

‘WONDROUS WINDOWS OF TIME’

# ANIMATED

## FILMS BRIDGE GENERATIONS



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# I

saw “Puss in Boots: The Last Wish” at a movie theater in my hometown Dec. 31. I watched my ferocious feline champion dance across rooftops, slash through steel and drink copious quantities of cream. As he pranced across his vibrantly animated landscape toward the coveted Wishing

Star, my heart pranced with him.

For 100 minutes, I was *animated*.

When I returned to Pepperdine for the spring semester, all I wanted to talk about was animated films. Fortunately, I found a few people, like Phillip Young, senior Integrated Marketing Communication major, who were equally animated.

“There’s a lot of beauty that can be found there that you can’t see in a normal [live-action] movie,” Young said.

Part of why “Puss in Boots: The Last Wish” garnered such acclaim from its viewers — 95% on Rotten Tomatoes, 7.9/10 on IMDb and 4.8/5 on Vudu — is its animation style, according to Vox. Since 2017’s non-photorealistic “Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse” became the highest-grossing movie in Sony Pictures Animation’s history,



according to Statista, audiences and studios have rethought their expectations for animation styles in feature films.

Junior Screen Arts major Dawson Storrs said for him, part of the appeal of animated films — and part of their timelessness — comes from their stylistic qualities.

“In live-action films, you have a lot of different decisions to make — lens choice, lighting, stuff like that,” Storrs said. “But what I like about animation is that all of that kind of goes out the window in favor of an actual art style.”

### How animation began

Michael Stock, professor of Film and English, teaches Film 421: History of Animation Innovation. The class begins with the early 20th century and dances through the technological advances of the animation industry through the decades.

“In the beginning, cinema wasn’t about narrative,” Stock said. “It was really about spectacle and about special effects, and that’s kind of where animation comes in.”

The earliest uses of animation, Stock said, appeared in live-action films. Stock gave the example of framed narratives in live-action films, such as dream sequences, which directors would animate to indicate their difference from the overarching story.

Stock said his class traces the effects of innovation and studio commercialization on the animation industry.

“It’s a parallel history of film,” Stock said. “People who are doing animated films are not doing live-action films; they’re pretty separate.”

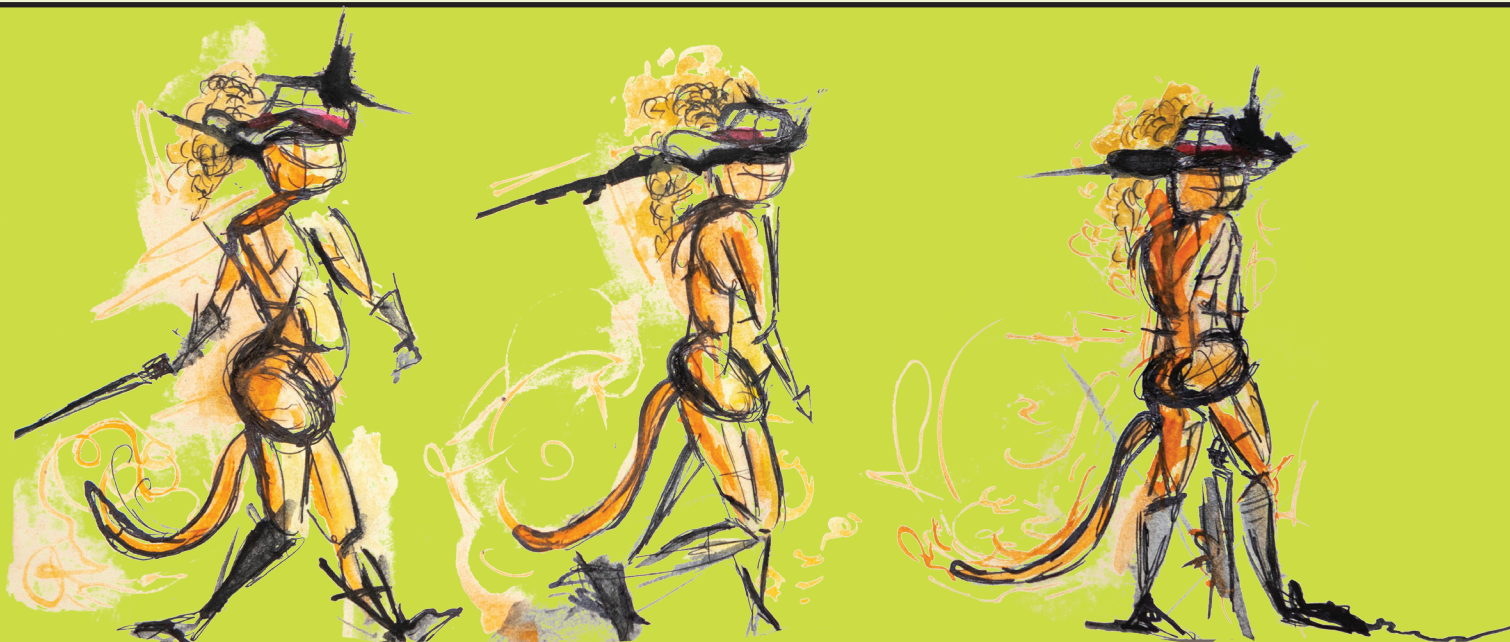
Animated television programming, Stock said, has played a vital role in the

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industry's development. Stock said shows like "The Simpsons," a front-runner in the Contemporary Golden Age of American television, propelled the industry to new heights and illustrated an increasing desire for animated content among all demographics — not just children.

"We've come such a long way from, 'Animation is for kids,'" Stock said.

Similar to how Disney is revisiting movies like "The Little Mermaid" in live action, Stock said Marvel could remake some of their most memorable characters in animation.

"It seems like money just waiting to be made, to me," Stock said.

Stock's love for animation, however, does stem from his childhood. Stock said

he grew up on a farm in Nebraska, which meant his televised entertainment options were relatively limited. Saturday morning cartoons — Warner Brother productions like Bugs Bunny and Wile E. Coyote — hold a special place in his heart.

"These wondrous windows of time with network programming, like Saturday mornings, meant so much to me," Stock said.

### Bringing animation to life

In their 1981 book "The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation," animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston codified 12 principles of animation, according to a Lesley University article. These principles — squash and stretch, anticipation, staging, straight-ahead action and pose-to-pose, follow through and overlapping action, slow in and slow out, arc, secondary action, timing, exaggeration, solid drawing, and appeal — serve as a guide for animators to this day.

Kate Parsons, professor of digital art, teaches a class on these very principles. Parsons said her course Art 420: Animation delves into the nuances of animated style, all the way back to its humble roots.

"We start with flipbooks, like we're literally making physical flipbooks, and then we end with XR [Extended Reality]," Parsons said.

As an artist, Parsons said she often starts with style and lets the story flow from there. She recognizes, however, that many others need to begin with a story — either for creative or financial reasons. Many studios work with large budgets for animated films, which leads to them being relatively risk-averse in their stylistic pursuits, according to Vox.

Whether one begins with style or story, Parsons said the two facets need to intentionally and effectively intertwine.

"A lot of it comes down to timing and telling a story in a way that is able to bring in the right comedic notes or the right dramatic notes," Parsons said. "The style should support that."

Animation revolves around a scientific concept known as "persistence of vision," Parsons said. Human eyes and brains can only hold on to an image for approximately 1/16 of a second, according to StudioBinder. When animators replace one still image with another within this time period, they create an illusion of continuity for the viewer.

The life and magic of animated films come from this illusion, Parsons said.

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## Kate Parsons

digital art professor

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### What animation means

Parsons said one of the first animated films she remembers watching was “The Last Unicorn,” a 1982 film based on a Peter S. Beagle novel of the same name. Parsons said she had the opportunity to meet Beagle at her first ever Comic-Con in her mid-20s. She brought a DVD of “The Last Unicorn” for him to sign.

“I started crying while he was signing it,” Parsons said. “I’m like this adult woman standing there crying at Comic-Con as he’s signing my favorite childhood film.”

Parsons, Stock, Young and Storrs all said animation has a certain timeless quality, although they disagreed somewhat on the extent of its timelessness. For instance, Young said even though he enjoys rewatching the animated films from his childhood, the animation occasionally makes him cringe compared to what he sees today.

“I’ve gone back and watched the original ‘Toy Story’ or the original ‘Monsters Inc.’ and they’re still great movies, but they look bad comparatively,” Young said.

Even when technological innovations age out the shock-and-awe factor of older animation styles, Stock said he still sees value in these classics.

“I would like to think for people who grew up with that, seeing some of this old cel animation can be pretty astounding because no one in the U.S. is doing that now,” Stock said. “So, it can actually feel fresh and exciting.”

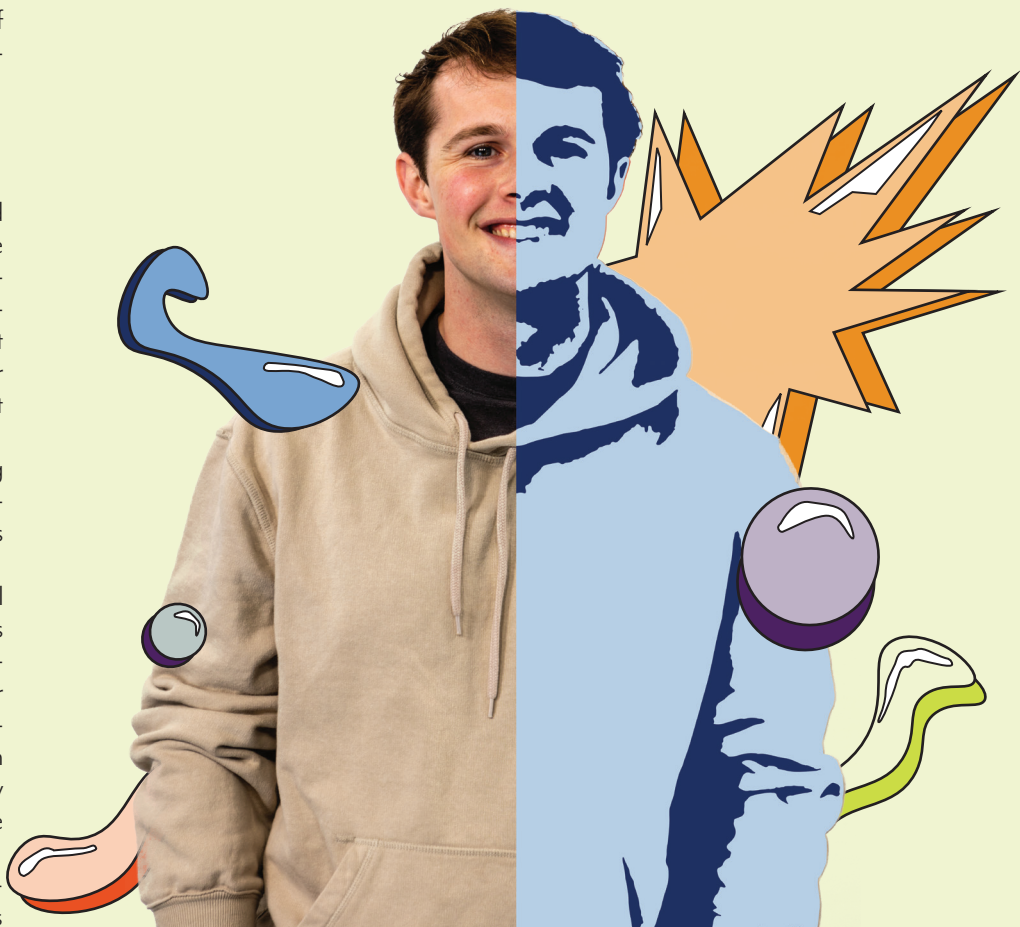
That’s not to say the love affair with animation is universal — people still attach a stigma to animation as a medium, according to *The Artifice*. People may assume, for instance, animation is just for children or that its focus on visuals masks an underdeveloped or lackluster narrative.

Storrs said he dislikes when viewers use animation as a scapegoat for poorly written material, echoing Parson’s sentiment that story often comes first.

“Whether you’re watching live action, whether you’re watching an animated series or anything, it’s not because it’s animated that it’s not good,” Storrs said. “It’s because it’s written poorly.”

From his personal experience, Storrs said he didn’t just grow up watching animated films — they grew up with him.

“The meaning of animated films changes from age to age in a way that live action never will,” Storrs said.



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