

“Business as Usual: The Pandemic Myth of Undisrupted Animation Production”

Mihaela Mihailova

A marketable pandemic narrative requires a few elements: a deadly viral threat; a mismanaged institutional response; and a hero with inexplicable innate immunity that can be replicated, by means of dubious science, to save society. In recent accounts of Covid-19’s impact on Hollywood, the animation industry has been cast as that essential, miraculously untouchable hero. Soon after live-action TV show production effectively ground to a halt in the wake of the Coronavirus crisis, popular press and media entertainment outlets rushed to reveal an apparent pandemic plot twist – animated series’ capacity to “adapt to keep production going amid industry-wide shutdown.”¹

Since then, headline after headline has touted the resilience and flexibility of TV animation in particular. Animation “soldiers on.”² It has “steamed ahead” as “traditional tv production struggles.”³ It is, in fact, taking advantage of the “big opportunity” created by the crisis.⁴ The gist of all these articles is as follows: animation production, traditionally decentralized and divisible into discrete tasks that can be coordinated remotely, was uniquely equipped to smoothly transition to a “work from home” model with very little disruption. As a result, animation production has continued to thrive in quarantine, and animation studios have largely avoided budget cuts, layoffs, and catastrophic delays, in stark contrast to their live-action counterparts. An unlikely savior, cartoons are thus called upon to carry the burden of timely content creation.

This discourse is remarkable for several reasons. TV animation rarely finds itself in the entertainment spotlight in a notable way, let alone spoken of in such messianic terms. While certain shows have enjoyed critical attention, the industry itself is rarely discussed outside of the context of children’s media or, more recently, streaming giants’ push for more diverse content.⁵ Thus, this pandemic-related (and therefore likely temporary) spike in press coverage provides a

rare opportunity to unpack the ways in which animation industry practices and animation labor are presented in popular discourse.

Omissions, inaccuracies, and oversimplifications remain common. For instance, the global context is either conspicuously missing from the conversation, or nonchalantly glossed over. One op-ed points out that TV animation has relied on international outsourcing since the 1960s, “resulting in a low-cost [...] feedback loop.”⁶ By not acknowledging the predominantly South and East Asian underpaid labor that has traditionally kept this practice “low-cost,” this statement frames animated TV’s long, fraught history of outsourcing as a quasi-prophetic adaptive advantage instead of an exploitative labor practice. In general, animated Hollywood’s reliance on global networks of labor is barely mentioned, with the exception of a source which points out that “outlets in Asia and in Canada often provid[e] much of the material to producers back here in L.A.”⁷ On a related note, Hollywood-centric accounts do not leave room for considering the current state of animation production beyond US borders. At the very least, a recognition of the Japanese anime industry’s struggles with significant delays would have added nuance to the discussion of the medium’s alleged immunity to the virus.⁸

Meanwhile, the “business as usual” rhetoric understates the extent of workflow disruptions experienced by animation professionals having to work in isolation and in suboptimal conditions, oftentimes without their full range of equipment. Moreover, overemphasizing animation’s versatility downplays the extent to which many cartoon producers continue to rely on traditional studio structures. As one of the more balanced accounts of quarantine-related challenges points out, separating production teams in such a fundamentally cooperative medium significantly slows down the creative process.⁹ Additionally, most articles tend to overlook the potential exacerbation of existing issues in the animation industry, such as the rampant overtime. *The Guardian*, for instance, includes – but does not in any way interrogate – a revealing quote from an industry professional who explains that “everyone is putting in 20% more hours to achieve the same amount of work logistically working from home.”¹⁰

Finally, pandemic coverage of TV cartoon production has contributed to the casual othering of animation that popular media discourse routinely engages in. Tired stereotypes abound in these articles. For example, Darryn King writes that “the art form, liberated from real-world constraints, is suitably escapist entertainment right now,” stringing together a baseless assumption about the medium’s ontological status with a reductive description of its functions.¹¹ Furthermore, animated content is framed as the inferior, but readily available alternative to live action. Dave Trumbore allows that “more attention may be paid to those titles than ever before thanks to less competition as the live-action well dries up.”¹² Evidently, cartoons are meant to tide industry professionals *and* viewers over until live-action TV production can resume. Trumbore’s account also concludes that “the animation industry is thriving thanks to its scrappy, can-do attitude.”¹³ That even an otherwise laudatory article can still assume such a casually patronizing tone speaks volumes regarding the persistence of anti-animation bias in the industry.

It is too early to predict whether animation production can offer a lasting cure – rather than temporary symptom relief – to Hollywood’s ailing TV industry. However, one thing seems clear: the Covid-19 crisis has placed the animation industry on center stage – but the spotlight remains too dim.

¹ Lesley Goldberg, “Animated Series Adapt to Keep Production Going Amid Industry-Wide Shutdown,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/animated-series-adapt-keep-production-going-industry-wide-shutdown-1286340>

² Dave Trumbore, “Animation Production Soldiers on as Live-Action Shows Shut Down Due to Coronavirus,” *Collider*, March 25, 2020, <https://collider.com/animation-production-continues-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>

³ Darryn King, “Why You’re Going to See More Animation (Thanks, Pandemic),” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-youre-going-to-see-more-animation-thanks-pandemic-11589724000>

⁴ Aaron Simpson, “For the Animation Industry, The Coronavirus Crisis Has Created a Big Opportunity,” *Cartoon Brew*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.cartoonbrew.com/ideas-commentary/for-the-animation-industry-the-coronavirus-crisis-has-created-a-big-opportunity-189911.html>

⁵ Wendy Lee, “Netflix and Amazon Spark Animation Revival, Spending Heavily in Quest for Binge-Worthy Shows,” November 18, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-animation-streaming-20181118-story.html>

⁶ Simpson.

⁷ Nellie Andreeva and Dominic Patten, “Animation Production is Still Going, Sometimes Slower, Amid Coronavirus Crisis,” *Deadline*, March 24, 2020, <https://deadline.com/2020/03/animation-tv-series-continue-coronavirus-challenges-1202890786/>

⁸ Lauren Orsini, “‘Pokémon,’ ‘One Piece,’ and More Anime Delayed Due to Coronavirus,” *Forbes*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurenorsini/2020/04/21/pokmon-one-piece-and-more-anime-delayed-due-to-coronavirus/#1679cc841c9d>

⁹ Andreeva and Patten.

¹⁰ Mark Sweney, “How Coronavirus has Animated one Section of the Film Industry,” *The Guardian*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/may/19/how-coronavirus-has-animated-one-section-of-the-film-industry>

¹¹ King.

¹² Trumbore.

¹³ Trumbore.