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Seaglass: An Animated Rejection of Narrative Permanence

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MS 190.2 Senior Seminar

<center>Seaglass: An Animated Rejection of Narrative Permanence</center>

Seaglass is an animated narrative that explores the tension between fabricated notions of

permanence and inevitable change, using a backdrop of current violent shifts in the natural

landscape to visualize that instability. Building off Althusser's theory of the Ideological State

Apparatus[1], for this essay I propose the term of a permanent narrative, which is an encapsulating

story structure that assumes its own permanence—in other words, the story structure assumes

that its own context is intended to last indefinitely. I use examples ranging from televised media

to how British Petroleum depicted their own 2010 oil spill to argue that narratives that cement

their identity in a façade of permanence are a denial of, and an attempt to create exemption from,

inevitable change, be it social, political, or natural. When that change becomes difficult to

ignore, these narratives will frame uncertainty as an unresolvable threat to their own fabricated

permanence. This project ultimately aims to challenge a permanent narrative that frames

structural change as a destabilizing future with no resolution.

The use of a permanent narrative is common in serial television. Animation as a

primetime television medium routinely establishes a default, constant state of being—such as a

stock character archetype or a frequently used background location—for its protagonists to

deviate from and then return to by the end of an episode. Often, these strategies are implemented

for reasons of efficiency and economy[2]. Shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park* notably

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[1] "Every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce." (Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", 101).

[2] It's a waste of an artist's time to have to repaint background after background to create an appearance of change in a show, when one reusable background would be more efficient. While my argument focuses on how select animated narratives create the illusion of permanence by resetting to a "default state" after every episode, it should be noted that few animated productions have the time or budget to incorporate more complexity.

incorporate this narrative consistency (which has allowed them to continue airing for several decades). Not only do these shows remain stuck in their own constructed permanent realities, but their narrative stagnancy has also contributed to their reputations for using cynicism and humor to play on underlying anxieties about the state of Western hegemony and its chokehold on the future. Saura (2019) notes how *The Simpsons* does so through its constant resets—no amount of chaos, destruction, or even good fortune is grand enough to cause a change in the titular family's way of life. Their house could be burned down by the end of one episode[3], for instance, only to be returned to in pristine condition by the beginning of the next one. A greedy character, such as Mr. Burns, might experience a bout of generosity for the sake of an episode's plot[4], but his generosity will never stick long enough for him to change. According to Saura, these patterns create a repetition that reveal the show's social commentary:

> [*The Simpson's*] ironic comments on society, religion and politics while having its characters changing nothing ultimately leads one into thinking that there is nothing that can be done since change seems impossible. This feeling, one would claim, derives from one's acts entailing no consequences and living conditions for the series' characters remaining rather the same as before. Time after time after time, the house will be reset no matter what.[5]

Here, Saura identifies how repetition is a signifier for an American psyche that feels trapped in permanence—when radical change seems not only impossible but beyond the interests of the encapsulating structure, what is there left to do than to sit and watch an unchanging system repeat itself? The resetting structure of *The Simpsons* exemplifies this stagnant feeling. This narrative choice of positioning permanence as a default state is exemplified beyond animated sitcoms—it seeps into the very structure of how televised content is presented as a packaged experience.

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[3] Such as season 4, episode 3 "Homer the Heretic"
[4] Such as season 2, episode 35 "Blood Feud"
[5] Saura, "Bojack Horseman, or the Exhaustion of Postmodernism and the Envisioning of a Creative Way Out", 292.

Serial narrative formats like television are uniquely capable of using repetition and consistency to create a pocket reality that communicates feelings of stability within larger uncertain global contexts. I refer to a programming tactic that Thompson (2013) reveals by using the Onion News Network as a case study for understanding how a branded channel incorporates a cohesive theme (in this case, satire) throughout all its programming, including advertisements, to incorporate the viewer in a packaged sense of identity:

> While some commentators have suggested the popularity of news parody is a sign of cynicism and disengagement, others have suggested the popularity of news shows such as *The Colbert Report* or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* experience a sense of community and strengthened political commitment knowing that other "smart people" share the same deep frustrations with the news and what is happening in the world. Viewers may feel that Brooke Alvarez or Stephen Colbert are not only speaking to them and other like-minded fans, but *for* them—fiercely articulating dissatisfaction with the status quo, saying what they don't have the power to say themselves and what no one in the "real" media seems willing to say.[6]

The ONN creates a cohesive narrative for its viewers to identify with. The past decades have been rife with political upheaval and uncertainty, and a steady diet of a single consistent outlook can give viewers a reliable framework to lean into when nothing else seems trustworthy. However, these narratives are not solutions to a collective feeling of stagnancy, but rather a complimentary stagnancy of their own. What is there left to do, these narratives lament, other than resign oneself to the role of a powerless onlooker who finds solace in making wry comments about a never-ending oppressive structure? In the contexts of the Onion News Network and animated sitcoms, the role of an irreverent social commentator is no more than a permanent narrative used to construct a sense of stability in the face of social and political uncertainty.

In a structure that is built to uphold a promise of permanence, any instability that challenges it—or suggests that permanence might not be for the best—must either be ignored or

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[6] Thompson, "Onion News Network: Flow," 288.

made out to be inconsequential. The natural consequences of global warming are a prime

example. Environmental damage resulting from pollution and habitat destruction has been

foretold for decades, but the nascent devastation resulting from over a century of natural

exhaustion is to this day minimized or dubbed an anomaly by political officials, media

conglomerates, oil companies, or anyone with a vested monetary interest in continuing to

exhaust resources. The only time that natural destruction is acknowledged is when it has such a

visible effect on economy, industry, or corporation that it cannot be ignored.

Natural destruction is most appreciated as a destabilizer when it threatens economic

interest, and even then, the damage is minimized or erased as much as possible to create the

illusion that no aspect of the economy will be substantially threatened—that we can still maintain

permanent stability. Chen (2012) describes these narrative choices made by British Petroleum

surrounding their 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, such as how they forbade cleanup workers

from wearing protective gear during media coverage of the spill. Indeed, minimizing the image

of destruction was priority, as was completely avoiding the bare truth of what makes crude oil a

destabilizer in the first place:

> For BP, whatever threat existed seemed to be divided into two irreconcilable domains: any threat to the "environment" was to the aesthetic preservation of the shore, and any threat to "humans" was only economic (that is, the reproductive cycles of some Gulf seafood, the fishing that they depended on for income, might possibly be interrupted). The notion of toxicity, which would have connected these stories, was largely bypassed in favor of the cleavage of these narratives.[7]

The media narrative around the oil spill was about preserving pre-existing visions of the gulf and

its industry,[8] which meant avoiding any acknowledgement that there exists a, literally, toxic

undercurrent to BP's longstanding operations. BP wanted the public to know that the beach

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[7] Chen, "Afterword: The Spill and the Sea," 226.
[8] The narrative also aggressively maintained a strict existential divide between humanity and nature, a telling choice that I'll return to later when I reflect on my own production process.

would return to its original pristine condition, and as for humans and the economy (the two priorities when crude oil is gushing into the ocean, of course), the only risk was a potential interruption in seafood supply. The spill, according to BP, was no more than a blip in an otherwise reliably consistent operation. BP's attempt to project a narrative of its own fabricated permanence and its denial of change coats the oil spill's coverage; from the corporation forcing its own cleanup crews to forgo safety gear and uphold the image of pre-destruction, to withholding footage of the well from before and after the spill,[9] thereby suppressing any visual narrative that would imply change and instability.

In mainstream stories that seek to disseminate an interpretation of our social, political, and structural realities, narrative permanence is a foundational tool and understandably so. Where there is permanence, there is reliability. Many fans enjoy knowing they can expect a new *Simpsons* episode every week, one that will hopefully continue to live up to the show's own self-made standards; those who live near the gulf want to know that their quality of life will not be affected by an oil spill they had no control over, or that the energy source we have been coerced into relying on will not backfire. There is stability in the idea of permanence, and yet, there is also unease, as the threat of change lingers in the background. *The Simpsons*, though successful, cannot continue airing forever, and at this rate its eventual end could either be a disappointment or a relief to its longtime followers. Try as BP might, they cannot reverse the consequences of their own damage—and it is unclear how their self-assumed permanence will hold up if we reach the point where earth can no longer sustain us, in part, due to their practices. What we are told is permanent will certainly change, and our stories fail to prepare us for it.

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[9] Chen states that, "for reasons unknown", they were "unsuccessful in obtaining permission from BP's Video Department for the publication of before and after—'alive' and 'dead'—images of the Macondo well" (p. 226).

This false stability cannot resolve a major destabilizing event like global warming because a permanent narrative cannot tend to what it does not account for. For example, one source of climate change denial comes from the conservative and neoliberal opinion that structural change is a threat to core values such as individual freedom and the promotion of a free market[10]. The logic behind this concern is that our current capitalist structure is the best possible one, so therefore it must continue—any alternative would only be a downgrade. Here is where a narrative about the present (the structure is capitalist because it's the best option) mutates into a fallacy about the future (the structure *will always* be capitalist because it's better than any other potential option). This permanent narrative cannot accommodate for climate change because it cannot conceive of a future where we adopt a system other than capitalism to counteract it. I argue that intentional storytelling can both reveal this fallacy of a permanent narrative and counteract it, and some of the best examples have been made using the medium of animation.

Netflix's animated series *BoJack Horseman* features a cast of characters who live in their own permanent narratives while the world around them threatens destabilizing change. In Season 4, Episode 9: "Ruthie", celebrity agent and manager Princess Carolyn deals with a bad day that threatens her understanding of her own identity and legacy. This episode begins in a futuristic classroom where a student is giving a presentation about her great-great-great grandmother, Princess Carolyn. In the year 2017, Princess Carolyn is pregnant and eager to have a child, but soon learns the pregnancy isn't viable and that she will be having her fifth miscarriage (a shock to the agent/manager, who insists that because her mother had twelve kids, she should be able to as well). On the same day, the gold necklace that always hangs around Princess Carolyn's neck

[10] Washington and Cook, "Climate Change Denial: Heads in the Sand," 89-90.

breaks. Upon sending it in for repairs, she discovers the necklace is not a priceless ancestral heirloom like she thought but instead a cheap costume trinket. This sequence of upsets, however, is resolved by the frame story before these problems even occur—since Princess Carolyn's descendant, who is wearing the very necklace that was broken, narrates the story. So, there's no real threat of identity collapse; Princess Carolyn must eventually have a child, and even if her necklace is cheaply made, it still survives and is passed down enough to become an heirloom in its own right. Despite the threat of change, Princess Carolyn's enduring understanding of her own identity is reinforced by the episode's structure. "Ruthie" is a permanent narrative if ever there was one.

And yet, this narrative is neatly thwarted within the final minute of the episode. When BoJack calls Princess Carolyn to complain about his own day, she offers BoJack a simple remedy:

> Princess Carolyn: Hey, you wanna know what I do when I have a really bad, awful, terrible day?
> BoJack: What?
> Princess Carolyn: I imagine my great-great-great granddaughter in the future talking to her class about me. She's poised and funny, and tells people about me and how everything worked out in the end. And when I think about that, I think about how everything's going to work out. Because how else could she tell people?
> BoJack: But it's... fake.
> Princess Carolyn: Yeah, well... it makes me feel better.

In one line, Princess Carolyn reveals her own fallacy. However, what is key here is that she is aware of her own permanent narrative—she knows it's a lie, but the simple comfort of having an idealized future that reliably gives her hope is worth the deception[11]. Unlike *The Simpsons*, who exist in a state of unquestioned perpetuity, *BoJack Horseman* does not allow its characters to fully believe that any illusion of permanence they use to deceive themselves is real. The show

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[11] It should be noted that Princess Carolyn's idealized future is more different from the present than it is similar; for instance, this future world has long abandoned the 24hr method of telling time in favor of a universal bean system. In Princess Carolyn's wildest, most hopeful future, the structure has transformed so radically that even time works differently.

enforces the consequences of change, and the very content of the animation is affected by it: "there is a memory of previous events. If a couch in BoJack's house is burned down, it remains burned down in the next episode…acts have consequences."[12] The show certainly sympathizes with the comfort a permanent narrative can give—it would arguably understand the fear of having to let go of old ways of life in order to adapt to, say, climate change—but *BoJack Horseman* does not allow its characters to live in a permanent narrative for too long.

With *Seaglass*, I started my story at the point of structural collapse in order to tell a narrative that could not fall back on any preconceived notions of permanent stability. By incorporating details that are all a denial of perpetuity—a flooded town, ghosts that fade in and out of view, the eventual physical death and stylistic transformation of the protagonist—I aimed to create a narrative that frames complete structural transition not as a curse to be avoided but as a catalyst for movement and a necessary vehicle for the story itself. I've grown up surrounded by the constant threat of destruction on the horizon, and more and more I wonder if that fear is for what is coming, or if it is instead for what will be lost. I've created *Seaglass* with the intention of designing a narrative that reframes the unstable and the unknown as necessary, and maybe even hopeful; perhaps a future we don't anticipate is better than a dismal one we trick ourselves into believing is inevitable.

My first goal with this project was to establish an intrinsic connection between humans and the spaces they inhabit, particularly the natural environment. This decision was a direct rebellion to narratives such as the one propagated by British Petroleum, in which they cleanly divided the risks of the oil spill between the natural (the cleanliness of the beach) and the human (the fishing economy—not even the health of sea life outside of the context of human

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[12] Saura, "Bojack Horseman, or the Exhaustion of Postmodernism and the Envisioning of a Creative Way Out", 299.

consumption). I argue that narrative permanence is particularly able to thrive when humans feel

as if they are separate from nature and its inherent cyclicality. This mindset facilitates the

exhaustion of natural resources, which is easily done if one treats a material such as oil to be as

infinite and unproblematic in supply as the cereal aisle in a grocery store. Without complete

understanding of humans' interdependence with nature, we see ourselves as an enduring and

dominant permanence on the earth, as its resources are depleted at our whims.

  I attempt to reject this assumption in several ways in my animatic. The first is how I

composed the shots in which the protagonist, Gen, undergoes their routine. There are a couple

matching shots—for instance, one where the direction that Gen paddles a kayak matches with the

composition of how they chop seaweed, or how the spoon in a bowl of soup matches

immediately to that spoon in their mouth. I composed this montage with the intention of showing

how much Gen identifies with the process of living—foraging for food, preparing it, and overall

living in response to the surrounding environment are all a part of Gen's very identity.

  The second way I enforce a connection between humanity and nature is in the final shot,

where Gen throws an orb that resembles the sun back out to sea. As Gen and the other ghosts

chase after the orb, the camera spins to follow their dash to the sea—but as the frame settles on

the waves, Gen is no longer there. Instead, a wave slowly crests and then crashes into the space

where Gen would be standing. This shot is paired with the final lyrics of the extradiegetic song:

"And soon I shall rise from the old churchyard". I intentionally keep Gen's ultimate fate

ambiguous (I have a weakness for open-ended stories), but through this connection between

visual and audio I aim to refute the assumption that humans and nature are separate by

insinuating that the wave is indeed Gen rising from the "churchyard" of an old town buried in the

sea. In other words, Gen's participation in natural cyclical progression revitalizes nature and

creates movement—life—on the visual screen. I also crafted this ending with the hopes of imbuing the story with a feeling of regeneration, which is possible when one departs from the myth of stagnancy.

I did my best to refute permanence at every opportunity, and primarily used visual motifs to do so. Routine tasks that Gen performs in the first half of the animatic become pointless as Gen stands in the shadow of those tasks as a ghost in the second half. At one point, Gen stares wistfully at an old photo of them and their friends in front of a whale mural. That very mural is shown once before that scene, and again after, both at various stages of flooding (poetically, the whales on the mural look quite at home in the slowly rising seawater). These shots are intended to convey how no aspect of Gen's surroundings, or indeed Gen, is stagnant. The incorporation of the ghosts was my most experimental use of impermanence. To be honest, all my initial ideas included them because I liked the idea of ghosts that weren't there for horror or to scare the protagonist, and I wanted to create a story around that idea. During the production process I really started to think about what ghosts symbolized and began to realize that the ghosts here resembled a life that Gen thinks they can continue living. That's why I had the ghosts doing mundane activities, some that Gen even does themself—telling each other stories, making tea and soup, and wanting to use the computer. The ghosts are the strongest symbol of unreliable permanence, in that they embody a life that is no longer sustainable; a life that is a relic of the past.

I don't think I knew what I was doing with this animatic until very late in the production process. When I described my idea to Scripps alum Ellie Irons, she said it sounded like a new variety of folklore, a modern kind that would help make sense of current uncertainties the ways old stories have done for millennia. That idea really heartened me in one sense, though in another

I became worried about my audience and who I was making this story for—and whether this phantom audience would like what I had to offer. I struggled most with figuring out how to convey the conceptual ideas I had in my head—but I got an idea about how to proceed from hearing about my peers' first impressions during my pitch and WIP presentations. They let me know what expectations they had for which direction my animatic would or should go based on my premise, and considering those ideas helped me figure out my own direction. I was delighted by how much curiosity the ghosts inspired from early on. I was most nervous about my concept being too vague or ethereal to offer a sticking point for viewer interest, so knowing that the most high-concept aspect of my story was garnering interest encouraged me to lean into and explore the ethereality. As for my audience, I ultimately decided I was making this story for me. I'm not sure if that was the correct choice, but it was certainly the one that made me most comfortable with my own work.

At the very start of this semester, I had no idea what I was going to make. I came up with the bare bones idea for this story about half an hour before I had to turn in my first pitch. My initial plans were of course ambitious—I wanted to make a full-color animated short, and in a different timeline I perhaps, foolishly, could have. However, a more detailed final product would have suffered from poor conceptualization. As soon as I started the first frame of the storyboard, I realized I wanted to keep the visuals simple and half-finished in the interest of putting most of my focus in assembling strong composition, editing, and a story that would make sense. Most of the stories I've come up with in the past, to put it plainly, don't make any sense, and I didn't want *Seaglass* to fall into the same trap. Looking back on all the drawings I made, I'm pleased to see several redrawn compositions and unused shots, because it means I valued telling a coherent story over any attachment to the drawings themselves.

However, once sound was added and the whole video began to feel terrifyingly real, I was surprised and a bit disappointed by how sad the story is—a realization one might have expected me to have sooner in the process. To be honest, I'm not sure if I ultimately like the plot and character I came up with! And this preference isn't even for any thought-out theoretical or critical reasons. It's as simple a feeling as one I would have when leaving the theater after seeing a movie that didn't speak to me. Even so, I don't mind all that much. I gained something much more valuable than a story concept I liked—I now know I'm already prepared to visualize the story concepts I have sitting in my head. At the beginning of this semester, I didn't think I had even half of the skills necessary to make something like this animatic, and I've just proven myself wrong. Now I see my own creative capabilities differently, and it's made me excited to see what I come up with next. One of the most heartening aspects of change is knowing that it can happen within me, as well.

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