Abstract: As television studies have grown as a field, some forms have been privileged considerably more than others. One of the forms that has been overlooked is the cartoon. With the rise of Adult Swim and programs like Archer, the cartoon is a form that is growing in both prestige as well as complexity. Unfortunately, current television criticism uses these programs to push larger, social agendas while never truly focusing on the content of the shows themselves. Using the work of John Caldwell and case studies on Bob's Burgers and The Venture Bros., this paper argues that cartoons can and should be analyzed as a show like The Sopranos has.

“That's A Tight Fit”: An Appeal for Televisual Aesthetics in Cartoons

Growing up, I had a tradition of watching cartoons every Saturday morning. As I grew up, I never lost my love of cartoons and gained a greater love of television. When I entered my graduate studies and decided that I wanted to pursue television criticism, I noticed a lack in the field's corpus. The scholarship seemed to focus on 'quality' programmes like Buffy The Vampire Slayer and The Sopranos. While I do like these shows, they are blips on the television ratings radar in comparison to shows like Deadliest Catch and Real Housewives of Atlanta, two shows that are much more popular but get far less critical attention. In addition to the lack of coverage of these popular programs, another gap in critical television scholarship is in the form of cartoons. From my own research, I could only find limited analysis of them with much of this scholarship focusing on their textual content rather than the programme's televisual components. This lead me to a series of questions. Why are scholars hesitant to talk about this form? Is it stigmatizing to study a juvenile form? Does the genre lack artistry or the sophistication of shows like Twin Peaks? As I thought about the answers to these questions, I realized that my own questions suffered from a misguided thought: cartoons are meant for children only.

Looking back through history, cartoons have always engaged an adult audience. From Betty Boop and Looney Tunes to The Flintstones and South Park, cartoons have always appealed to an adult audience, one that would understand the more mature humour and markedly

1 Within Television Studies, there has been considerable discussion about the idea of quality television and what constructs it. A good book that deals with the strengths and weaknesses of Quality TV is Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, eds, Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond, I.B. Tauris, 2007.
provocative nature of the programmes. Given this reality, I think that it is more than appropriate to consider how these programs could fit into a discussion of televisual aesthetics, which is focused on the study of the content and style of television programming, looking at the intertextuality, visual style, and production lineages of shows. A foundational text in this sub-field is John Thornton Caldwell's *Televisuality*. Here, Caldwell presents a theory relating to television audiences and television producers, focusing primarily on the inner workings of programs and their industrial connections. The rationale for using this theory is that it is foundational. Many future analyses of television have stemmed from this theory, so it seems appropriate to use it to justify televisual analysis of the cartoon. It will be from this theoretical base that I will analyse the style of cartoons as well as how they relate to their audiences through two small case studies.

The first will be *Bob's Burgers*. Currently in its first season, *Bob's Burgers* revolves around the Belcher family, which is headed by the titular Bob. From week to week, the family engages in a series of interesting foibles with their colourful neighbours. Created by Loren Bouchard, the show has a well-developed production lineage and uses it to develop a certain televisual style. The implications of this will be discussed later. The second program that I will discuss is *The Venture Bros*. A bedrock of the Adult Swim programming block, the show follows the lives of the titular brothers Hank and Dean, their father Dr Thaddeus 'Rusty' Venture, family bodyguard Brock Sampson and the various supervillains that are trying to destroy Rusty. This show does different work with televisuality from *Bob's Burgers*, focusing primarily on rewarding a particular audience for having a robust cultural knowledge while also playing with conventions.

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2 There is a substantial amount of scholarship done in Film Studies about the animated shorts that ran in cinema theatres during the first half of the 20th Century. See Norman Klein, *Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*, Verso, 1993 and Danny Peary & Gerald Peary, eds, *The American Animated Cartoon*, E.P. Dutton, 1980 for such work.
I chose both of these shows because they are oriented towards adult audiences and operate with those audiences in mind, using complex narratives and building environments for the show's characters to live in. For *The Venture Bros.*, the show contains jokes and themes that would be completely inappropriate for a child. Furthermore, as the show moves on, the back stories that have been built for the characters come into play, helping to create contextual jokes and move the show forward. This is a trait that can be seen in a well-analysed and loved adult-oriented show like *Seinfeld* with Art Vandelay, which developed as a joke over a number of seasons. For *Bob's Burgers*, the tone of the show suggests an adult audience due to its heavy use of subtlety. The show lacks slapstick humor and delivers the jokes it does make in a deadpan monotone, which requires the viewer to understand the context of the situation and be able to process the absurdity. These are skills that are not immediately accessible to most children. In addition to the mental processing, the show builds the environment of Wonder Wharf by fully integrating the characters into the space and forcing them to interact with its many kooky citizens yet keeping the Belcher family at the centre of the programme. This is a trait that can be seen in critically accepted shows like *Gilmore Girls* and *The Simpsons*. Given their similarities to other critically accepted shows, I believe the case studies will reinforce the idea that I will present throughout the entire paper: cartoons should be considered as complex televisual texts that can be analysed and evaluated.

**Why Cartoons? Why Televisual Aesthetics?**

In terms of Television Studies, two particular areas have been immensely understudied. The first is cartoons. As Jason Mittell notes in his book *Genre and Television*, television scholars have, by and large, ignored cartoons in their studies.\(^3\) When a study is undertaken, it is usually a

contemporary cartoon. Popular favourites are *The Simpsons, Family Guy,* and *South Park.* Much of the scholarship on these shows is well encapsulated through the exemplar of *Leaving Springfield.* An edited text, *Leaving Springfield’s* subtitle is 'The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture.' While the essays are all rather interesting, they avoid discussing the cartoon on its own terms since the authors are more focused on how the politics of the real world play out on the show.\(^4\) This can be more clearly seen in some of the scholarship on *South Park.*

In his article 'Puppets, Slaves, and Sex Changes,' Ted Gournelos investigates the character of Mr/Ms Garrison throughout the development of the show. He argues that s/he is a performative character within the show and can offer alternative ways to think about political engagement.\(^5\) In doing his analysis of the show, Gournelos focuses specifically on what Mr/Ms Garrison says during the show. Minimal mentions are made about the distinct animation style of the show. Those that are made are fleeting and cursory in tone. The discussion of the show itself is limited to references of specific incidences in the show and how they relate to a larger understanding of the larger American culture. As a result, Gournelos' argument avoids discussing the environment of the show itself and the ways that the character of Mr/Ms Garrison reflects specific values in the *South Park* environment. This shortcoming can be clearly seen in Victoria Nagy's piece in *Women Studies* entitled 'Motherhood, Stereotypes, and *South Park*.' Here, the author engages in the same type of work as Gournelos but with less textual evidence from the show, only pointing to specific incidents without considerable analysis of the source material.\(^6\)

In both articles, the actual program and its environment are discredited by the authors in the effort to speak to political concerns outside of the text. While these are only two examples,

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4. This can be considered to be a general fault in a considerable amount of Television Studies, but it can be attributed to the presence of Cultural Studies within the field.

5. Ted Gournelos, 'Puppets, Slaves, and Sex Changes: Mr. Garrison and *South Park’s* Performative Sexuality,' *Television & New Media,* 10, 2009, 271.

6. This is really a poor piece of scholarship, but I point to it because it reinforces the disrespect that cartoons get within the academy as a legitimate object of study.
they speak to the larger problem within scholarship of cartoons as relays for discussions of problems outside of the programme. As I hope to show in this paper, cartoons are rich texts on their own. With their artistry, environments, and narratives, there is no reason for them to be considered different from other shows that have been extensively analysed like *Mad Men* as they share many of the same characteristics.

Although it might not be present in cartoons, there has been an attempt within Television Studies to move back towards studying the style, form, and narrative of television programmes on their own terms, recognizing that there is plenty to be discussed within the programme itself. This movement has roots in Horace Newcomb's 1976 edited text *Television: The Critical View*. Here, there is an essay from Bernard Timberg which argues for the importance of examining the audio and visual components of a television program – in his particular case, soap operas – to understand how a program can engage with viewers.7 In addition to Timberg's contribution, Newcomb speaks towards the development of a television aesthetic in the same text. In an essay from 1974, Newcomb argues that television is becoming a complex visual form, one that is constantly distinguishing itself from other forms and creating its own artistic characteristics, or aesthetic.8 For him, a part of that aesthetic needed to include 'intimacy, continuity, and a special sense of history.'9 While these are core parts of it, the idea of what actually constitutes the aesthetic of television is something that has been under continual debate.

Charlotte Brunsdon struggled to articulate what a television aesthetic should be in her contribution to *Logics of Television*. While she clearly believes that the elimination of the 'simple cross/tick political aesthetic of popular texts was overdue,' Brunsdon struggles to articulate an

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9 Newcomb, 627. I also note that Newcomb does not argue that these should be the sole characteristics of a television aesthetic although they should be heavily considered.
aesthetic for television. The only thing that is certain for her is that '[scholars] need to retain a notion of the television text.' Brunsdon does pick up on an important point though: the criteria by which shows are evaluated by scholarly critics as good or bad need to become clearly articulated if there is to be a successful television aesthetic developed.

This is a challenge that has been taken up by a number of different scholars. David Thorburn defines an 'aesthetic anthropology,' which requires 'a simultaneous awareness of television programs as manufactured cultural artifacts and as fictional or dramatic text.' Thorburn implores critics to understand the ways that the programs are shaped by corporate interests while containing narrative and stylistic complexity. Continuing in the same open framework of Thorburn, Christine Geraghty argues for the ascription of different aesthetic values to different genres. She lays out a rather neat way to think about looking at television dramas. Geraghty believes that more emphasis needs to be put on how television programmes are described and evaluated through their aesthetics. Robin Nelson adds to Geraghty with his book *TV Drama in Transition* and goes further by saying that these questions of aesthetics must also be considered with politics and ethics. While they all have good ideas, all three authors do not have a shared vision of television aesthetics. This is not to say that they do not share similarities.

As Sarah Cardwell points out in her article on the topic, those who have talked about television aesthetics do agree on some general concerns. The most important are about defining what 'good' television is as well as placing emphasis on close textual analysis, which she defines as a 'focus on thematic, formal and stylistic elements rather than simply on content or

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11 Ibid.
12 David Thorburn, 'Television as an Aesthetic Medium,' *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 4, 2, June 1987, 167
“representation”. Additionally, Cardwell notes that many of the scholars focusing on aesthetics want to move away from the idea of using television to study something else. For her and the scholars mentioned above amongst others, television has plenty to study on its own without needing to study something else. This is not to say that television aesthetes cannot talk about social issues, but they need to talk about them in terms of the programme's narrative rather than using the show to talk about a political concern.

The sentiments of these scholars can be seen in recent book length studies on television aesthetics. In his book Beautiful TV, Greg Smith takes up talking about both the use of music and special effects in Ally McBeal as well as its discussion of political issues like gender. To reinforce the point made by Cardwell, Smith notes in his introduction that

> The formal properties of the program—the narration, the style—powerfully shape [the cultural] discourses. In our zeal to explain the social power of television, we have neglected to give much specific consideration to the aesthetic and narrative construction of television at anything other than the broadest levels.

For him, analyses like those done by Nagy and Gournelos miss how these shows discuss the politics that they read from the shows, an argument with which I would agree. Along with Smith's text, Jeremy Butler has published a text called Television Style, which merges techniques from Film Studies, in particular the work of David Bordwell, and Television Studies to examine the style of television in examples such as Miami Vice and The New Adventures of Old Christine. While he does look at cartoons, it is a) only The Simpsons and b) in passing to the program. This is a microcosm of the general lack in the television aesthetics research so far.

Much of this scholarship does not deal with cartoons in any way. I find this paradoxical when these scholars want to put more focus on the aesthetics of television. There is no form that

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is more aesthetically based than cartoons as they are visual, moving art. While an argument could once be made with regards to the lack of narrative complexity within cartoons, this is no longer possible as cartoons are becoming as complicated as dramas with regards to their discussion of relevant social issues, use of emotions, plot construction, and intertextuality. Furthermore, there can be discussion about what makes a 'good' cartoon and a 'bad' cartoon now, but the evaluation of 'quality' cartoon programmes is not the aim of this current paper. Instead, I aim to show that these shows can stand up to the intense scrutiny required of aesthetic criticism and show that delineations between good and bad in cartoons can be made in addition to dramas and other television genres. To accomplish this goal, I will use a core theory from the field that focuses the assessment of style in television: Televisuality.

A Crash Course in Televisuality

Something that is important with newer television cartoons is the use of style. As John Thornton Caldwell points out in his 1995 book Televisuality, 'Televisuality...is about constantly reinventing the stylistic wheel.'17 In the cartoon realm, this is a task easier said than done. The Hanna-Barbera cartoons that populated the screen from the 1960s to the 1980s were well-known for their rather mechanical look. Shows had to be generated quickly, so shows were only partially animated to save time. Furthermore, many of the shows took on the same characteristics. Rather than changing the animation style, Hanna-Barbera just changed what they animated. The style of The Flintstones is the same as that of Jonny Quest which is the same as Super Friends: undetailed backgrounds, a total lack of visual depth, and simply drawn characters with heavy outlines. In addition, the movement of objects through the space was usually lacking smoothness. It was as if one cel was being held over a moving background with a shift of the cel to suggest that it was moving rather than the background. The adult-oriented cartoons that we

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17 John Thornton Caldwell, Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television, Rutgers UP, 1995
have now are thoroughly breaking out of this mould.\textsuperscript{18}

These differences in style can be attributed to the development of many new televsual authors as well as the ability to produce animated programmes for far less than was possible before.\textsuperscript{19} While there have been a number of television dramas made by authors with a singular vision (\textit{The Sopranos, Six Feet Under, Mad Men, The Wire}), this is an attribute that has existed in cartoons for a much longer time as it started on film and then translated to the smaller screen. If legendary director Tex Avery came up on the title cards of an animation short, regardless of who actually did the work in producing the cartoon, there was the tacit understanding in the audience that the animation would look a certain way, the story would progress in a particular manner, and there would be a certain joke style. As the number of adult-oriented cartoons continues to increase, we can already see cartoon authors being developed and having the same immediate name recognition of style as Avery. Due to their possession of a distinct visual and narrative style that can be immediately defined, these authors will be turned into 'conceptual mythologies manufactured by production entities and broadcast corporations alike.'\textsuperscript{20} By using this creator's name in the promotion or creation of a show, the audience will have certain expectations for the execution and content of this show. Caldwell refers to this kind of programming as boutique programming. There are more characteristics than just the creator, but those contours can be better explained through the concrete example of \textit{Bob's Burgers}.

\textbf{Bob's Burgers and the Boutique Programme}

\textsuperscript{18} I understand that this could be understood as a problematic statement, especially considering that the second shows from the primary innovators in adult animation, particularly Matt Groening and Seth MacFarlane, maintain a similar aesthetic from the first one. This is true for \textit{Futurama} (Groening) as well as \textit{American Dad \& The Cleveland Show} (MacFarlane). Additionally, this classification causes conflicts when thinking about shows built on previously made footage like \textit{Sealab 2021}, which, ironically enough, is based on a Hanna-Barbera cartoon \textit{Sealab 2020}. I stand by my statement, but I did want to acknowledge that there could be possible problems.

\textsuperscript{19} Authors here is meant in the film sense where there are multiple people involved on a project yet a work can maintain the distinct signatures of a specific person.

\textsuperscript{20} Caldwell, 105.
Currently in its first season on Fox, *Bob's Burgers* follows the life of the Belcher family. Revolving around the patriarch Bob, his burger restaurant, and his rather eccentric family, the show features many of the characteristics of Caldwell's boutique television programming. He argues that the boutique program

constructs for itself an air of selectivity, refinement, uniqueness, and privilege. The televisual excess operative in boutique programming then, has less to do with an overload of visual form than with two other products: *excessive intentionality* and *sensitivity.*

Let's begin with the first part of this quote: the idea of of creating a selective television space. For many, *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist* was not required weekly watching. The squiggly-lined protagonists and his round-up of clients, while not necessarily well watched, developed a cult following thanks to its dry, observational humour. More importantly for *Bob's Burgers,* this show is where its creator Loren Bouchard got his start in television. Following the end of *Dr. Katz,* Bouchard moved on, teaming up with Brendan Small to create *Home Movies,* another cult comedy program that explores the very strange world of a boy who makes videos with his friends. The project that brought Bouchard to Fox's attention was *Lucy, Daughter of the Devil,* a show that ran during Adult Swim in 2007 about a girl who was being groomed to become the Antichrist by her father Satan.

According to a panel at the San Diego Comic-Con of 2010, Bouchard said that he was tapped by Fox due to them seeing *Lucy.* The fact that he was approached by the station speaks to the fact that he already has a particular voice and style that is immediately recognizable and desired to bring in viewers. Paired with former *King of the Hill* show runner Jim Dauterive, Bouchard created *Bob's Burgers,* a show revolving around Bob Belcher (H. Jon Benjamin). A man who has a singular vision to create amazing burgers but lacks the business acumen to sell

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21 Ibid. Original emphasis.
them to the public, Bob is surrounded by a veritable nuthouse. There is his wife Linda (John Roberts). She's in love with Bob but can nag him excessively. Bob and Linda have three children: Tina (Dan Mintz), Gene (Eugene Mirman), and Louise (Kristen Schaal). Tina is the eldest. She is awkward and loves both horses and zombies. Gene is a budding musician while Louise is a blooming psychopath/genius (the jury is out about which way she will go). While it might not seem like it, this show displays 'the personal touch' necessary for a show to be labeled as boutique.\textsuperscript{23}

The first thing that stands out is the presence of Bouchard on this program. As suggested by the cult nature of his prior programs as well as questions at Comic-Con, there is an expectation that Bouchard will bring a certain style to the show. This can be seen starting with the animation. It is clear from the introduction of the show that the show uses computer animation. This is not uncommon for Bouchard as all of his prior shows have also been done in the same manner. In addition, Bouchard's animation style for \textit{Bob's Burgers} both references and departs from his prior work. The characters on \textit{Bob's} all have light-bulb-shaped heads in addition to lacking a distinct chin. Rather than having a drawn chin, there is only a line suggesting where a chin should be. This draws a stylistic connection to his past work on \textit{Home Movies} where the characters shared similar shaped heads and the lack of a chin. In addition, the light brown flesh tone used in \textit{Bob's} is similar to the one used for the characters on \textit{Home Movies}. Lastly, the body shapes on both shows are awkward; both sets of characters lack a particular balance. The \textit{Home Movies} characters were heavy in the middle with thin arms and necks. The same can be said for \textit{Bob's Burgers} in addition to thinner legs, which amplifies their midsection girth. This is where the connection between the two shows ends though. On \textit{Bob's}, the characters wear full, articulated pieces of clothing rather than having the rest of their body drawn in colours to signify

\textsuperscript{23} Caldwell, 106
clothing as it was on *Home Movies*. Furthermore, each character has hair which looks like a regular hairstyle rather than a shock of hair like Brendan had on Bouchard's prior programme. This realistic yet unreal drawing style allows for the narrative flourishes that pepper the show.

Since this show is a comedy, it is important that the show actually have jokes contained within it. What makes looking at the aesthetics and narrative of this show important is the fact that the jokes here are never made plain like on *The Simpsons* with Homer getting hit in the head repeatedly. On *Bob's Burgers*, Bouchard builds them through context and irony as he did on all of his other television shows. For example, in Episode 11 entitled 'Weekend at Mort's,' Gene and Louise talk about staying at a hotel and raiding the mini bar. Although their dad says they aren't actually doing that, Gene yells 'Yes, we are!' and finishes by saying, 'I'm going to drink some Bailey's and unwind.'

In different situations, Bouchard will use visuals for his jokes. In the ninth episode of the season 'Spaghetti Western and Meatballs,' Linda is having a feud with another parent Colleen Caviello about making food for a fundraiser. A joke revolves around Linda being haunted by the ziti made by Caviello for the previous year's event. It starts with Linda noting how Bob doesn't understand how terrible it really was. This immediately transitions into a haunting flashback of the event. The voices of the women are slowed down with each word being extended. The visuals have also been slowed down to a terrifying speed and given a hazy filter to signify the fact that this is a flashback. The viewer can see the food fly out of the women's mouths in slow motion as they talk about how amazing Caviello's ziti is. The last shot of the flashback is a close-up on Linda's eye as it twitches in anger. It is at this moment that we are transported back to the present where Linda says that it was the worst moment in her life before swiftly transitioning into another topic. The joke works due to its absurd audio and visual components.

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24 'Weekend at Mort's,' *Bob's Burgers*, Television, 20th Century Fox, 2011.
The scene was like when Ricky was shot in *Boyz N The Hood*. The problem was that it lacked the emotional impact of that scene, and that is the basis of the joke here. Being impressed by someone's ziti isn't horrifying, but it was for Linda, so much so that she had a war flashback and could see the horrors of people enjoying Colleen Caviello's ziti. As one can sense, this is a difficult, absurdist joke that requires fully understanding the context and any visual allusions that are being made to even be remotely funny. These types of jokes speak to the excessive intentionality of Bouchard's comedic style as he demands the viewer to understand these underlying components to get the show's absurdist humour.

In addition to this complex joke style, Bouchard is also known for the environments that his shows create with extra characters that come in and out of the lives of the main protagonists. This has not changed for *Bob's Burgers*. From episode to episode, there are recurring characters like Teddy (Larry Murphy) and Mort (Andy Kindler), Bob's steady customers, or Mr. Fishoeder (Kevin Kline), Bob's landlord and a man who is 'one white cat short of being a supervillain.' While he generally liked, Bob has his enemies as well, the most primary being the health inspector Hugo (Sam Seder) and Bob's business competitor Jimmy Pesto (Jay Johnston). They are full characters, not just joke set-ups. They have played an important role in a number of episodes, serving to introduce conflict into the episodes or to provide the basis for a particular plot. For example, Mr. Fishoeder appears in multiple episodes. In his first appearance in Episode 6, 'Sheesh! Cab, Bob?', he gives Bob the opportunity to earn extra money for Tina's 13th birthday by driving a late-night taxi for him, which develops into the primary plot line of the episode as Bob befriends a trio of transvestite hookers. To reiterate, these characters are integral members of the overall environment of the show that help in pushing the story forwards as well as giving the audience further backstory to the protagonists.

The varieties of characters that exist in the town also allow the sensitive part of the show to exist. Caldwell notes that boutique shows usually feature a sensitive character which anchors the show's narrative world. In Bob's Burgers, this is Bob himself. While he can be curmudgeonly, he is also the emotional heart of the show, the one that makes everything OK by the episode. To return to 'Weekend at Mort's,' Bob had his restaurant tented by Hugo because they found mould on his walls. Linda saw this two-day break as a honeymoon for the couple who had never taken a proper one. While Linda was trying to be romantic, Bob put on his “lazy pants” and started making a model of the bus from Speed. After going on a double date at Jimmy Pesto's (which was on Pastafarian Night) and almost getting cremated by his kids, Bob realizes that he made an ass of himself by not respecting his wife. This culminated in a rather lovely speech given at the end of the episode about love which Bob gave without wearing pants.

This sensitivity comes through in 'Spaghetti Western and Meatballs' as well. Following Gene's adoption of the Banjo persona (albeit with a Little Princess guitar and his mom's sun hat), the times had gotten tense in Wonder Wharf. At the conflict resolution fundraiser, Tina and Linda had attacked their respective nemeses. School Guidance Counsellor Mr. Frond (David Herman) tries to use his ABS (Access your feelings, Be apologetic, and Slap it!) to no success. Given the general western motif of the episode, the final conflict happens when the outlaw Bob walks through the swinging auditorium (saloon) doors with his tongs on his belt like guns in a holdster. The first shot of this scene is from between Bob's legs and shows Tina and Mr. Frond, who are the person being saved and the bad guy in this scene respectively. The entire room proceeds to look at Bob as he stands by the doors with Frond in his sights. Frond responds by saying, in

26 Caldwell, 108.
27 Tina is in a conflict resolution skit with Jocelyn who she threatens with violence if she talks poorly about her to Jimmy Pesto, Jr. When Tina takes the microphone at the fundraiser, she sees Jocelyn whispering something to Jimmy then snaps. Linda snaps when Colleen keeps talking about how embarrassing it is that there is no food at the event and that people are going to have to talk about her ziti for another year.
typical western fashion, that Bob shouldn't be here. This tension is amplified afterwards both by
the swelling music as well as the quick series of zooms and close-ups on faces that occur during
the sequence, the most happening between Frond and Bob. Taking the pose of a gunslinger, Bob
says that he has something that he wants to tell Frond, which is that he wants to use his ABS. In
the end, Bob is able to diffuse the difficult situation that had developed in the auditorium.

Such moves as the ones displayed here are not uncharacteristic as Bob is the one who
usually levels out the show from episode to episode. Bob routinely helps his family through their
issues and comes to realize his own faults as a person, showing how this programme maintains
the spirit of the boutique programme, retaining the special touch that Loren Bouchard puts on all
of his television shows and clearly establishing Bob as the emotional centre of the show.

The Oversaturated Cartoon Watcher: An Analysis of The Venture Bros.

While Bob's Burgers does inhabit televisualility, much of Caldwell's argument also
revolves around the style of the program as well as how that program is understood by the
audience. For the author, it is more important to look at how the televisual text opens itself to
engaging viewers.28 Caldwell expands upon this idea, noting that many of the shows that work in
this open text manner create an intellectual surplus. This is constructed through the use of 'smart
iconic references, visual embellishments, tableaus, and historical masquerades – not just
dialogue.'29 The last part of this statement is the most important component. Making smart
allusions is not the thing that creates the surplus. Rather, making references that have to be
visually seen and comprehended are stock and trade of this process. The viewer needs to take
pleasure in the fact that they are able to access the references without the text spoon-feeding the
reference to them.

28 Caldwell, 251.
29 Caldwell, 253.
In addition to these stylistic concerns, televisual programming must have various levels of emotion in addition to the stylistic and intellectual embellishments. Caldwell rightly argues that good televisual shows should hit viewers on a variety of different levels, whether it is melodrama or pathos.\textsuperscript{30} In addition to these emotional concerns, the author argues that televisual shows encourage conjecture through their use of alternative worlds that allow for visual flourishes such as special effects and narrative additions like out of body experiences.\textsuperscript{31} While some of these components have been touched upon in my analysis of \textit{Bob's Burgers}, \textit{The Venture Bros.} serves as an excellent place to explore these aspects even further.

Started in 2003 by Jackson Publick and Doc Hammer, \textit{The Venture Bros.} tracks the adventures of Hank and Dean Venture, a pair of brothers that act like the Hardy Boys and look like something out of \textit{The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis}. Due to their overwhelming naivete—or stupidity—the boys find themselves in a number of rather precarious situations. This is not aided by their fumbling father, former boy adventurer and current super scientist Dr. Thaddeus 'Rusty' Venture. Coasting on the coattails of his father Jonas Venture, Rusty is being chased by various supervillains like The Monarch, Baron Underbheit, and The Phantom Limb. The Venture family is protected from these menaces by Brock Sampson. Former college roommate of Rusty, Sampson was a member of the Office of Secret Intelligence (O.S.I.) and carries a license to kill, which he uses with great aplomb. While this show on its surface is a standard action cartoon, the content of the show is far more subversive, mature, and intertextual than it would appear.

To explore these themes, I will look at two episodes from the first season of the show: “Careers in Science” and “Tag Sale – You're It!” In both, the more adult nature of \textit{The Venture Bros.} shines through as well as how the show rewards the viewer for their knowledge of culture.

\textsuperscript{30} Caldwell, 255.
\textsuperscript{31} Caldwell, 261.
of varying levels of class. The first thing that is immediately noticeable about the show is the animation style. The characters themselves are very neatly drawn with solid black bordering and clearly defined lines. These characters are set against rather simply drawn backgrounds. The colouring of the backgrounds is based on muted colour gradients, making the characters in the forefront stand out more. While this might be the result of wanting to simplify the animation, those who watch their cartoons know that this style is a direct reference to the Hanna-Barbera cartoons, in particular Jonny Quest, which is a primary influence of the show and executes many of the same tricks.

The connection to Jonny Quest continues into the introduction of the show, which contains a number of visual references to Quest. The first is the title cards for each primary member of the cast. The difference is that unlike in Quest, the boys are presented first than Dr. Venture and lastly Brock.32 In addition to the cards, one of the trademarks of Jonny Quest appears in the Venture intro: a Walking Eye. A well-known opponent of the Quest family, the Walking Eye appeared in the original intro of Jonny Quest as well as during the show.33 The Venture Bros. intro also features a shot similar to one from the intro of Quest with all of the primary cast members sitting on the family plane in their respective seats. The boys, like in the original, are in the back two seats. The doctor is not flying the plane; that responsibility is delegated to the bodyguard in both shows. While the show does share many similarities to Jonny Quest, it is not enough to applaud the intellectual or visual surplus of The Venture Bros. audience. The content of the show helps in this process.

To start with “Tag Sale – You're It!,” the show makes a number of verbal and visual allusions to popular culture. One of the primary characters on the show is Dr. Girlfriend.

32 In Jonny Quest, Jonny was presented first then Dr. Quest, Race Bannon, Hadji and Bandit in that order.
33 The Walking Eye also appears during 'Fallen Arches,' the eighth episode of Season Two.
Currently affiliated with The Monarch, Dr. Girlfriend is a dead ringer for Jacqueline Kennedy-Onassis. She keeps the same haircut, dresses in a modified version of Kennedy's trademark Chanel suits and wears the pillbox hat. Even further, the character is voiced by the male Doc Hammer to satirize the uncharacteristically deep voice of Kennedy. While they are waiting for access to the yard sale at the Venture compound, she points out that one of the members of Depeche Mode is also there. The Monarch displays shock at the fact that they are there at all and at the fact that he is there with a woman. For many years, Depeche Mode was understood to be a gay band due to the fact that they sang songs about coming on to men. The myth of the band being gay had to be dispelled by Dr. Girlfriend, who learned that the band was straight from an episode of *Behind the Music* she saw on 'the VH1.' Within this small sequence, the audience is thrown a number of allusions to other pop culture knowledge that they may or may not have access to which can make the joke work for them. The episode also contained a number of other pop culture references, but these were not visually spoken; rather they were shown without dialogue, returning closer to Caldwell's ideal.

There was a visual reference to Rock'em Sock'em Robots as they were purchased at the yard sale by a pair of scuba diver henchmen, but the one that I want to focus on involves *Star Wars*. One of the Monarch's henchmen, Henchman 21, finds a prototype weapon that looks EXACTLY like a light saber from *Star Wars* but is never verbally identified as one. While there is never any clear line drawn between the show and *Star Wars*, the allusion is rather clearly made. Aside from the fact that 21 totally loses his mind when finding it, Rusty makes an off-handed remark about how the military no longer engages in hand-to-hand combat, giving further knowledge to those see the weapon but may not immediately know it as the light sabre. For

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34 She would later marry him at the end of Season Two with the blessing of the Sovereign aka David Bowie.
36 *Star Wars* is well known for its hand-to-hand combat scenes involving Obi-Wan Kenobi and Darth Vader as well
those whom the reference is not perfectly clear, 21 attempts to challenge Brock with the sabre. His pre-attack routine makes clear reference to the viral video of the *Star Wars* kid with the less than graceful movement as 21 stumbles around ungracefully.

While there are a number of them in this vein, all the references in the show are not pop culture based. In this episode, after the Monarch attempts to defecate in the portable toilet set up on the grounds and fails. When he exits, The Monarch responds to Dr. Girlfriend's question about how it went by saying, 'It was all sound and fury, signifying nothing,' referencing *MacBeth* by Shakespeare. 37 Publick and Hammer show that they have a knowledge which expands beyond the popular, and this is put on display from time to time in the show. This particular reference pays benefits to those who have the substantial knowledge of Shakespeare to immediately recognize the quote from there, but as with good comedy writing, the joke can be understood without knowing its actual origins. Seeing as the show is capable of going high- and low-brow interchangeably, we need to examine what else the show can do to elevate it from sheer parody into the televisual.

The show also works with generic themes in a very telling way. This can be better seen in the next episode “Careers in Science.” This episode opens with a 60s-style training video from 1971, which not only helps to contextualize Gargantua-1, but provide a necessary backstory to the episode. The video is full of static images that change slowly while the narrator reads a written script. The dated nature of the video is pointedly revealed by the animation, which shows the edges of the celluloid reel that is being advanced frame by frame. This is a reference to the space movies that were made in the 1960s like *2001: A Space Odyssey* that frequently address the always advanced nature of their structures. 38 In the case of *The Venture Bros.*., it was speaking as Luke Skywalker.

38 I understand that the 70s are not the 60s, but the 70s had yet to develop an aesthetic by 1971.
to the marvel that is this space structure built by Jonas Venture during Rusty's youth. In fact, the premise to this show is to help turn off the problem light that came on. In the decades of living on the ship, the two remaining officers, Bud Manstrong and Anna Baldavich, had never even seen the light illuminate, so they had no idea of what to do.

In addition to the space references, there is an extended set of references to pornography within the episode. The first comes when Brock has to land at Gargantua-1. Manstrong transfers control over to Baldavich who guides Brock into the landing dock. This sequence begins with Baldavich commenting on the size of the Venture ship and expressing uncertainty with regards to if it will fit. She also notes that it is her first time. While these could be legitimate concerns, the references becomes less subtle as the music kicks in. To understand this particular joke, one has to have a knowledge of not just pornography but vintage pornography as the heavy-handed metaphors and double entendres have begun to disappear from the modern product along with the stereotypical porn music. This reference to vintage pornography is furthered when Baldavich goes to visit Brock following him being sucked out into space momentarily. She comments on how big and strong he is (read: vintage pornography dialogue), puts her hand on his inner thigh and asks if there is anything she can do for him, referencing the ever popular nurse-themed sub-genre of pornography. Given the nature of this discussion, Brock takes her up on the offer. While pornography is generally an appropriate touchstone for a cartoon of this nature, i.e. one created specifically for adults, these cultural references and stylistic concerns are not all that make up an appropriate televiusal text; there must also be emotions and, if made possible by the nature of the

39 Her character also does not show her face on screen. It is assumed that she is hideous from multiple requests for her to put her helmet back on. Her beautiful physical appearance and red hair suggest that the show might have been referencing Ms. Sara Bellum from The Powerpuff Girls, but no distinct references were made towards that end.

40 To speak to the super powers of Brock, he not only didn't die at exposure to the coldness of space, he was able to resist its pull by holding onto a rail. All the while, he did not lose his cigarette. Brock Sampson could be the basis of an entire paper on his own.
show, the use of alternate techniques to encourage outside conjecture about the characters on the show.

*The Venture Bros.* display both of these characteristics in 'Careers in Science.' The emotion comes through the relationship between Manstrong and Baldavich. Baldavich would love to make a future with Manstrong, but he has been reticent in expressing his feelings towards her. Throughout the episode, Manstrong watches Baldavich move away from him into the much more appreciative arms of Brock. The importance of Baldavich to Manstrong can be seen when he confronts her about sleeping with Brock. He, inevitably, apologizes to her for treating her the way that he has, but the situation shows the emotion that Caldwell speaks about. The show does have a heart contained within its shell of popular culture references and porn jokes. The emotions of both Manstrong and Baldavich throughout the episode are raw with the frustration and sadness present in both of their voices and only visible in Manstrong's face. You can feel the sexual frustration in Baldavich and the heartbreak in Manstrong radiating from the screen.

In addition to the relationship tensions of the space crew, the audience is offered the feelings of inadequacy felt by Rusty in relationship to his father. Seeing as he is dead, it is hard to discuss this relationship within the space of the narrative. The show elides the life-death divide by having Rusty talk with his father in a hallucination from hitting his head on the main console of Gargantua-1. In this space, Rusty is able to address his father and the problems that he has faced in his own life because of his father's perfection. This sequence does not provide any answers due to the fact that Rusty finds one of his pills which will eliminate the hallucination and send his dad back into his subconscious. This moment allows for the viewer at home to think more about Rusty and attempt to understand why he has such negative feelings towards his dad as well as the struggle he faces as he tries to get out of his father's shadow.41 While there are

41 The reason for his low self-esteem was explained in Season Three through a flashback induced by Dr. Henry
other moments in this program that can reinforce the idea of conjecture, I do not have the space to discuss them. But, as can be seen by this example, the show does create the space for time tricks and out-of-body/out-of-mind experiences to make conjecture amongst fans possible, increasing the narrative depth of the program.

To The Future: A Conclusion

This paper started from a simple frustration. In reading much of the scholarship about television, there has always been a heavy emphasis on live-action programming but never much on cartoons. As someone who grew up in a family that watched a lot of cartoons (my family still does watch a lot of cartoons), it was queer that there was not a lot of consideration given to them as a legitimate site of interesting, detailed television analysis.

With the growing re-emphasis on television aesthetics, there is a great possibility to re-imagine how we think about the medium. This paper is a preliminary step in that process. The first step is to change what types of shows that can be studied in depth. Most every other genre of television show has been subject to thorough analysis in the field except for cartoons, which have been used primarily as texts to examine social concerns like gender representation. Although I'm not sure why these programs have not been closely analysed, it is clear that the adult-oriented cartoon has become much more prominent in the past decade with the rise of Adult Swim and the creation of cartoon programmes on channels like HBO and TBS amongst others. This a growing segment of television programming that need to be considered. For this paper, I chose somewhat randomly two cartoons that I felt shared the characteristics of critically acclaimed dramas like Northern Exposure and The Wire. Here, this resulted in the selection of Bob's Killinger in the episode 'The Doctor Is Sin.' When Rusty was young, he saw his father's rather large penis hanging right in front of his face while he ate his morning breakfast. The image stayed with Rusty and gave him a continual lack of self-confidence.

42 The Life & Times of Tim is fully animated and some segments on The Ricky Gervais Show are animated as well.
43 Aside from showing reruns of Family Guy and American Dad, they have developed Neighbors From Hell.
**Burgers** and **The Venture Bros.** To make sure that they fit into the space of the aforementioned dramas, I use a foundational theory in Television Studies: Televisuality.

On the whole, the two case studies fit well into the framework laid out by Caldwell. **Bob's Burgers** contains many of the characteristics that Caldwell attributes to serious dramas like the short-lived **Tribeca** and **Quantum Leap.** The show features a rich environment of characters and experiences that centre around an emotional core in the form of Bob Belcher. In addition, the show maintains some of the characteristics of its creator Loren Bouchard's prior programs **Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist** and **Home Movies,** in particular those shows' subtle approaches to humour. Rather than using slapstick comedy, **Bob's Burgers** works through visual displacements and wordplay, forcing the viewer to understand and interpret the joke rather than making it plain.

In **The Venture Bros.**, the comedy is a bit more upfront, but its content is just as complex. The surface of the show is a reference within itself, recalling **Jonny Quest** and prior action cartoons. In addition, the creators put smaller pop culture references in the frame of the show, ones that are funny to those who can understand them. In both shows, there are clear emotions displayed through the characters, allowing the viewers to access and connect with them. In summary, these two programmes show an intense visual and narrative depth as well as great complexity. More importantly, these programmes are not exceptions. Many other cartoons share the characteristics of the cartoons analysed here.

As I've shown throughout this paper, adult-oriented cartoons are detailed texts like dramas such as **The Wire.** In both spaces, characters come in and out of the spotlight within the show and have rich narrative backgrounds, making it hard to say that they are either good or bad. Additionally, both sets of shows feature distinct visual styling and narrative style, both of which are ripe for analysis due to their textual depth. The division between cartoons and the elusive
category of 'quality' television are no longer able to be made as cartoons have many of its characteristics.

In her essay on quality television, Sarah Cardwell notes that this form of programming is 'television that we experience positively: we find it engaging, stimulating, exciting, original and so on.'\(^4^4\) She goes on to note that it requires 'the subjective experience of an appreciative viewer who feels something towards [the programme].'\(^4^5\) These are feelings that we have felt for shows like Mad Men because they are complex, emotional open texts that allow viewers to draw their own conclusions about what happens from episode to episode. As I have shown above, cartoons allow for this same openness. While it might not have been true in the past, complex cartoons now exist. They create narrative speculation and possess other characteristics that Cardwell prizes. To put it another way, cartoons are not child's play any more.

Within the field of Television Studies, there has been much emphasis on looking at a variety of new shows. This paper has shown that cartoons, in particular adult-oriented cartoons, can be a part of this expansion due to their great televisual depth. I have only started looking at the genre in this manner, so there is a considerable amount more to be explored in terms of visual construction and narrative complexity. While other genres can be questioned, it should be clear by the work done here that the cartoon genre can, in fact, serve as a point of expansion for television criticism.

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\(^{4^5}\) Ibid.