considered in conjunction with the success of Pixar, it marks the perpetuation of an animation tradition that judges animated worlds differently from live-action worlds.
To delineate an animated film tradition with expectations and aesthetic experiences vastly different from live-action film perpetuates a narrow definition of animated film that overlooks the diversity of animated media forms. With respect to film studies the history that traces divisions between early trick films and live action, between fantasy and realism, and then between classical narrative cinema and those experimental or medium-conscious productions that expose their constructed artificiality has created a contradictory set of positions for animated film. Many animated films are described as naive fantasy, yet these films also make for efficacious propaganda and pedagogical material. Animation production is supposedly “other” to the photographic, indexical production of live action, yet profilmic animation (any mode of animation that utilizes frame-by-frame photographs of manipulated things—nonhuman or human) is ontologically equivalent to live action; it is equally photographic and indexical. As Suzanne Buchan observes, this state of affairs can be attributed to a confluence of dominant forces in film studies that include an ideology of realism, the industrial-backed dominance of narrative cinema, and the fact that the animated film canon taught and studied remains dominated by male animators and industrial production. Additionally, the digital shift in cinema has tended to conflate digital production with animation, which eclipses diverse animation practices. This conflation builds on the misrepresentation of animation attributed to the popularity of animated cartoons and to the commercial and cultural influence of the Disney Company.

In addition to these factors the history of film theory contributes to this narrow animation tradition through the dominance of ideas about the photographic basis of cinema. On the one hand, a photographic understanding of cinema emphasizes the construction of history, a reconnection with the external world, and the ethical promise of the camera as a machine for historical specificity—a tool for record keeping and a witness to history. On the other hand, theories of cinematic motion or animation are typically more forward-looking and present-focused.
than photo-indexicality or strict theories of correspondence, which privilege historical record and looking backward. Complicating this bifurcation, however, is the fact that cinematic realism relies on both photographic historicity and cinematic motion in conjunction with artifice or aesthetic styling. Photography and film may have an affinity with historiography, but, as recent scholarship on André Bazin demonstrates, this does not preclude an equally prominent affinity with aesthetic styling, even within the domain of realism. Not only are there numerous realisms, then, but they include various forms of artifice and fabrication. The lesson here is that delineating the key attributes of the narrow animation tradition epitomized by Sobchack's discussion of Diaz Gonzales's IMDb comment is likely to be more nuanced than a simple distinction between nonanimated and animated film.

Consider, for instance, Bazin's analyses of long takes and depth of field. These aesthetic techniques are thought to enact a mode of realism by engaging the attention of spectators and enabling them to choose where and how to focus their attention. This mode of realism preserves the "ambivalence of reality" within the moving image, which is, inevitably, a framed and stylized production. These aesthetics preserve the freedom to interpret a moving image that is ambiguous and indeterminate, and in doing so they approach a familiar, quotidian indeterminacy and freedom that we experience whenever we explore reality through perception. Hence, Bazin finds a philosophical expression of everyday life, with its uncertainty, ambiguity, and need for interpretation, through an examination of Welles's Citizen Kane. Without debating the extent to which the fictional reality presented in Citizen Kane is ambiguous and open to interpretation, I want to acknowledge that this formulation resembles the reflective, aesthetic judgment that escapes utilitarian logic and determinate procedures and, indeed, underscores the ambiguity of reality.

Animated films are equally capable of such philosophical expression, but the ambiguity experienced when watching a cel animation film, for instance, tends to function differently from that described by Bazin. In
Diaz Gonzales’s IMDb comment and Sobchack’s elaboration of it, animation’s lawlessness is not described as ambiguous reality but as “irreality” or as “different from reality.” The ambiguity of animation, in terms of viewer experience, seems to exceed the threshold for cinematic reality. The philosophical implication is that instead of elucidating the ambiguity of reality at the core of everyday experience, animation tends to elucidate ambiguity more generally, without as much or as many references to a concept of reality. Given that reality is not a neutral concept, this is a significant distinction. An experience of ambivalent or ambiguous reality, by retaining greater referentiality to a familiar reality or common world, does not interrogate reality or nature to the extent that media experiences that are not “of reality” are capable.

Animated films certainly bear a strong relation to reality. But within the traditions of animated cartoons and stop-motion cinematography the theoretical descriptors of animation often have more destabilizing connotations than the terms ambivalence and ambiguity. Sergei Eisenstein famously compared the protean quality of Disney’s early animated films to plasma and to fire, which express the “unity of oppositions,” forms of becoming and unbecoming. The dynamics of movement imbue the medium of drawn animation with a capacity to both continuously present a reality and subvert it. 36 Like Eisenstein, most contemporary animation theorists do not define animation in terms of movement alone but movement in tension with static elements. At the core of the animation tradition that I am mapping is the presence of a destabilizing, unresolved dialectic. 37

Animation historian and theorist Esther Leslie uses Walter Benjamin’s term petrified unrest to describe animated film’s dialectical relationship with social, political, and economic formations. Since animators frequently use drawings and other static forms to indicate movement, their work relies on human perception mixed with the knowledge that makes sense of perception; for example, the contour shape of a flexed muscle can convey movement without any actual movement. Unlike the relative autonomy of photography, drawing emphasizes how human concepts and
understanding give vitality to images. Since the movement of film and profilmic elements works with static markers of movement to convey a promise of possibility and change, Leslie concludes that this practice correlates with the alienating, industrial promises of capitalism and a contradictory expression of stagnation within movement: “Animation’s petrified unrest is a formal sign of its ambivalent renderings of the real—it is stuck in a form of life and world simulation, which can be read symptomatically—or critically—as an inability to move on socially, to sketch out new lives and worlds.”

For Leslie animation is equally capable of interrogating nature—exposing the alienation of capitalism and modern life—and naturalizing those same cultural practices and ideals: “Animation is the medium that allows for a dramatization of a skirmish with nature. This skirmish is not the fascistic one of subjugation. It is rather a wrestling with what is natural about nature, and what is historical, which is to say, changeable, about it.” Leslie’s theory of animation engages with the usual questions in film theory about artifice, history, nature, and reality, but instead of photo-indexicality, the primary terms are movement and dialectics. Drawn animation relies on human concepts to convey motion through static form, but animated drawings also rely on mechanical movement and automation. This gives drawn animation a different or other nature and this otherworldliness does not express age (i.e., the historicity of photo-indexicality) as straightforwardly as live-action film. Unless a technical innovation gives away the precise period of production, there are typically fewer historical markers, or indices, in animated film. Leslie does not deny the historicity of animated film but declares it messy and animated itself: “Animation evokes history, plays with it, undermines it, subverts it, but it does not have it, just as it does not have nature. It has second nature. Or different nature. It has different history. It models the possibility of possibility.” Animation, as an artistic practice, is capable of subversive forms given its mix of human concepts, perceptual knowledge, and automatic, technological processes, but this attribute also equips it to work in the service of dominant
ideology. In other words, when history and nature are thrown into obvious play—"a dramatization of a skirmish"—there is a temptation to acknowledge what remains as a stable, reliable, natural ground.

For Leslie animation operates through a mix of conceptualized and unconceptualized forms. It is at once unfamiliar and strange and very familiar and natural. It invokes the phenomenon of not ever really being able to encounter the new because encounters rely on concepts and perceptual knowledge. The totally new is either unnoticed or utterly confusing. Animated worlds that do not seem to have the rules of reality or nature do end up having many of these rules. Hence, they naturalize as much as they denaturalize. Following Eisenstein and others, Leslie's dialectical approach connects the experience of viewing animation to social and political contexts that may not appear to be immediately relevant to an animated film that is expected and designed to be disconnected from reality. This disconnection from reality itself can provide artistic expression of modern forms of alienation attributed to industry, consumerism, or the pervasive technological mediation of digital culture.

Paul Wells uses a very similar articulation to define animated film's modernist legacy: "More than any other means of creative expression animation embodies a simultaneity of (creatively) re-constructing the order of things at the very moment of critically de-constructing them." In the context of modernity the animated cartoon and the abstract, nonrepresentational animated film encourage audiences to attend to the medium of animation itself. The forms of transformation and becoming, and the comic elements of cartoons, effectively subvert and challenge the solidity of orthodoxy and convention. Wells claims that although grounded in artistic responses to the mechanization, urbanization, and commercialization of modernity, the modernist aesthetics of animated film have not been exhausted: "such art becomes a symbolic inflection of changing models of experience and is not confined to any one historical period, but social moments which insist upon revising existing rules and consensual guidelines which have arguably
been naturalised in a way that sustains outmoded ideological frameworks.” Here, then, the modernist tradition of animation can be understood as having a basis in “changing models of experience.” Representational cartoons tend to incorporate these revisionary and transformational elements into narratives, as well as visual sequences.

When informed by the comments of Leslie and Wells, the specific tradition of animation under discussion can be defined as including an expectation that reality and nature will be thoroughly challenged, that there will be “a dramatization of a skirmish with nature” to use Leslie’s phrase. And the dialectical challenge to nature offered, which frequently contains a narrative or series of gags that challenge the diegetic nature of the animated world, correlates with real-world contests over what is natural. Leslie focuses on capitalism’s claims for naturalness, but any ideology that appeals to the status of nature can be addressed through animated film. As Wells suggests, this kind of animation is well-suited for addressing “changing models of experience.”

Although not a theorist of animation, Stanley Cavell provides another famous, predigital example of an experience with animated film that reinforces this particular tradition of animation but also considers cinematic experience with respect to philosophical questions. Cavell’s comments are like those of Bazin’s in that they help delineate more precisely the subtle but significant distinctions between animated and live-action films. Focusing on cinematic experience more than technical specifications, Cavell omits animation from his reflections on film’s ontology and its relation to reality. The omission is poignant because it indicates that he deems watching animation a very different experience from watching live-action film, even though the modernist formulation of animated film as addressing “changing models of experience” approaches Cavell’s interest in film as addressing the skepticism prevalent in modernity.

In the expanded edition of The World Viewed, in a dialogue of much interest to animation studies scholars, Alexander Sesonske questions Cavell about the world that animated cartoons bring into view. Cavell
is quick to explain that animated cartoons do not project the world and therefore, do not accord with his definition of cinema: “a succession of automatic world pictures.” They do not bear the same relation to reality and perception as live-action cinema. Nevertheless, when describing the “animated world” that cartoons do present, Cavell describes his experience in terms that evoke a more lawless form of aesthetic judgment: “The difference between this world and the world we inhabit is not that the world of animation is governed by physical laws or satisfies metaphysical limits which are just different from those which condition us; its laws are often quite similar. The difference is that we are uncertain when or to what extent our laws and limits do and do not apply (which suggests that there are no real laws at all).” It is the uncertainty of applying laws that concerns me here. The first sentence accords with Leslie’s dialectical understanding of animation: strange animated worlds have similar laws to our own and therein can contribute to naturalizing social contexts and ideology. But Cavell adds that the viewer’s experience of not knowing when and what laws will be applied/naturalized indicates a real absence of laws. Comparable to Sobchack’s analysis of *Final Fantasy*, Cavell locates an intense uncertainty in the animation viewing experience that contributes to a general suspension of judgment of the animated world.

Cavell’s emphasis on the radical lawlessness that he perceives in animated cartoons is informed by his experience of live-action film. It is unlikely that Cavell would describe live-action film as providing viewers with certainty in contrast to the uncertainty of animated cartoons, but the implication is that there is less uncertainty in live-action film. The viewer of an obviously animated world has less recourse to the concepts and perceptual experience that typically define a sense of reality—including the familiar ambiguities of perception. The hyperbolic absence of laws or nature explicitly invokes aestheticized judgment, a mode of making sense of experience with little direct application of concepts and procedures. Kantian aesthetic judgment has a significant role in Cavell’s philosophy, which includes the study of art.
and literature because, Cavell contends, philosophy is like aesthetic experience in that it aspires to objective answers through impossibly subjective means. Cavell turns to aesthetic judgment to explain how art and its criticism escape the logical positivism of analytic philosophy. Cavell’s neglect of animation, then, is appropriately tied to experience because, for him, cinema’s live-action projection of reality has the “force of art.” The projection of reality that Cavell experiences through film addresses the philosophical problems associated with modern skepticism that are exacerbated by logical positivism. As D.N. Rodowick explains, for Cavell, photography and film “pose both the condition of skepticism and a possible road of departure, the route back to our conviction in reality.”

We can understand this through Cavell’s claims that film presents a “human something” in a way that is roughly analogous to how all humans are present to each other in a limited sense: “It is an incontestable fact that in a motion picture no live human being is up there. But a human something is, and something unlike anything else we know.” The moving image on the screen breaks an object or person from its worldly context while presenting it as an object or person to be considered by viewers. Since the experience is elicited through a screen, there is no reciprocation; the viewer cannot access the other presented, and that “other” does not know who sees him or her. The time and space separation between actors onscreen and audiences exaggerates the basic separation between persons experienced every day. As political theorist Davide Panagia explains, for Cavell this correlates with the basic incommensurability that troubles subjective human experience: “our willingness to regard an other requires our admittance that we can never get at what is fully human in an other and that the best we can do is to see a human as a human something.” Cavell treats knowing the world in comparable terms: “Whereas what skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be accepted; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged.” Cavell’s
comments about film describe the medium as a subjective opportunity for thinking about our objective, skeptical condition.

For Cavell film’s world projections, its affected presentations of reality onscreen that are at once present but absent, are an exaggerated rendering of modern experience in which we know we have limited knowledge of each other and the world around us. On this topic Cavell also stresses the automaticity of the motion camera and its capacity to relieve a “burden of perception,” to use Rodowick’s phrase. Film’s automaticity fulfills the human wish to view the world as it is and remain unseen. Films do this “not because they are escapes into fantasy, but because they are reliefs from private fantasy and its responsibilities; from the fact that the world is already drawn by fantasy.” The experience of cinema that Cavell appreciates relieves humans from the expanded sense of artifice unleashed by a modern understanding of subjectivity as an epistemological problem. Perception becomes burdensome precisely when it is understood as a kind of personal fabrication, which, in the passage above, Cavell compares to drawing. Rather than settling for logical approaches that only resolve verifiable phenomena, film offers an opportunity to think about unverifiable and incommensurable knowledge and experience. The idea is not that film relieves humans from this condition but that film relieves humans from the burden of this condition by enabling them to experience it in an exaggerated, aestheticized form.

There are animation forms that approach reality in this way, but Cavell and Sesonske’s discussion is focused on animated cartoons designed to do something different from conventional live-action film. That something different includes building on the dialectical and modernist traditions of animated film already discussed. Cavell’s experience of animated film as too lawless can be attributed to his overall approach to film, which works to relieve the burden of living in a world “drawn by fantasy.” As a medium often used to produce drawn fantasies, animated film does not illuminate modern skepticism by showing the world, and Cavell’s comments imply that there are simply basic laws
present in live-action film that are absent from animated film. The assumptions that take place when viewing live-action films, such as Cavell’s contention that there is a “human something” onscreen, can become routine judgments (prejudices?) that constitute another burden that, in turn, is relieved in animation. Elements of determinative judgment continually develop in concert with media environments; media practices become habitual and the particulars of perceptual experience do not disrupt general concepts and norms but reinforce them. The concept of a “human something,” akin to Bazin’s “ambivalence of reality,” carries with it a host of rules about human bodies and personalities. Animated film, then, presents a something, but it frequently is less stable than the concept of human that Cavell finds valuable. The implication is that we have developed relative distinctions between different kinds of transcriptions of the human—graphic, photographic, digital motion capture, and so on.

I use the term burden loosely, but relief from perceiving a “human something” designates a conceptual release that affirms the numerous descriptions of animation disrupting the rules that guide viewing live-action film. For example, animated characters relieve the tension of the mimetic paradox that exists within human performers who are at once a historical record of a person and a creatively imagined character.\(^56\) Admittedly, this animated/nonanimated character distinction ignores the forms of micro resistance and nonhuman agency that exist within animation and that work against the animators’ intentions.\(^57\) But there is a greater remove from the “flesh and blood” of the actor, and as Bazin noted when comparing cinema to theater, an audience’s proximity to living performers results in a more demanding ethical relation.\(^58\) In other words, whatever cultural and moral feelings of obligation or responsibility one has toward his or her fellow human, these are significantly influenced by proximity and perceptual recognition. This ethical distance is not consistent across animated forms, and animated films are not consistently departures from spectator embodiment. Documentary animated films such as *Waltz with Bashir* (Folman 2008)
explicitly express real historical events and people with pointed ethical, moral, and political messages. And, in accordance with body genres, animated films can be pornographic, horrific, and sad. In other words the address of the aesthetics of judgment under discussion is not intrinsic to animation techniques. It must be created through style, narrative, characterization, and audience expectations. It has its own norms and rules. Nevertheless, it is not clear how long these distinct interpretative traditions can last given the overlap of techniques within digital cinema. 

CRITICAL AESTHETIC ATTENTION

Animated films that meet expectations for irreality, ambiguity, interrogations of nature, and shifting modes of experience are not divorced from reality or ideological messaging. Their lawless ethos can, paradoxically, contribute to reinforcing very specific and harmful ideas and norms. For instance, the *Private SNAFU* educational films for World War II soldiers were designed to entertain young men (they contain many sexist depictions of women) and demonstrate dangerous behaviors that soldiers should avoid. The goal of this design was to partially relieve the angst and gravity of war, which would help audiences digest a variety of messages—be they sexist, racist, patriotic, or pragmatic. The relief that animated cartoons have offered during contexts of war relates to contexts of death and violence more broadly. The sting of death is certainly relieved when static elements are continually brought to life, but there is also the sense that the resilience and plasticity of animated cartoon characters expresses a kind of training in violence. Furthermore, wartime propaganda expertly vilified enemies through racial and ethnic caricature, and cotemporaneous children’s entertainment tended to retain a variety of these discriminatory depictions since many of the same animators worked on both forms.

Within the history of animated cartoons there are numerous examples of hyperbolic sexist, racist, ethnocentric, and nationalistic
depictions. The roots of such depictions in the United States can be traced to the influence of burlesque, vaudeville, and black minstrelsy. The practice of caricature, for instance, mitigates the intense labor of drawn animation by quickly producing recognizable figures conducive to short films, and this has an immense capacity to perpetuate stereotypes and racist fantasies. As Nicholas Sammond details in his history of American commercial animation and blackface minstrelsy, cartoon minstrels (such as Felix the Cat and Mickey Mouse) appeal to racialized fantasies about blackness, otherness, commodified bodies, and slavery. A cartoon character’s status as comic, rebel, trickster, debauchee, living commodity, and its metamorphic body and caricatured design owe much to minstrelsy. Cartoons can connect an array of worlds associated with racialized American conceptions of blackness—for example, Africa, the plantation, the urban underworld, the ghetto—in a fluid, transhistorical fashion that could not happen as easily through the less malleable bodies of stage performance. Even cartoon characters that do not evoke blackface explicitly often do so implicitly through a “vestigial minstrelsy” maintained through trickster behavior and design traits such as white gloves, bulging eyes, and pronounced lips. The continuance of minstrelsy and racist caricatures correlates with the fact that animators in the United States have been predominantly white, but it also indicates competing aestheticized modes of judging newness and otherness.

Racialized fantasies about blackness and African Americans as borne out in commercial animation contain aesthetic judgments. As I have already mentioned, aesthetic judgments are never purely aesthetic or free from culture and history, even though they deal with particular encounters and subjective experience. In the case of racist caricatures, even if these include particular traits, they derive from and contribute to collective fantasies. Sammond refers to Richard Iton’s concept of “black fantastic” and describes this collective fantasy as a “matrix of meaning” constituted by seemingly trivial media and references that are nonetheless pervasive. This collective fantasy about blackness and
otherness bolsters systemic racism and quenches any distinct imaginative reckoning with that systemic racism. Cartoons that appeal to this collective fantasy, without any reflective, critical mechanism, do not help us imagine an alternative social reality. The collective fantasy, supported by stereotypes in cartoons and other media, secures social injustice and inequity by nullifying the more critical aspects of aesthetic judgment. Instead of disrupting the correlation between image and idea, the two become more entangled.

An animated world’s distance from reality and determinative concepts, while emphasizing the aesthetics of judgment, also generates a space vulnerable to the perpetuation of prejudices. Critical attention requires a variety of skills and motivations, and aesthetic experience is an opportunity for critical attention, not an imperative for it. When encountering an artwork, for instance, a person typically benefits from knowing some history and context when making sense of the experience. This is in part because the work of art is frequently engaged in troubling the norms and rules at play in its context. In the case of watching animated cartoon stereotypes, the imagination may be fooled into thinking it is engaged in a fantasy that challenges norms and reality when precisely the opposite is happening. The fantasy is the norm. Here again the problem central to forms of animated film that have inherited a cultural legacy in which irreality and experimentation with nature are expected is that this distracts from normative and naturalizing elements within such films.

Popular audiences in particular tend to relax critical attention toward animated films that distance themselves from identifiable sociocultural contexts. Paul Wells believes this is one of the reasons classic Disney films have maintained an overwhelmingly positive popular reception despite a robust body of criticism. Granted, the burden of critical aesthetic attention does not rest entirely on viewer or film given that movie watching is a relational, dynamic phenomenon. The storytelling that occurs in many Pixar features, for instance, incorporates the aesthetics of judgment into characterization and plot. In other
words the characters face epistemological confusion to a greater degree than any actual audience watching the film. With respect to the foregoing discussion of stereotypes, the film *Monsters, Inc.* demonstrates how a monster character’s contact with a little girl reconfigures the monster’s general assumptions about human children. This is experienced as ironic by audiences who know more about children than the fictional monsters even though the animated world of the film presents a fantastic cosmology in which our norms and nature need not apply. The film presents a particular experience that challenges generalized norms within its diegesis, while affirming norms that exist outside its diegesis. A variety of viewers may find that this structure prompts critical discussion, but it is likely that many viewers will not feel compelled to think critically about norms given the film’s affirmative elements.\(^5^7\)

Critical analysis of formal aesthetics is crucial to exposing subtle departures from stereotypes and prejudiced fantasies. Sianne Ngai’s analysis of the stop-motion animation television show *The PJs* demonstrates as much through its explication of how an excessive “animated-ness” undermines conventional racial constructions of animated characters.\(^6^8\) Another example is the comic and animated series *The Boondocks*, by Aaron McGruder, which carefully subverts ethnic and racial caricatures and takes aim at racialized assumptions and fantasies. But McGruder’s caricature of caricatures is at times subtle and overpowered by depictions of masculine violence. To bring the show’s virtues into social consciousness requires thoughtful commentary.\(^6^9\) Critical commentary is crucial in these readings of animation subverting animation because so much hangs on the critic’s handling of the dialectics of animation’s contestations between matter and movement and between its naturalization and denaturalization.

Pixar’s films are not as ideologically consistent as a television series. They involve different writers and directors and seek to build distinct worlds and characters while maintaining commitments to conventional Hollywood storytelling, classical character animation, and stylized realism. Although several of their films perpetuate the tradition of animation
focused on transformation and aesthetic experience, a tradition conducive to the ethos of creative labor and digital modernity, Pixar films raise different cultural issues and distinct critical opportunities specific to each imagined world and story. By attending to the aesthetic concepts and cultural, historical contexts raised by individual films, the following chapters seek to disclose how these films “dramatize a skirmish with nature” and address “changing models of experience” but not necessarily in a fashion as consistent as the studio’s creative philosophy and branding. Although Pixar’s management has effectively exploited the creative freedom of its employees, its productions remain opportunities for critical analyses capable of expressing how their world, too, is an aesthetic one with rules that are also subject to change. This formulation submits that aesthetics does not strictly refer to encounters with art but refers to our sensorial and thoughtful integration with an environment, which is also a political integration since it entails judging that environment alongside others.