

The Rise Of Indie Animation

In the late 1960s, an animator named Ralph Bakshi and a producer named Steve Krantz, created a studio called Bakshi Productions after Ralph left paramount pictures in 1968. The first ever movie Bakshi Productions produced was called Fritz the Cat and it took four years to release. After releasing Fritz the Cat, Bakshi Productions produced three more films, before creating one of the most famous movies in history Lord of the Rings and continued to create four more movies by the names of American Pop (1981), Hey Good Lookin (1982), Fire and Ice (1983) and Cool World (1992).



Bakshi's influence on modern film makers

Ralph Bakshi was an inspiration to many indie artists such as Matt Groening, John Kricfalusi and Mike Judge. He is also an inspiration to modern Indie artists, like Vivienne Medrano, who created Zoophobia, Helluva Boss and Hazbin Hotel. Also Harry Partridge, who created Starbarians and live action directors such as Quentin Tarantino, Gore Verbinski and Peter Jackson.



Ralph's work had influenced the animation industry by breaking the "Disney standards" of animation, by prioritising artistic vision and raw atmosphere over production values. He had also even popularised artistic rotoscoping and mixed media techniques for creative low budget workarounds, which gave way for newer indie animators, who either didn't have the time or money like big budget company's such as Disney, Pixar and Dreamworks had, to create their own work. Ralph Bakshi's impact on modern indie animation, stems from his role as the first filmmaker to liberate the medium from being

strictly family oriented, by proving that independent, adult oriented stories could be successful and profitable.

Ground breaking but controversial

When Ralph Bakshi started producing films, some viewers found his work ground breaking as at this time only family oriented movies were being released. However, other viewers found the movies gritty and controversial due to the themes that he tackled, such as sex, drug use and racial tensions. Critics, who were mostly conservative, found his movie Coonskin so disturbing and dangerous that it received picketing and protests. This massive backlash, showed how much adult animation could shock people. Bakshi considered the film "pro-black" rather than anti-black, aiming to "record some of the things I'd observed and experienced myself" regarding the realities of the ghetto. However, it also paved the way for television networks to take big risks decades later. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the edgy energy that Bakshi started, moved from independent cinemas over to TV channels like MTV and Fox.



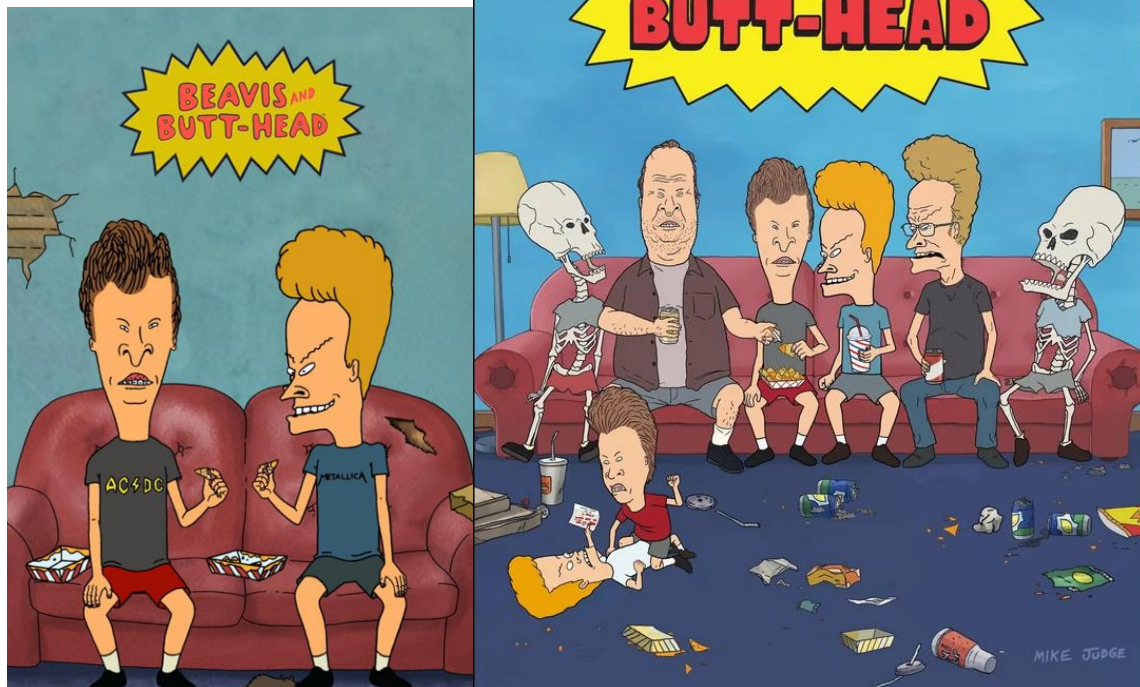
Acceptance of adult animation

TV bosses finally realised that adults wanted to watch animations that Disney would never make. The shift allowed creators with rough, messy art styles to get their work on TV. For example, Matt Groening's The Simpsons started out as short, poorly drawn clips on The Tracey Ullman Show, before getting its own slot. It completely ignored the

perfect, clean look of big corporate studios. Instead, it focused on raw, everyday family dynamics and real world problems.



Similarly, Mike Judge's Beavis and Butt-Head on MTV used incredibly basic, low budget animation that looked like a student doodle. Just like Bakshi, these creators were criticised at first. Parents and schools actually tried to get Beavis and Butt-Head banned, because they thought it would make teenagers do dangerous things. Despite the hate, both shows became massive hits and they proved to the industry that low budget, independent ideas could be popular.



Financial considerations

While television gave independent creators a bigger platform, it still had a major flaw. You had to get permission from TV bosses to air your work. That all changed in the early 2000s with the rise of the internet. Websites like Newgrounds and YouTube completely removed the middleman so anyone with a home computer, a basic drawing tablet and a flash software, could animate a cartoon and share it with millions of people instantly.



nickelodeon

This era gave way to a whole new wave solo indie animators, like Harry Partridge with his Starbarians series. These creators did not have to worry about TV censorship, or conservative critics trying to ban them. They had total creative freedom, just like Bakshi did, but they were doing it entirely from their own bedrooms. The internet became the new underground cinema, proving that indie animation no longer needed Hollywood money or TV networks to survive.



Modern animators

This new and improved way of doing animation, gave way for big indie animations, such as the Amazing Digital Circus, Murder Drones and Hazbin Hotel. One of the first people to build their own studio and produce multiple animated series is Vivienne Medrano, also known as VivsiePop. Instead of trying to get a job at big studios like Disney or Pixar, she used the internet to build her own company SpindleHorse. In October 2019, she put the pilot episode of Hazbin Hotel on YouTube for free and it received millions of views. To pay for her work, she went directly to her fans using crowdfunding sites like Patreon.

This completely changed the rules of the animation industry. Before the internet, Bakshi had to fight movie theatres to show his work, and 90s creators had to please TV executives. Vivienne Medrano proved that if you have a strong artistic vision, your audience will fund you directly. Her success became so massive, that major Hollywood companies like A24 and Amazon Prime Video eventually stepped in to distribute her shows, keeping her adult oriented style intact. Today, internet shows like Helluva Boss and The Amazing Digital Circus get just as much attention as big budget Hollywood movies.

To see how far indie animation has come, you only have to look at the massive shift in visual styles. While Bakshi used flat, hand drawn rotoscoping to create a dirty and realistic atmosphere, modern internet animations like The Amazing Digital Circus, (TADC) produced by Glitch Productions and created by GooseWorks, uses 3D computer animation to build completely different worlds. The show has bright, neon colours, glossy and plastic looking textures, and bouncy character rigs.

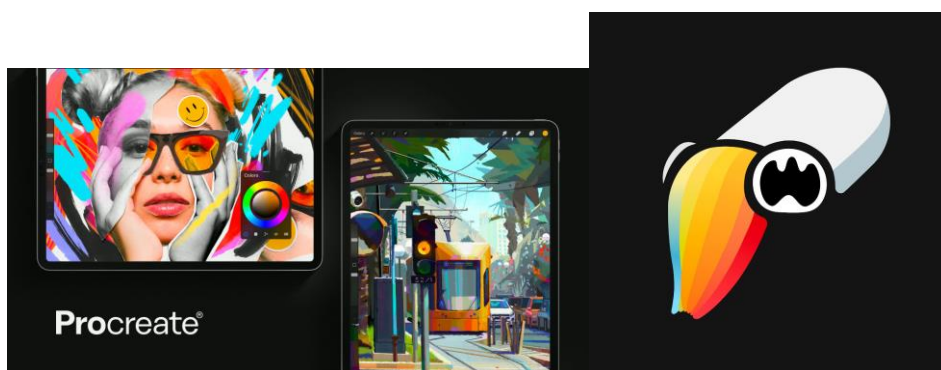
If you look at a specific scene, like the opening sequence where the main character, Pomni, suddenly spawns into the circus, the visual story telling is obvious to anyone watching. You can instantly understand what emotion she is feeling in the scene and her exaggerated facial expressions only push that further. The way that the characters in The Amazing Digital Circus are modelled, Jax being a purple bunny, Gangle being a ribbon with a tragedy mask as her face, Pomni being a jester, Ragatha a ragdoll, Zooble a bunch of different toy parts and Caine, the ringmaster literally being a sentient set of teeth, completely breaks the style that big companies such as Disney and Pixar traditionally use. These big brands usually spend millions of dollars making their animations look smooth and realistic unlike TADC who intentionally makes some of the animations look rigid and artificial. Scenes that you can look at from Disney and TADC to compare this are these two showed below. The first one is a scene from TADC where Pomni tries to retrieve Zooble's eye from the water, only to find these poorly animated and poorly rendered fish trying to protect their "sunken treasure". The second picture is a scene from the movie Big Hero Six, made by Disney, which is also animated to be a funny scene however in this scene, the visuals are incredibly smooth, the animation looks a lot more well done and viewers can see the time that was put into making this, unlike the first photo where it is harder to see how much work was put into the scene.



To understand why Disney's Big Hero Six movie looks so smooth compared to an indie movie, you also have to look at the budget of the movies and size of their teams, not just the intentions of specific scenes. Mainstream studios use massive teams of artists and have separate people for modelling, rigging, skin weighing and lighting. In a big budget film, a scene involving water or complex physics goes through months of simulation tests to make sure that every splash, reflection and ripple looks perfect. This is why every scene looks clean and expensive. Shows such as TADC or Helluva Boss may cut corners in places due to finances, due dates, their intentions on how the scenes look, and more. While critics might say that these shows are poorly made, they often don't look at the bigger picture, unlike fans who understand the circumstances and love it anyway, because it brings more personality and funny characters.

When you look at the massive gap between multi million dollar Disney movies and low budget indie movies, you can realise just how difficult it is to get started with your own movies. Directors like Henry Selick and author Neil Gaiman who made Coraline have said “There’s very few people who want to just make beautiful films that make money, when they can make films that make huge money.”, “When things get tough, this is what you should do: Make good art. I’m serious. Husband runs off with a politician? Make good art. Leg crushed and then eaten by mutated boa constrictor? Make good art. IRS on your trail? Make good art. Cat exploded? Make good art. Somebody on the Internet thinks what you do is stupid or evil or it's all been done before? Make good art.” and “I hope that in this year to come, you make mistakes. Because if you are making mistakes, then you are making new things, trying new things, learning, living, pushing yourself, changing yourself, changing your world.”

Because of how hard it is to create an entire animated movie whether its 3D or 2D from scratch, Indie animation tools have had to evolve to make the process more accessible for smaller creators, this is the reason that software's such as Blender and Unreal Engine exists. Blender is completely free to use and so is Unreal until your game makes over a million pounds and by then the subscription won't actually matter. Other apps that are more accessible to smaller creators are Toonsquid which is an animation app with a onetime purchase of 12 pounds, Steam, which makes you pay 100 pounds to publish a game but actually refunds you the money after your game makes over a thousand pounds, and Procreate, which millions of artists use to draw and animate which has a onetime purchase of 12 pounds as well.



Ultimately the rise of indie animation proves that the industry has fully shifted away from gate keeping and rigid rules. Ralph Bakshi had fought for animations to be allowed to have adult themes in the 1960s, and in the 90s tv creators started pushing boundaries and finally being able to make way for modern artists who are using affordable software like Toonsquid, Blender and Procreate. Animators have raised

points on how these accessible tools allow independent creators to prioritise storytelling over expenses. While mainstream critics often focus on the production values it was stated by audience analysts that the modern viewer actually prefers unique stories over expensive visuals and effects, these days it could be argued that indie animation represents the true future of the medium, driven entirely by creative freedom and community support. Viewers could also argue that while the big brand companies are great with their stories and visuals, they may argue that the low budget movies have more life and soul put into them and they are able to show just how much the artist really cares for their independent shows/movies.