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Plasticity in Animated Children's Cartoons: The Neoliberal Transforming Bodies and Static Worlds of *OK KO* and *Gumball*

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Plasticity in Animated Children's Cartoons:
The Neoliberal Transforming Bodies and Static Worlds of *OK KO* and *Gumball*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

To every wonderful educator, parents, friends, and teachers alike, that I've had both inside and outside a classroom.

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ABSTRACT

Through the study of *OK KO! Let's Be Heroes!* and *The Amazing World of Gumball*, I argue that children's cartoons represent and recreate anxieties toward money's plasticity in the plasticity of the cartoon bodies and worlds. I closely examine the ambivalence towards abstraction's plasticity in contemporary children's cartoons to trace the neoliberal ambivalence towards money's plasticity. While much scholarship has grappled with what can be understood as animatic plasticity, very little of it takes on the questions raised about neoliberal culture by televised children's cartoons. Cartoons are important to study in this respect because their form allows for unbridled plasticity. Cartoons provide the artists with the freedom to create characters and worlds that are as bound or unbound to our world's norms and natural laws, unlike in other live action moving media. It combines this with the dynamic, temporal component of moving image media. Unlike a surreal painting, cartoons are capable of dynamic movement and transformation, even in their non-moving image form as comics. However, this plastic dynamism is most fully realized in the animated form, as the characters are capable of movement and change regardless of the viewers' presence. Contemporary cartoons like *OK KO* and *Gumball* asymmetrically mobilize this plasticity by rendering the characters' bodies as highly plastic while presenting their worlds as comparatively static. This aesthetic practice suggests that the world

cannot be reshaped for a variety of reasons, so the only thing that individuals can do is try to change themselves as necessary to accommodate it. Thus, what at first blush looks like a celebration of plasticity is in reality a celebration of mere flexibility, which enables and perpetuates neoliberal power structures. Yet these same shows simultaneously challenge the neoliberal aesthetic project in their hyper-mobilization of non-diegetic plasticity. When the shows mobilize their plasticity in a way that is not narratively impactful, such as through cutaways, inserts, or other asides, the plasticity is instead framed as comedic and thus enjoyable. This suggests that while presenting character and world plasticity as equally valid would be natural next step for animated aesthetics, the major limitation contemporary animation faces is in reality the uneven treatment of diegetic and non-diegetic plasticity.

INTRODUCTION

Through the study of *OK KO! Let's Be Heroes!* and *The Amazing World of Gumball*, I argue that children's cartoons represent and recreate anxieties toward money's plasticity in the plasticity of the cartoon bodies and worlds. In what follows, I closely examine the ambivalence towards abstraction's plasticity in contemporary children's cartoons to trace the neoliberal ambivalence towards money's plasticity. While much scholarship has grappled with what can be understood as animatic plasticity, very little of it takes on the questions raised about neoliberal culture by televised children's cartoons. Cartoons are important to study in this respect because their form allows for unbridled plasticity. Cartoons provide the artists with the freedom to create characters and worlds that are as bound or unbound to our world's norms and natural laws, unlike in other live action moving media. It combines this with the dynamic, temporal component of moving image media. Unlike a surreal painting, cartoons are capable of dynamic movement and transformation, even in their non-moving image form as comics. However, this plastic dynamism is most fully realized in the animated form, as the characters are capable of movement and change regardless of the viewers presence. Contemporary cartoons like *OK KO* and *Gumball* asymmetrically mobilize this plasticity by rendering the characters' bodies as highly plastic while presenting the worlds as comparatively static. This aesthetic practice suggests that the world cannot be reshaped for a variety of reasons, so the only thing that individuals can do is try to change themselves as necessary to accommodate it. Thus, what at first blush looks like a celebration of plasticity is in reality a celebration of mere flexibility, which enables and perpetuates neoliberal

power structures. Yet these same shows simultaneously challenge the neoliberal aesthetic project in their hyper-mobilization of non-diegetic plasticity. When the shows mobilize their plasticity in a way that is not narratively impactful, the plasticity is instead framed as comedic and thus enjoyable. This suggests that while presenting character and world plasticity as equally valid would be natural next step for animated aesthetics, the major limitation contemporary animation faces is in reality the uneven treatment of diegetic and non-diegetic plasticity.

Animated cartoons further are important to investigate in this vein because their target audience, children, are more susceptible to any implicit or explicit values embedded in the media. Children play a major role in social reproduction, since they ultimately inherit the society they grew up in and can thus create (or recreate) it as they see fit. This fact becomes particularly worrying when one considers the political implications of the asymmetrical, hyper-utilization of characters' plasticity in the context of a fairly stagnant, non-changing cartoon world. This attitude lends itself clearly and rather easily to political stagnation.

Much like the animated worlds and characters in cartoons, money can be understood as a plastic instrument. Its plastic ability to form the world around it is neither controversial nor revelatory; money has long been equated with this plastic power and has, at numerous points, lead to or caused major shifts in society. For Marxists, this is typically thought of in negative terms, such that money is understood to primarily perpetuate and sustain unjust power structures.¹² While these critiques are certainly constructive, they have the unfortunate effect of occluding the positive, constructive side of this plasticity as well. The heterodox school known as Modern Monetary Theory in particular has argued positively for money's overlooked plastic ability to be formed.³⁴

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, (Pacific Publishing Studio, 2010).

² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ L. Randall Wray, *Understanding Modern Monetary Theory*, (Edward Elgar, 1998).

⁴ Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

Indeed, money's plastic ability has become more difficult to deny in the last 50 years, as it has shifted from cash and checks to plastic cards to electronic transactions that are represented primarily by numbers on a screen. However, in the neoliberal era, this component of money's plasticity is recognized far more anxiously, owing to a rightward shift in politics as much as to economic austerity and precarity. When this aspect of money's plasticity is explored or made explicit, it is either treated as natural and self-correcting or critically framed as apocalyptic or otherwise problematic.

As commentators from Sergei Eisenstein to Scott Bukatman have shown, animation as a medium inherently imbues both its characters and worlds with a high degree of plasticity.⁵⁶ Because animated figures and worlds are constructed through drawing, painting, and frame-by-frame manipulation, the characters and worlds can mutually shape and be shaped by one another as the animators see fit. However, this plasticity is deployed in a highly asymmetrical manner. Although both animated characters and worlds are able to mutually transfigure one another, the animated characters are re-shaped far more often than the animated worlds. This has not been the site of much scholarly investigation since, historically, this asymmetry could easily be understood as a result of the technology that enables cel animation. My approach to investigating this under-investigated asymmetry is to apply the critical economic lens of neochartalist aesthetic theory. While mobilizing this specific theory to analyze cartoons has not been done before, examining and critiquing mainstream cartoons through the economies that produce them is not. Marxists as early as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno have argued with others and among themselves about how early Disney cartoons can be variously understood as sites of resistance or resignation to the

⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, (Seagull Books, 1986).

⁶ Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Sulmberland*, (University of California Press, 2012).

inherent violence of the capitalist mode of production.⁷ Regardless of whether they critiqued these cartoons as simple expressions of the violence capital enacts upon individuals as Adorno did or they celebrated the revolutionary potential and desire expressed in the characters' survival and foiling of the structure around them as Benjamin did, many major Marxists clearly viewed animated cartoon aesthetics as an important site to both understand and re-imagine how society is organized. While I agree that animated cartoons are important sites of investigation to understand the broader psychological and aesthetic experience of society, I cannot affirm their Marxist approach to aesthetics since it reifies money as a destructive object. While I find many of the same tensions of resistance and resignation playing out in contemporary cartoon aesthetics, because I explore these cartoons with a foundationally different critical framework (and in a different historical moment) as these Marxists, I must also critique their inadvertent reification of cartoons worlds in the same vein that they reify money.

OK KO and *Gumball* best capture the asymmetry in aesthetic plasticity in contemporary cartoons because the divide is so strikingly dramatic. The casts of *Gumball* and especially *OK KO* are not only plastic but hyper-plastic. The characters regularly and radically change shape, size, and style. A majority of these transformations are not narratively motivated; most of the time, they are treated as one-off jokes. This could be understood to reflect a more positive, light-hearted attitude toward plasticity. While I explore and affirm the possibilities of this easier, more open relationality to plasticity in a later section, I also argue that, upon closer examination, this is generally not the case. The few times that such transformations are ascribed to the narrative, that these transformations are acknowledged as actually occurring in the cartoon world, it is posed as a real, destructive problem. Because the transformed character is neither prepared for nor

⁷ Miriam Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney," *The South Atlantic quarterly* 92, no. 1 (1993): 27-61.

accustomed to their new forms, they commonly cause property damage, hurt other characters, or are hurt themselves. A transformed cartoon body that is able to use their singular transformation to alter the world around them is thus only presented as problematic, undesirable, and, at worst, outright destructive. In contrast, transformations that are narratively unacknowledged and do not (and cannot) seriously impact the cartoon world are presented as harmless and, since the transformations are generally comedic, pleasant.

In this way, what these cartoons are truly celebrating is not what French philosopher Catherine Malabou would call “plasticity,” but rather what she would derisively identify as mere “flexibility,” which she ties to the broader logics of neoliberalism. Malabou characterizes flexibility as a domesticated form of plasticity that lacks the ability to control its own form and “the power to create.”⁸ She argues for a broader recognition and reconceptualization of plasticity as separate from flexibility, as true plasticity would be able to restructure society in a more equitable way while flexibility can only allow the perpetuation of social and economic injustices. In this light, these shows’ celebration of flexibility in place of plasticity participates in the broader neoliberal project by rejecting characters’ plasticity when it is consequential but highlighting their inoffensive, non-threatening flexibility. In spite of this, both shows helpfully map out and even somewhat push against the aesthetic domination of flexibility over plasticity.

On the other hand, the plasticity of the cartoon worlds in *OK KO* and *Gumball* are negated in ways that suggest that a radical change or restructuring of our world is at once highly improbable and thoroughly undesirable. In this way, the cartoon worlds in these shows are presented as quite rigid, almost monolithic. While the characters in each show can freely transform without issue (assuming that the transformation is not narratively acknowledged and thus obtrusive), there

⁸ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brains?*, (Fordham University Press, 2008).

is no such possibility for the cartoon worlds. When the cartoon worlds transform, it is most commonly figured as apocalyptic, if not at least deeply unpleasant. These changes are only ever figured as destructive and worrying; there are no obvious redemptive qualities to these changes.

In the thesis that follows, I argue that ambivalence toward abstraction in contemporary cartoon animation both literally and aesthetically expresses a broader ambivalence toward monetary abstraction in present neoliberal America through its highly asymmetrical use of the medium's plasticity. The plastic potential animation offers its cartoon characters and spaces is presented rather dismally in these cartoons: A character's plasticity is suppressed and refigured into simple flexibility, itself a carefully controlled form of plasticity that denies a character's ability to reshape their worlds. In stark contrast, the world's plasticity is almost entirely repressed, appearing only at moments to be demonstrated as undesirable and thus worthy of rejection. However, as dismissive and grim as this aesthetic attitude toward plasticity may seem, I do see some latent redemptive potential in the non-diegetic comedic uses of plasticity in these shows. The fact that these shows regularly present any form of plasticity as frequently and as consistently positive, natural, and enjoyable, is rather remarkable in the landscape of current mainstream children's animation.

My thesis further develops and complicates the neochartalist aesthetic theory developed by Scott Ferguson.⁹ Ferguson's essential provocation is that all art centrally contends with tensions and anxieties about the money relation, but most post-Renaissance art operates with the Liberal misunderstanding of money as a tangible "thisness." Neochartalism, also known as Modern Monetary Theory (MMT), reasserts that money is an abstract, and thus boundless, public utility that motivates labor when a state body introduces a tax obligation. In contrast, the Liberal

⁹ Ferguson, *Declarations*.

conception of money treats is as a private good that is discovered or created in a supposedly independent marketplace. Because this understanding of money renders it a finite resource that cannot be freely created, there has been much hand-wringing economic discourse on money flowing out of economies and otherwise disappearing. Ferguson argues that the aesthetic project, particularly after the 1970s, has been acting out the tensions and anxieties caused by this Liberal misunderstanding of money by suppressing, marginalizing, or otherwise negating its own abstraction, since money's inherently abstract nature is misunderstood anxiously as evidence that it can all disappear and disintegrate suddenly. Put differently, Liberal aversion to money's abstractness is translated as a general aversion to aesthetic abstraction. This is done by "negating and recuperating [aesthetic abstraction], though in divergent manners."¹⁰ Aesthetic abstraction is negated thorough its association with bad actors and oppressive worlds; it is recuperated when it is refigured as a more proximate, tangible entity or when it is entirely displaced in the past and framed nostalgically. In either case, aesthetic abstraction is either outright maligned and rejected or it is limited to a past that cannot immanently affect the present. The term "haecceity," or "thinness," captures the link between the broad aesthetic impulse to render its abstract creations as tangible and the Liberal insistence that money is indeed a tangible resource.¹¹ While this basic process of negation and recuperation is certainly observable in cartoons, they occur on slightly different terms. Abstraction, in the form of cartoons' plasticity, is very clearly negated when the characters diegetically transform or when the world transforms at all. However, the cartoons' plasticity is embraced when the characters transform non-diegetically to express the shows' style. While this works with the recuperative project of placing limits upon abstraction, the term "refiguration" seems more applicable in this context.

¹⁰ Ferguson, *Declarations*, 188.

¹¹ Ferguson, *Declarations*, 47.

In the succeeding sections, I explicate both the critical and redemptive aspects of my argument. First, I show how diegetic character plasticity, which threatens to change the cartoon world or our relation to it, is anxiously depicted as undesirable. I then make the case that the plasticity of cartoon worlds is depicted in far more extreme, negative terms that quite explicitly connect it to the apocalypse. Finally, I assert that in spite of these major limitations, both *OK KO* and *Gumball* are nonetheless represent some kind of progression in the aesthetic project since they regularly depict at least non-diegetic character plasticity as both pleasurable and even positive. I end by asserting that these shows reveal that the ultimate limitation of contemporary animated aesthetics is not simply the asymmetrical mobilization of the plasticity of cartoon characters and worlds but also a much larger (and equally arbitrary) division between the diegetic and non-diegetic.

THE NERVOUS PLASTICITY OF CARTOON BODIES

Although all animated characters, particularly non-CGI characters, have a latent plastic potential, this inherent quality of animated characters is only seldom explored in much contemporary animated media. Some shows, such as *We Bear Bears* and *The Loud House*, set this potential so far to the wayside that aside from some light cartoon physics (i.e., characters being able to easily incur physical harm with few/no consequences) and elements that may require some suspension of disbelief (i.e., talking bears or genius grade-schoolers who engage with sci-fi level technologies), they could conceivably be shot in live action. This is not the case in shows like *OK KO* and *Gumball*, which make the plastic bodies of their characters a part of the spectacle. Most shows fall somewhere between the hyper-plasticity of *OK KO* and the limited plasticity of *We Bear Bears* in terms of how heavily they engage with their characters' plastic potential, with each show representing the extremes of how contemporary animated media deals with animated characters' plasticity.¹²

Characters in both *OK KO* and *Gumball* are remarkably plastic, to the point that the way each show uses the plasticity of their characters is a defining feature for both. In spite of how important this plasticity is to each show's appeal and success, the shows themselves express a rather ambivalent attitude toward their character's plastic bodies. In the present section, I explore

¹² I am deliberately not engaging with more volumetric examples of computer animation, such as those found in Pixar films, since they are generally made with software and algorithms that impose real limitations on what can and cannot be rendered easily. To name one example, the technology these productions use make it so that contiguous space is always preserved, limiting the animated worlds' plasticity. The software these shows use do not necessarily impose this aesthetic limitation. This, combined with these productions' considerably larger budget, means that these larger productions are working with appreciably different aesthetic considerations than the smaller ones I examine here.

the more anxious, negative expressions of these show's attitudes toward their plastic characters, which renders their plasticity simple flexibility. This privileging of flexibility mirrors both neoliberal market demands on labor and the ambivalence that arises from the objectively useful but conceptually challenging aspect of money's plasticity.

Whenever characters are acknowledged as having transformed (thus recognizing their inherent plasticity) within an episode, this usually means trouble for the central cast, even if the major transformation may be initially enjoyable for the characters affected. *OK KO* features a number of straightforward examples. In "Just be a Pebble" (S1, E13), KO becomes giant after eating a candy bar. At first, he is happy to no longer be so small, but as he inadvertently causes more destruction in the plaza, he wishes to return to his regular size. After some more hijinks, he is ultimately able to return to his normal size by eating magical burritos.¹³ In another episode, "We've Got Fleas!" (S1, E27), KO and his friends all decide to become anthropomorphic animals to better combat a robotic wild cat. They are initially delighted by their new identities, but they soon wish to return to their everyday, human forms. Unlike the previously discussed episode, however, they are ultimately unable to return to their previous forms. The episode does not even end on a note where they learn to accept their new forms; if anything, it reasserts how regrettable their situation is when they discover that much of the non-humanoid cast desires to be human as well.¹⁴ Both episodes emphasize the transformations as they happen. "Pebble" has KO enlarge across seven shots, six of which involve KO unwittingly destroying the bodega and one in which the cast look up in horror as he becomes giant. "Fleas" has the characters transform one at a time,

¹³ Even within this example, this anxious character plasticity is unpredictably embedded within the world, at least for the viewers. In fact, the origins of much of this sort of diegetic, anxious character plasticity is similarly bizarre and also strangely food-related, i.e., a *Gumball* episode I later investigate involves the kids accidentally eating protein powder to suddenly mature.

¹⁴ Although this may sound like this would be a major disruption to the show's status quo, particularly because this is an example of diegetic character plasticity, the episode "resolves" by KO and his friends just wearing human costumes. On rare occasions, later episodes reference this shift, but only very briefly.

emphasizing each major transformative change (growing fur, fangs, tails, etc) with a closeup. The general technique used to depict these transformations is reminiscent of transformations in body horror sequences, such as the one in *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), which was likely intentional since Rad openly speculates that he is transforming into a werewolf. Taken together, it is easy to interpret these episodes as expressing an anxiety that being as plastic and mutable as these characters can lead to one losing oneself.

Gumball similarly expresses anxiety toward plasticity, but in a way that makes it a far more devastating problem. In “The Mustache” (S1, E26), for example, Gumball and Darwin suddenly and unexpectedly go through puberty and physically mature into adulthood. Much like the episodes in *OK KO*, this transformation is emphasized in the episode. We see Darwin suddenly grow his first pimple and, after Gumball points it out, we cut to a view of Gumball from inside the pimple. Later on, after the two run into a bathroom, the show cross cuts between their teacher explaining the signs of puberty, such as hair growth, and them experiencing it.¹⁵ Finally, when we see the two suddenly become taller and develop muscles, it is done primarily in one shot wherein their bodies gradually inflate in a grotesquely uneven manner. Although these transformations are terrifying and off-putting as they happen, once they are complete and the boys understand what has happened, they are thrilled. They are excited to do adult things, like voting, test-driving cars, and paying more to see movies. By the end of the episode, however, they want to go back to being children because they realize that they are unprepared for adulthood.

This episode clearly links the plasticity of the cartoon bodies to monetary concerns, as the pair only start to regret their transformation when they register that they need money in order to buy things, and they need a job in order to get money. While interviewing with an employment

¹⁵ Interestingly, when this happens, the boys also compare themselves to a monstrous werewolf.

agency, we learn that that they have no skills. When pressed, Gumball shows off how he can roll his stomach, demonstrating his plasticity once more. Gumball and Darwin's breaking point only comes when, having no "marketable skills" and unable to pay any bills, they are forced to briefly live in abject poverty. In this way, "The Mustache" plays out this anxiety toward character plasticity in far more dramatic manner than *OK KO* ever does. At worst, KO's sudden bigness may have kept him from hanging out with his friends as much as he normally does; "The Mustache" does not end until Gumball and Darwin are in tears and cowering in their dilapidated apartment in fear of the landlord coming to collect rent they cannot pay.

This nervousness surrounding character plasticity is also dramatized in the fully plastic figures of shapeshifters in both shows. Although every character in *OK KO* and *Gumball* do regularly distort and shapeshift, it is understood that they are not actually able to transform themselves within the diegesis of their cartoons. That said, both shows feature characters who are established as shapeshifters within their series. *Gumball* has both Penny and Clayton, while *OK KO* has Shannon. *OK KO* maligns its shapeshifting character; Shannon is an evil robot created by the villainous Lord Boxman to attack the plaza. As a result, most of her transformations are violent and destructive. On top of that, Shannon is one of (if not the) most abrasive characters in the show. She constantly puts down her robot brothers (particularly her younger brother Darrell) and often speaks to other characters condescendingly. This may be surprising given that *OK KO* does not generally present character plasticity as a devastating problem, but this is in fact consistent with the attitude it expresses toward character plasticity. After all, *OK KO* is not inherently against plasticity (particularly since it adopts its characters' plasticity as a core part of its aesthetic), but the show does present it as a force that needs to be controlled and moderated effectively in order to be productive, or at least not outright destructive.

Gumball, on the other hand, presents its shapeshifting in a far more sympathetic, nuanced way that plays out neoliberal ideas of how individuals should and should not utilize their plasticity and the anxieties embedded within this dichotomy. Clayton is largely a minor character, but he has played a major role in three episodes to date. In these episodes, he generally acts as an antagonist. He is a pathological liar who often causes trouble for Gumball and Darwin by using his shapeshifting abilities to impersonate others. Unlike Shannon, however, his actions are not presented as malicious. Instead, the show makes it clear that his lies and antics come from a deep sense of insecurity and loneliness; basically, he thinks he is a boring, uninteresting person and the only way he can make friends is through deceit. We see here how fully plastic individuals are still suspect and can be a problem, but that this unfettered plasticity may in fact be recoverable.

Penny presents us with a much more complicated case. Through the character of Penny, Gumball's girlfriend, we see that the full plastic capabilities of shapeshifting can be figured as threatening even when the character itself is presented sympathetically. In "The Shell," Penny comes out of her shell to reveal her true self, both literally and figuratively. When she first emerges from her shell, she mistakes Gumball's awe-struck silence as outright rejection and goes on a rampage. Her outer appearance shifts to reflect the various emotions through which she quickly cycles. She turns into a dragon when she is angry at her father, a small troll when she is ashamed of her appearance, and a tiny ghost when she feels small and insignificant. Although Penny is not intentionally destructive or disruptive like Shannon or Clayton, she nonetheless puts others in danger. By the end of the episode, Gumball assures her that he still cares about her, and so she calms down and returns to her new base form. After this episode, Penny's ability to shapeshift is not seriously brought up again. This more sympathetic take on shapeshifting characters may be surprising in a show that catastrophizes diegetic character plasticity, but, again, this is consistent

with the show's attitude toward character plasticity. Afterall, Gumball and Darwin regularly struggle with their own plastic bodies. It is thus possible for characters predicated on plasticity to be redeemable across both shows, but only if their plasticity is seriously reined in and controlled in the same way that the non-shapeshifting characters' plasticity is curbed.

The anxieties connected to this sort of sudden, unpredictable character plasticity can be clearly and easily linked to anxieties toward monetary plasticity. Much of the antipathy toward character plasticity in these episodes emerge from concerns that it may be unproductive and, more pressingly, that the characters are unable to cleanly "fit in" with their worlds. In "Just be a Pebble" KO only becomes distressed with his giantness after his boss tells him in no uncertain terms that he cannot work in the plaza at his size. In fact, KO makes himself variously shrink and grow to get his boss's keys and keep his job. The characters only agree to transform in "We've Got Fleas!" after they are unable to defeat a robot sent by Lord Boxman, which is something they are expected to do in their job. They only want to drop it after this transformation is no longer productive, since they become too busy gnawing at their fleas to work. "The Mustache" plays out this concern incredibly clearly through Gumball and Darwin's sudden maturation, particularly in the job interview scene. It is not necessarily that these transformations are bad in and of themselves (hence why the characters often enjoy the change for a time), but they become problematic only in the context of a capitalist system that they are unable to navigate without either controlling or entirely undoing these transformations. In other words, *OK KO* and *Gumball* show us that the plasticity itself is not a problem so long as it is in service to capital. For the most part, it is only plasticity that is carefully regulated and controlled to be productive is affirmed.

Thus, what these characters experience is not true plasticity, but rather what Malabou would derisively label as "flexibility." To Malabou, plasticity entails the subject's ability to not

only be shaped by external forces, but also to actively shape itself and things around it. Flexibility, on the other hand, only entails the former without the latter. A flexible object can be shaped and reshaped by the world, but it cannot truly shape itself and it certainly cannot affect things around it. This makes flexibility an asset for labor in a neoliberal economy: As markets change and move quickly, labor is expected to similarly adapt itself in order to keep up. This attitude has led to many abusive, exploitative business practices, since it asks a lot of labor while trying to give back as little as possible. As a result, it is much more difficult for many skilled and unskilled workers to find real job security. While unskilled labor has historically been under-appreciated, the de-valuing of skilled labor to the degree we see it today is a new phenomenon. Rather than hiring writers, graphic designers, animators, programmers, etc, larger companies in many industries are much more likely to hire people on a contracting or freelancing basis. In fact, in the game industry, larger publishers engage in the practice of scheduled lay-offs; every 90 days or so, newer hires are fired and replaced so that the company does not have to pay for their health insurance. Because of this lack of job security, it is not uncommon for people to have multiple jobs over a life time as opposed to a few, longer-term careers. Furthermore, due to wages not keeping pace with the rising cost of living, it is similarly normal for most people to have multiple jobs at once.

Given this context, it is little wonder that character plasticity is met with some kind of antipathy, and that this antipathy normally at least references jobs and the economy, since the creators themselves are or have been expected to be as economically flexible as the bodies of their cartoon characters. That said, monetary plasticity is not intrinsically destructive or bad. Neoliberal capitalism and those living within it recognize this to some degree, as money's abstraction and plasticity enable things such as digital transactions that make transactions faster and easier than ever and lines of credit that allow people to spend money they do not actually have. Money's

inherent abstraction has always been a part of non-barter market economies, but more modern technologies and bank practices have brought this abstraction even closer to the surface in recent decades. This combined with the exploitative manner that neoliberal capital appeals to an individual, privatized sense of self-efficacy through adaptive plasticity (or rather flexibility) re-centers plasticity itself as the primary source of these anxieties, the problem to be solved, and generally one put upon individuals to figure out for themselves. Because money is so intimately involved with the aesthetic project, the contemporary aesthetic project reflects this.

Neochartalism does away with this anxiety by openly acknowledging money as an abstract unit of account that emerges from a distant central body (i.e., the state) rather than as tangible unit of exchange created by unimplicated, private entities. These two simple albeit major adjustments to how we conceptualize money have long-reaching social and political consequences. First, it asks us to recognize ourselves not simply as discrete, private individuals, but also as implicated actors in a broader community. This shifts collective action of any kind (advocacy, unionization, etc) into not simply a matter of personal ethical choices but frankly the only way to realistically and effectively address major problems. Put differently, it put the onus on mutually implicated groups of people to solve broader problems rather than on individuals to navigate them. Secondly, this allows money to simply be where it needs to be. Because money does not need to be tied to any tangible “thisness,” it can be freely issued to causes or groups that need it.¹⁶ This cuts so deeply against wide latent assumptions about how money operates and is so consequential that it is difficult for many to conceive of money as this comfortably abstract (no)thing. The aesthetic project, then, which cannot do away with its abstraction, would be a good place to start reorienting

¹⁶ To clarify, MMT does not assert that money can be printed entirely freely or that it is tied to absolutely nothing. MMT economists and theorists acknowledge that inflation can happen this way. However, MMT ties the value of money to the labor it motivates. Money can thus be freely printed if it is ultimately issued to motivate any kind of labor.

our sensorium to the positive possibilities of monetary plasticity and wider abstraction. In addition, the aesthetic project itself would benefit by embracing its own plasticity more comfortably since this would open up new expressive possibilities and ways for the viewer to relate to the aesthetic object itself.

An episode of *Gumball* titled “The Kids” (S3, E1) perhaps best captures this twin anxiety of monetary and cartoon character plasticity and the limitations they pose. In this episode, Gumball and Darwin’s voices start to radically change. At first, they try to ignore it, but they eventually become concerned enough to see a doctor. The doctor explains that their voices are not *broken* as they thought, but rather that their voices are *breaking*, signaling the start of adolescence. Unlike in “The Mustache,” Gumball and Darwin are at no point excited about physically maturing. The two try and work through this anxiety in the number “Make the Most of It,” much of which celebrates their freedom from monetary and economic demands. What is particularly fascinating about this sequence is how thoroughly it weaves positive portrayals of character plasticity with more anxious ones. During the chorus, Gumball and Darwin are drawn in a radically different style and regularly flow and shift from one form to the next. However, this strange, fun sequence abruptly ends when the characters’ voices suddenly and unpredictably become deeper, when it is clear that their plasticity cannot be rendered into simple flexibility since it happens on its own.

Yet what makes this episode so fascinating is the meta-narrative reason for its existence. *Gumball*, unlike most animated shows, actually casts children to voice the main children characters in the show. At this point, the actors voicing Gumball and Darwin were actually starting puberty, and thus had to be replaced. “The Kids” was the final episode the original voice actors worked on, and this episode exists to acknowledge within the show that the characters’ voices have changed and they indeed sound “even younger than before.” The children working on the show, much like

the characters in the show, are forced to confront the problems that uncontrollable plasticity poses in a neoliberal economy. Because their plasticity cannot be controlled in a productive, capitalist way, both the cartoon characters and the real voice actors have to face direct economic consequences.

The plasticity of cartoon characters is framed highly anxiously in children's media because of the broader anxiety and struggles to cope with neoliberal capital's uneasy, unethical engagement with monetary plasticity. The nervous manner in which characters grow, shrink, or otherwise transform suddenly at once reflects the lived struggles of individuals endeavoring to maintain a high degree of flexibility while also allegorizing the limited but nonetheless fraught acknowledgment neoliberal capital extends to money's ontological abstractness. The artists behind *OK KO* and *Gumball* must recognize this on some level as the characters' anxieties toward their transformations are commonly connected to broader economic concerns. However, as loaded as plastic cartoon bodies may be, the cartoon worlds themselves play out this nervousness far more dramatically since they deal with money's even more (supposedly) frightening potential to change things around it.

THE CATASTROPHIC PLASTICITY OF CARTOON WORLDS

When compared to the aesthetic and narrative strangeness of the cartoon characters in *OK KO* and *Gumball*, the cartoon worlds they inhabit are quasi-naturalistic. Though anxiously so, the characters in both shows are fantastical (*OK KO* stars superheroes, *Gumball* has a mixed-media cast) and highly plastic in a largely whimsical manner. Yet the worlds of both *OK KO* and *Gumball*, aside from their aesthetic and narrative quirks, are relatively grounded and firm, such that they are often at least somewhat resemble our own. Looking past the superpowered characters of *OK KO* and the shenanigans in *Gumball*, the primary settings of each are recognizable within our own world and are not particularly fantastical. *OK KO* largely takes place in a bodega in a strip mall, and *Gumball* typically takes place in an ordinary, midsized town. More significantly, the worlds are also strikingly different from the characters in terms of how their plasticity is engaged.

While the characters in these shows are easily mutable and plastic, the worlds themselves are immutable and rigid. Unlike the characters, the worlds of both *OK KO* and *Gumball* seldom transform or behave in an erratic manner, not even as a brief gag. However, this is not to suggest that the plasticity of these animated worlds are never explored or utilized in these shows; rather, this plasticity is rarely mobilized. On these rare occasions, though, the world's plasticity is always framed in a negative manner. At best, the plasticity of the worlds of *OK KO* and *Gumball* is a disconcerting, disorienting obstacle for the characters to overcome. At worst (and far more commonly), this plasticity is downright apocalyptic. Moreover, the way both shows problematize their plasticity imbues animation as a medium and its inherent plasticity with this nervous tension.

Monetary plasticity is clearly conflated with this plasticity to an even greater degree than character plasticity because while money's plastic ability to reshape itself is at least somewhat useful for capital, its ability to alter or disrupt the status quo is only figured as threatening. Both *OK KO* and *Gumball* play out neoliberal unease with major shifts caused by money's intrinsic abstraction by largely only addressing the plastic of their worlds as existentially terrifying at best and threatening a globalized scarcity and disintegration at worst.

Before delving into how each show frames the plasticity of its world negatively, it is important to note that this framing has not been the default manner that cartoons engage with their own plasticity. For example, the "hand of the animator" trope that opened many early animated shorts, perhaps most famously in the *Out of the Inkwell* series, openly acknowledged the essentially abstract and hence plastic nature of the cartoon world. Later in these cartoons, the animator often reshapes the plastic animated world. However, the most dire consequences of this meddling are framed as simply inconveniencing the animated character, which is itself presented jokingly, as part of the fun of the short. The cartoon's mere existence as an abstract creation is not a cause for existential terror or a universe-shattering unraveling; in fact, these early shorts exult in their plasticity in this way. Midcentury Warner Bros cartoons maintained this comfortable engagement with the plasticity of cartoon world. This can be most easily and directly observed in "Duck Amuck" (1953), since it invokes the "hand of the animator" trope, but it can be seen in a number of other Warner Bros shorts as well. For instance, Wile E Coyote and Road Runner shorts routinely feature gags that challenge our understanding of the world's physical forces and reality. Most famously, gravity is only an operative force when the Coyote notices that he is floating in the air. A cliff that is already on the ground falls with the Coyote on it while the Road Runner is free to stand on a floating rock. The Coyote paints a tunnel on a wall that the Road Runner can run

through, but when he tries to chase after him, it is suddenly just a flat image again. In all of these examples, the malleable reality of the cartoon world, its inherently abstract nature, is just as much a part of the appeal as the plastic bodies of the characters, even in spite of the fact that many of the backgrounds are generally quite static.

This is simply not the case in either *OK KO* or *Gumball*, where events like these are more commonly connected to some kind of reality-shattering apocalypse that strikingly implicates the plasticity of the animated world. Although this tendency can be seen across both shows, it plays out in a milder, less extreme form in *OK KO*. *OK KO* has far fewer examples of its animated world behaving in a plastic manner than *Gumball*, likely because *Gumball* has been on air for longer than *OK KO*¹⁷. That said, there have been two particularly notable examples of *OK KO* exploring the plasticity of its world: “Your World Is an Illusion” (S2, E7) and “We Got Hacked” (S1, E37).

In “Your World Is an Illusion,” KO is told by Holo-Jane that his world is not real. At first, KO dismisses her claim as obviously ludicrous, but when he notices small illogical inconsistencies in his reality, such as never running out of nachos even though he only bought ten, he takes her claim far more seriously. This ultimately triggers an anxious existential crisis, culminating in KO wandering in an abstract black space where he passes concept art and collides with the viewer’s screen. He is only comforted when Jane later insists that at least the relationships he has built in his unreal, abstract world are in fact real. In this way, the abstract plasticity of the cartoon world is framed highly anxiously, as psychologically and emotionally disruptive. “We Got Hacked” thus positions the plasticity of the animated medium as broadly apocalyptic, thus charging the form of animation itself with an intense anxiety, but particularly when this plasticity is explored in the cartoon worlds.

¹⁷ As of this writing, *OK KO* is on its second season and *Gumball* is in its sixth. *OK KO* premiered in 2017 and *Gumball* premiered way back in 2011.

The origins of these types of catastrophes are consistently embedded in the world. The episode starts when KO is unable to clean the bodega because his mop is malfunctioning. His tech-savvy friend, Dendy, offers to help him repair it, but everything goes horribly wrong when he accidentally gives the mop a virus by clicking on pop-up ads. Unfortunately, this virus seemingly seeps into the code of the broader world as well, and eventually starts to infect KO's coworkers. As each character becomes infected, they become horrifying, glitchy CGI zombie versions of themselves. Even as this episode problematizes its plasticity in general, it is nonetheless notable that the source of this calamity was a character trying to productively utilize the plastic nature of their world.

Not coincidentally, the episodes that explore the plasticity of the animated worlds and frame it as apocalyptic and negative echo the neoliberal and (to a lesser extent) Marxist anxieties over money as a medium. Both view money's plasticity as an inherent problem, albeit for very different reasons: Neoliberal capitalists view any substantive change to the status quo as innately dangerous since, much of the time, these changes threaten their power or the power of their moneyed benefactors. Because Marxists commonly point to the existence of money itself as the central problem with political economy, they regard most changes money can bring about with suspicion. In both cases, the central anxiety is that money's plasticity is a destructive force that needs to be controlled if not outright suppressed. This echoes both *OK KO* and *Gumball*'s formal and aesthetic apprehension toward their plasticity more broadly, but more specifically toward the plasticity of their cartoon worlds. Major, lasting aesthetic changes and other violations to each shows' status quos are framed as disruptive and in need of correction if not outright negation. *OK KO* and *Gumball* can only openly explore their constructed nature in the context of existential

crises and apocalypses, which are themselves commonly brought on by some major change to each show's status quo.

The plasticity of the world in *Gumball* is particularly apocalyptic and rather overtly connected to problems of neoliberal political economy and the Liberal money form. The Liberal form of money is concrete rather than abstract, bound and limited rather than boundless, and generally rigid and non-plastic. In an episode titled "The Money" (S3, E40), disaster strikes the Watterson family when they are unable to pay for their meals at a fast food establishment because Richard (the bumbling father) lost all of their money. At first, things are simply tense within the family as their furniture, house, and even lawn is repossessed. However, things get more chaotic as the family starts to experience glitches in their animation. Much like the glitches in "We Got Hacked," these glitches trouble the plasticity of the characters' bodies (the first glitches they experience are tied only to their movement), but the plasticity of the world is much more clearly the focus, as the animated town of Elmore deteriorates and disintegrates around them. Surfaces lose their texture, moving objects become simple, jittering polygons, and objects start clipping into one another. Eventually, the world and characters are reduced to their non-animated storyboards, and finally the characters are rendered as crude stick figures on sticky notes with no background. Gumball explains these phenomena as he declares first that, "without money, you're nothing," and then more alarmingly, "[w]hen you don't have money your whole world falls apart!"

The plasticity of the animated world is further thematized as globally apocalyptic and overtly connected to money's plasticity via employment in "The Job" (S2, E8). The episode starts when Richard, who is normally unemployed due to his laziness, informs his family that he got a job delivering pizzas. Nicole, the mother, instructs her sons to watch over Richard throughout the day, as something simply feels "off" to her. Even as her daughter insists to her that the additional

income from this job is a good thing for the family, Nicole is vindicated throughout the day by foreboding omens (such as the causeless spiderwebbing of a family portrait organized around the father) and later strange occurrences (such as tap water flowing upwards from the faucet) that indicate that something is indeed wrong. It is ultimately revealed that the father's employment fundamentally disrupts the order of the universe, to the point that the universe starts to tear itself asunder more and more as Richard nears the end of his first shift. Gravity shuts off, entire parts of the world start to dissolve, and certain characters get caught in animation loops. With this realization, the rest of the family tails the father with his boss to get him fired before the universe is entirely destroyed. As they near the heart of the anomaly, the group, at one point, gets caught in a mobius strip-like loop, and, at another, face disruptive waves of energy that alter their style and medium (i.e., at one point, each character is just presented as the actual animals / objects that they are). The episode concludes when Richard's boss fires him, after discovering that Richard has been eating the pizzas he was supposed to be delivering.

The aesthetics of both *OK KO* and *Gumball* play out the anxieties that emerge from the Liberal understanding of money and its plasticity. This is only natural since everyone involved in the creation of each show exists in a globalized neoliberal economy, and thus the problems surrounding it and the Liberal form of money are simply a part of their daily existence. It is thus not shocking that money, jobs, and the economy are commonly referenced quite directly. In fact, both *OK KO* and *Gumball* not only directly thematize these things across episodes, they further implicate them in these apocalyptic episodes that explore plasticity as partially or entirely responsible for their worlds coming apart.

The plasticity of the cartoon world is so deeply distrusted that, unlike the character plasticity, it cannot be even initially enjoyed, even if it is trying to be implemented to serve capital.

In “We Got Hacked!,” Dendy’s ability to manipulate the plasticity of her animated world and KO’s inability to manage this responsibly causes this threat of global disintegration. However, the entire reason they started messing with the world’s code is because KO was struggling to do his job. The opening scene of this episode has KO’s boss yelling at him and his coworkers to do their jobs better and more quickly. KO uses his “power mop” to try and clean the store more efficiently, but this just results in a mess so big that the store needs to be shut down for the day. It is under the threat of business suspending for one day and KO’s difficulties to perform his job duties that he gets his friend to help him troubleshoot his mop and interface with the code of the world. Broken down this way, it is rather easy to read this episode as a reflection or affirmation of neoliberalism’s distrust toward abstraction even above its over whelming concern for the well-being of businesses.

While there are certainly economic themes and concerns embedded into the aesthetics and narratives of *OK KO, Gumball* makes these subtextual, implicit concerns an explicit part of its text. *Gumball* is an interesting case because these apocalyptic events are commonly be caused by or directly reference money and markets. For example, “The Job” directly plays out implicit neoliberal anxieties and assumptions about the necessity of an un- / under-employed class. The destructive plasticity of the world is directly linked to some kind of major change to the family’s economic status quo. However, this change is positive, as the daughter reminds us throughout the episode. After all, the father getting any kind of employment, even part-time employment that pays minimum wage, would help the family’s financial situation. The show itself regularly acknowledges that the Watterson family is a part of the working poor and that they can barely afford to survive paycheck to paycheck. Yet this cannot be, as this episode makes the stability of the cartoon world contingent upon unemployment, and more specifically on the poverty of the family, since this real attempt to alter this causes an apocalypse. Thus the show is at once

acknowledging how unpleasant the world it has created is while also, in a rather Thatcherian way, insisting that there is not any other way the world could operate. Any real change to the state of the cartoon world in *Gumball* either outright causes or is directly connected to the dissolution of the world, in a way that lines up rather clearly with the implicit neoliberal assumption that it is both acceptable and natural for people to be un- and underemployed.

“The Money” similarly plays off the neoliberal fear of (ironically self-imposed) scarcity and the resulting dissolution of reality as we know it. After all, the animation starts to only really break down after the main character unequivocally declares that without money “your whole world falls apart!” While the text of the episode mostly speaks for itself as a direct representation of neoliberal anxiety, the conditions under which this episode was made are worth exploring. Much like “The Kids,” there is an interesting meta-narrative reason for this episode’s existence. Ben Bocquelet, the creator of the show and a writer behind this specific episode, explained that this was the Season Three finale. By this point, the team had used up most of the show’s budget. The production team, much like the Watterson family, had run out of money and were scrambling to finish the season in spite of this. In this way, money’s imposed scarcity and absence threatens to dissolve the world both on- and off-screen. This insistence on money’s necessary, tangible “thisness” is thus clearly thematized in “The Money” and its destructive scarcity is explored through the plasticity of the cartoon world. The shows retroactively justify their limited engagement with the plasticity of their worlds by only deeply engaging with it when they are in the process of catastrophizing it.

In fact, “The Job” and “The Money” are particularly illustrative of the tensions and inconsistencies inherent in the neoliberal worldview that is so caught up in the Liberal form of money. On one hand, the absence of money in “The Money” is the cause of the world unravelling,

at least for the main family. On the other hand, when the family is granted the possibility of improving their socioeconomic situation in “The Job,” of having more money, it is also implicated as disastrous, this time for the entirety of the world. At best, this can be interpreted as a pretty clear demonstration of an anxious ambivalence towards money. At worst, and perhaps more accurately, this reads as an explicit acknowledgement *and* acceptance of the consequences of imposing monetary scarcity. Yes, the Watsons are poor and, as demonstrated by “The Money,” almost constantly on the brink of financial and literal dissolution. However, the show also clearly tells us that their state of poverty is preferable to the threat of the world falling apart as it does in “The Job.” Besides, the real consequences of the family’s dire financial straits are seemingly written off and easily mitigated in “The Money,” when the family is able to afford basic necessities once again after agreeing to star in a demeaning commercial for a fast food chain. In this way, the episode seems to imply that the needless scarcity caused by the highly hands-off approach to political economy that neoliberalism advocates for can be resolved by capital and the free markets themselves. One only needs to believe in it enough and cooperate.

Up to this point, I’ve discussed how these shows are anxious about the plasticity of their worlds aesthetically and formally and how this anxiety is formally and narratively connected to neoliberal anxieties toward money’s plasticity. However, this anxiety toward plasticity is also operative in how these shows cope with their status as serialized, episodic media. To characterize these shows’ uneasiness with their own plasticity, it is again helpful to look at how unconcerned earlier cartoons were with their episodic, serialized mediation.

The episodic, serialized mediation of many cartoon series has not, in the past, been a major issue.¹⁸ Cartoons as early as Felix the Cat and Mickey Mouse were entirely unconcerned with

¹⁸ Furniss, Maureen, *A New History of Animation*, (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2016), 110-137.

maintaining any kind of continuity. In one short, Felix is owned by a human and Mickey lives on a farm; in a later short, Felix has a family and no owner and Mickey lives in Los Angeles. The shorts do little to explain these major shifts narratively or, as the studios adopted different art styles, aesthetically. This early attitude takes on another dimension in midcentury Warner Bros cartoons. In one cartoon, Donald Duck is in space as Duck Dodgers; in another, he's feuding with Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd on Earth. However, this lack of continuity and consequence is carried over into the shorts themselves. All of these cartoons famously feature a lot of cartoon violence with characters regularly being squashed, blown up, or even shot in the face. However, there are virtually no catastrophic or irreversible consequences for this violence; rather, it is presented as part of the fun. Because Wile E Coyote is not an animated coyote, he can sustain multiple major injuries throughout a single short and without the short itself lingering on them. This feature of these episodic, serialized shorts is utilized freely and without regard for whether or not it "makes sense" in the cartoon worlds that have been created, since there is a tacit understanding that it really does not have to make sense.

This is simply not the case for episodic, serialized televised cartoons today. *OK KO*, like many other popular largely episodic cartoon series, oddly insists on establishing a continuity. Although largely episodic, the show supplies an over-arching narrative that is only seriously developed and addressed directly a few times in the season. This narrative concerns KO gradually discovering and learning to control what turns out to be his extensive powers. Although more immediate, pressing changes to the status quo may be introduced, such as when Enid stops working at the bodega to go to a boarding school, these are generally resolved over the course of about three to six episodes. Aside from these specific sets of episodes, the other episodes can be watched in virtually any order with little being lost. This sort of part-episodic, part-continuous approach to

the show's seriality is seen across most successful contemporary cartoon series, including *Stephen Universe*, *Adventure Time*, *Star vs The Forces of Evil*, *Gravity Falls*, *Rick and Morty*, and even, to a much lesser extent, *Gumball*.¹⁹ This expresses a discomfort with the plasticity of the animated worlds that are further enabled by their episodic, serialized structure, as these shows seek to create a continuity that can explain any fantastical features of the world or simply create continuity for its own sake. In other words, contemporary animation harbors such unease toward its own plasticity that even the basic format of episodic serialization is subject to arbitrary, self-imposed limitations by establishing continuity.

Gumball, on the other hand, largely maintains its episodic format. Every episode, regardless of how the last episode ended, starts at the show's status quo. However, the show nonetheless feels compelled to justify this accepted part of its format in "The Finale" (S2, E40). In this episode, the family is confronted with the various consequences of their innumerable misadventures in Elmore. The episode opens with the family on the couch laughing and acknowledging simple weird inconsistencies in their reality, such as the time that the children fell from a ludicrous height and walked away unscathed. However, things quickly escalate when they are confronted with more disastrous outcome of their misadventures, such as the time when they caused the destruction of most of Elmore by inciting a giant to go on a rampage. Between this and countless other instances of hospitalization and property damage, the family is once again thrown into a crisis of scarcity: They simply cannot afford to pay for their share of all of the damages they have incurred. At first, they simply decide to deal with the situation by trying to calmly reason their way out of it, but when this does not work, they decide to do what they do best by making

¹⁹ It is incredibly minor, but there is a slow development for the character Penny and her relationship with Gumball. They become closer until they are explicitly dating by Season Three. In "The Shell" (S3, E 20), Penny also transforms by literally breaking out of her shell. This is the only somewhat major instance of continuity that the show has tried to establish thus far.

things worse. Toward the end of the episode, people connected to the various (and generally financial) consequences of their actions, past and present, surround and are slowly encroaching on them to collect. Gumball declares that the only thing that can save them is some sort of reality reset, and then the credits roll. Thus, in this episode we see an ironic acknowledgement of the otherwise easily accepted episodic structure of the animated sitcom format. In this way, the show expresses some kind of unease toward its essentially episodic structure. *Gumball* thus struggles to freely accept its inherent plasticity in its broadest sense, even within its essential structural logic. This general disease with non-continuous storytelling is likely connected to how money is understood as a medium in neoliberal society: Money cannot just be and appear where and as it needs to, it *must* move through space contiguously, just as these otherwise episodic shows must move through some sort of narrative continuously.

By examining how anxiously both *OK KO* and *Gumball* engage with the plasticity of their worlds and of the animated medium as a whole, it is easy to see how, in spite of how strange they are, they easily fit into the neoliberal aesthetic project. However, to write off both *OK KO* and *Gumball* as simply trapped at the same aesthetic dead end as most contemporary media would be to do each show a major disservice. Although both shows are generally apprehensive about their plasticity, they nonetheless choose to engage in that plasticity with far greater regularity than most other mainstream animated media. This would suggest that, in spite of each show's tendency to align plasticity with chaos and distress, there is nonetheless something about the plastic nature of cartoon animation that these shows deeply desire to engage with positively. However, since the plasticity of the characters and (especially) the world is so acutely fraught with anxiety, both shows can only revel in the pleasures of their plasticity so long as the plasticity itself remains non-diegetic and unacknowledged.

REDEMPTIVE NON-DIEGETIC PLASTICITY?

Despite how frequently both *OK KO* and *Gumball* malign their own plasticity, they also noticeably revel in it. As I previously argued, both shows take advantage of the plasticity inherent in animated cartoon media more than most other contemporary televised animation. Although diegetic plasticity is consistently rendered as distressing, non-diegetic plasticity is played up enjoyably for our benefit. What I am referring to as “non-diegetic plasticity” are the moments when the characters radically change shape, size, style, etc. in a way that is not acknowledged within the show’s diegesis. For example, in the episode “You’re Everybody’s Sidekick” (S1, E3) from *OK KO*, KO’s face briefly takes on rather chiseled features in a slightly off-putting manner. Although this happens, it is not acknowledged by either of the characters in the scene and ends as abruptly as it starts. These fleeting and narratively unimportant moments are actually quite meaningful. Because this is the one area where both shows freely and unanxiously revel in their essentially abstract form, the viewer is similarly given a space where they can recognize and take on this abstraction as negotiable relationality rather than as a problem. Essentially, this allows the viewer to engage positively with abstraction through the cartoons’ mobilization of their plasticity when it isn’t fully acknowledged by the narrative. In fact, it isn’t entirely accurate to broadly categorize these moments as “non-diegetic,” since although these transformations are not often fully appreciated or commented on by the characters, they do nonetheless often help move the plots forward in some way. For example, although no one will ever acknowledge that Gumball can partially turn into a horse and the show will likely never explore the implications of this or

have him do this again, the fact that this happened will usually, if nothing else, help move the dialogue forward. *Gumball* and *OK KO* feature numerous moments of this unanxious quasi-diegetic plasticity, although *OK KO* is much more enamored with its characters' plasticity.

The most common way that both shows engage with their characters' plasticity openly is by depicting them in a different style. Both *OK KO* and *Gumball* do this, albeit in very different ways. *Gumball* generally highlights these stylistic changes and brief transformations. For example, in "The Pest" (S4, E7), Gumball becomes upset when he discovers that his sister, who he thought was being a bully, is actually being bullied herself. This causes him to declare that he is going to kick the bully's butt as he suddenly takes on the appearance of a Super Saiyan from the anime *Dragon Ball Z*. Darwin points out that he's just posturing, and Gumball abruptly becomes his regular self again as he admits that his brother is right. In another episode, "The Egg," (S3, E38), the mother becomes so offended by how judgmental a guest is being that she briefly turns into a minotaur-like demon as she yells at them. She quickly reverts back to her regular, blue cat form, and, although the characters acknowledge her outburst, no one comments on her transformation.

Although these transformations and shifts are generally brief and confined to a character's body, *Gumball*, at times, includes entire sequences of multiple characters being drawn in very different styles. For example, "The Fury" (S4, E37) features two extended sequences where every character is drawn (and moves) in an anime / manga style: Nicole and her opponent are given larger more expressive eyes and a more clearly humanoid form, the children watching are drawn in a hyper-simplified, chibi manner that would generally be reserved for an over-the-top reaction, and the mouth movements do not strictly align with what the characters are saying.²⁰ "The Kids" features a musical sequence in which the characters easily flow, shape, and reshape themselves

²⁰ This is not inherently a part of all anime in every form, but this was a notable feature of early English dubs of anime.

during the chorus. Yet perhaps the most dramatic example of *Gumball* engaging with its characters' (and even its world's) plasticity in a non-catastrophic, less anxious way comes from an episode called "The Ollie" (S5, E19). In this episode, Gumball poses as a talented skateboarder to impress Darwin. It seems to work too well, as Darwin then asks his brother to teach him everything he knows. Darwin eventually figures out that his brother has been tricking him, but not before he is already speeding down a hill without knowing how to safely get off the skateboard. The show then transitions to a chase sequence in which Gumball actually manages to skate really well. The entire sequence is animated in a style that is reminiscent of the more experimental punk animation of '90s MTV shorts. Although this sequence is predicated on the danger of Darwin becoming seriously injured, the sequence itself feels playful and light in a way that is radically different from the scenes of apocalyptic disintegration in "The Job" and "The Money." In fact, the sequence itself uses few background elements, instead opting to allow the sequence to take place in an abstract, tan space. Although sequences like this certainly go further than the quick visual gags of characters transforming, they are still similarly not acknowledged by the characters themselves and thus still not properly diegetic. Moreover, these intertextual moments that reference other styles and genres of animation ask the viewer to contend not only with the plasticity of *Gumball*, but also with the essential abstraction of animation as a broader medium. Indeed, every disparate art style that *Gumball* mobilizes for our enjoyment is only able to exist because there is no inherent "thisness" to the cartoon form, so that highly detailed anime bodies can exist in the same medium (or, as the case were, within the same show) as more primitivist bodies that resemble children's drawings.

While it is indeed accurate to call *Gumball* and *OK KO* "highly plastic," only *OK KO* can be described as "hyper-plastic." This is because, as much as *Gumball* plays with the plasticity of its characters, *OK KO* mobilizes the plasticity of its characters even more. While the characters

OK KO are easily recognizable by their major features (i.e., Enid has purple hair, Radicles has blue skin), their finer features and details are remarkably negotiable. In one shot, a character may have more rounded features, their eyes may be wider, and their nose, eyes, and mouth may be closer. In another shot, that same character's features may become sharper, their eyes may be smaller, and their eyes, nose, and mouth may become more distant. This happens with such regularity that it is in fact hard to find two consecutive shots in which the characters' features are kept consistent. Sometimes these subtle changes happen all within the same shot. Often times, these changes are not even subtle, as characters are drawn in noticeably different styles. For this reason, the plasticity of the characters in *OK KO* can be best understood as an essential facet of the show's aesthetic, and thus the show itself can be described as "hyper-plastic."

OK KO also does more to play with its characters' plasticity than merely messing with their finer features and more subtle details. The show overtly and rather obviously fools with the size and proportions of its cast. For example, Darrell and Shannon are two teenage robots who are roughly the size of older teenagers. Their "father" is the evil Lord Boxman, who is a short man that is only a bit taller than the grade schooler KO. However, "Sibling Rivalry" (S1, E7) features a shot in which Shannon and Darrell are significantly smaller than Boxman to the point that they easily hang off of his arm. Although the entire cast is subject to these plays of proportion, Mr. Gar is distorted in this way most frequently. Because he is a big, muscular man and a renowned hero known for his strength, the animators regularly make him ludicrously large or mess with his basic anatomy in a way to further exaggerate his bigness. For example, in "Legends of Mr. Gar" (S1, E16), he is drawn at one point to be a full head taller than the store shelves. At another point in this same episode, he is made roughly this tall again, but at least a third of his total height comes from just his head. In fact, his changing, ridiculously large stature is even lampooned a bit in this

episode, as a crazy old man tells a story about Mr. Gar in which he is quite literally colossal and then shrinks down to a somewhat more reasonable size. Even when these distortions on proportion are quasi-diegetic, they are never a cause for alarm and are enjoyably played up for the audience's benefit.²¹

As one may expect, *OK KO*, much like *Gumball*, also regularly mobilizes its characters' plasticity by drawing them in different styles. However, *OK KO* handles this aspect of its plasticity very differently from *Gumball*: While *Gumball* highlights these moments, *OK KO* generally integrates them seamlessly into its episodes. Although much of the time the way that these distortions to the characters are easily noticeable, they show typically does little to seriously draw out attention to it. The characters behave the same, the distortions are not typically in service to hamming up a reaction, and the moments themselves are even briefer than they are in *Gumball*. Returning to "We Got Hacked," there are two moments when KO (as he tries to stop the malfunctioning mop) and Dendy (after Mr. Gar has yelled at her and set her down) appear as even smaller, rounder, almost "chibi-fied" versions of themselves. This moment with KO is incredibly brief, lasting less than two seconds. The moment with Dendy is slightly longer, but nothing particularly interesting is happening in the moment; Dendy is just rummaging through her backpack. In this way, *OK KO* does even more than the highly plastic *Gumball* to have viewers reconsider their experience with plasticity and abstraction. By highlighting these drastic changes as odd punchlines, an implicit joke in *Gumball*'s gags is that this plasticity is abnormal and strange. On the other hand, *OK KO*, by casually including these smaller distortions without consistently highlighting them, presents its plasticity as an organizing, central feature of its aesthetic praxis, which makes our generally pleasant experience with it much more consequential. After all, if *OK*

²¹ I say "quasi-diegetic" simply because it is pretty clear from the context of the episode that this story is entirely a fabrication.

KO can generally engage with its plasticity openly (at least in this context, with fans specifically lauding the “unbounded imagination” and “unrestricted” motion)²², and our experience of this plasticity is then pleasurable, then it begs the question if other forms of plasticity (such as monetary or diegetic) may also be potentially positive.²³

If *OK KO* only treated their somewhat more subtle plays with plasticity in this way, then this, perhaps, would not be particularly notable. However, *OK KO* affords this sort of treatment even to its more overt permutations to the characters’ base designs. *OK KO* will also play with its characters’ plasticity in a way that calls attention to the essential flatness of its 2D world. We can easily observe both of these phenomena in “Sibling Rivalry,” when Shannon and Darrell are deliberately drawn in a simplified way that suggest no depth. As they fight, they bump and phase into and out of one another to simulate fighting. This moment barely lasts more than two seconds before *KO* literally rolls in to break up the fight. *Gumball*, in contrast, has only ever called attention to its flatness once across its six seasons in “The Ollie,” where it was set up by Darwin directly stating that *Gumball* always stands in $\frac{3}{4}$ profile. *OK KO* is, in this sense, more comfortable freely playing with its flatness than other contemporary animated TV shows.

Yet *OK KO* will go further still in mobilizing its characters’ plasticity by messing with the quality of animated motion itself. Although the characters in *OK KO* will generally move on the standard ~12 frames per second of most animated shows, there have already been multiple instances in its two-season run where this framerate is noticeably altered. This is perhaps the most explicit way that *OK KO* will have viewers engage with its essential abstraction non-anxiously.

²² “OK K.O.! Let’s Be Heroes: Surprisingly Endearing.” *Animation Discourse* (blog). August 11, 2017. <https://animationdiscourse.com/cartoons/ok-k-o-lets-be-heroes-surprisingly-endearing/>

²³ At moments, *Gumball* betrays a deep, fervent desire to similarly engage with its plasticity as easily, such as during the song “I Am Free” from “The Weirdo” (S5, E29) in which the characters easily shift from one primitive, childlike art style to another. The song itself is about the joys of approaching the world from fundamentally different ontological premises.

For example, in “Presenting Joe Cuppa,” (S1, E12) after Joe pounds Shannon into the ground, KO and Radicles can be observed clearly moving on only 2 frames of motion in the background. While that particular instance may only occur in the background, not all of these moments do. In “Rad Likes Robots,” (S1, E31) Shannon marches off to Lord Boxman’s factory to have her factory settings restored at her brothers’ repeated intrusions into her relationship with Rad. As she storms towards the factory, she only moves on two frames of animation. Because she is the only moving object in the frame, it is hard to not notice how limited her movement is. Earlier in the same episode, she can be observed moving on two frames of animation as a much larger subject of a shot. As Darrell tries to talk her out of her crush on Radicles, Shannon is once again obviously moving on only two frames of animation. Because she one of the two subjects the shot (and the only one moving), it is impossible to miss this. These moments thus can only be understood as deliberate choices rather than as errors. Not even *Gumball* mobilizes its plasticity in this manner, making this yet another way that *OK KO* is able to embrace its non-diegetic plasticity even more than *Gumball*, and thus even further open up our relationality to plasticity and abstraction rather than treating it with suspicion and hostility.

Up to this point, I have generally characterized these moments as enjoyable and pleasant. This begs a simple question: What about these moments are enjoyable? To answer this question, it is helpful to understand *why* these moments occur. Although the specific circumstances of these moments of unfettered character plasticity do vary slightly in motivation, in general these moments exist for comedic purposes. *Gumball* will often use its characters’ plasticity in this way as a joke in and of itself (such as when Darwin points out that Gumball stands in $\frac{3}{4}$ profile) or to exaggerate a character’s reaction (such as when Gumball becomes a Super Saiyan). *OK KO* is trickier to classify in this way, since, as stated above, this type of unchecked character plasticity works as a

part of its core aesthetic. However, this aesthetic choice still operates largely in service to the show's comedy. Sometimes, much like *Gumball*, it exaggerates a character's reaction. Other times it exaggerates a character's characterization in a moment, operating as a kind of caricature. For example, KO is "chibi-fied" when trying to stop his mop in "We Got Hacked!" to exaggerate just how small and ineffective his intervention will be, which is made comedic by his older friends' prior failures to stop the wayward tool. Dendy's "chibi-fication" in this same episode also works as a comedic contrast to Mr. Gar's bigness. While there are countless examples of this sort of unrestrained character plasticity throughout any episode of *OK KO*, there are noticeably fewer and less overt permutations during more serious, dramatic sequences, such as when KO is fighting against TKO, his darker half. Therefore the overwhelming majority of this sort of character plasticity in both *Gumball* and *OK KO* can be accurately described as comedic visual gags.

That said, these moments of unfettered character plasticity are pleasant for another, rather significant reason: They are not predicated on any kind of distress or threat of harm coming to the characters. As stated above, every time the characters are acknowledged as having transformed within the diegesis of the world, this is immediately or eventually a source of distress. If KO becomes giant because he eats magic candy, then it becomes a problem because he cannot work with his friends anymore; however, if Mr. Gar becomes giant as a visual gag, then there is no problem. This lack of threat in these moments make them unique not only in the context of contemporary animation, but also in the context of the more recent history of mainstream animation. Returning once again to midcentury Warner Bros cartoons, much of the plasticity of the form is predicated upon some kind of threat or violence. For the most part, the characters and worlds are at their most plastic when someone is being hit, shot, disintegrated, or otherwise seriously injured. This is simply not the case in these moments of non-diegetic character plasticity.

Because these moments are inherently non-diegetic, they do not need to be predicated on violence or, frankly, much of anything. This aesthetic impulse brings it closer to the even earlier tradition of rubber hose animation of the '20s and '30s, in which the plasticity of the characters' bodies and worlds can playfully confound the characters or delightfully twist themselves in their favor.

In this way, it almost seems as if *Gumball* and especially *OK KO* are actively trying to reimagine how we can relate to the plasticity of the animated worlds, or at least how we have in more recent decades. Rather than being some kind of expression of the inherent violence (as in the midcentury Warner Bros shorts) and/or unpredictability of the cartoon world (as when the plasticity in these shows are diegetic or exist in the cartoon world), it instead is simply a quintessential part of how it operates, a fact of it that can be accepted to make the world even more exciting and animated. Non-diegetic moments of plasticity like when Gumball briefly becomes a horrifying squelching monster in "The Scam" (S4, E39) call attention to the constructed-ness of the cartoon form in a way that assures us that these changes can be abandoned as quickly as they are adopted. This undermines the anxiety in other similarly moments of diegetic plasticity by revealing that this anxiety need not be. Because we have seen Gumball can become a cute blue cat after briefly transforming into a hideous blob monster in "The Scam" without consequence and we can find it delightful, the decision to present Gumball's similar diegetic transformation in "The Box" (S5, E17) as frightful and anxious is revealed to be a conscious decision rather than an inherent facet of dealing with cartoon plasticity.

Given how both *Gumball* and *OK KO* habitually connect money's plasticity to their cartoon plasticity, this aesthetic choice has quite radical implications regarding how we can understand money's plasticity. If these shows are attempting to reconsider the plasticity of cartoons (or at least cartoon bodies) as a mediating, rather than threatening, force, then so too can we apply this

understanding to money's plasticity. In nearly every moment of diegetic plasticity, the shows present plasticity as a chaotic, inherently destructive force that must be contained and carefully controlled lest the character's lives be ruined or the world undone. This impulse maps onto the concerns raised by the Liberal understanding of the money form rather clearly: Money's ability to freely change form and re-form the world around it is most easily understood negatively by Marxists and neoliberals alike. There's an undeniable sense that if money's plasticity is not carefully controlled, then it will simply disappear and devastate millions or it will naturally pool around organizations and individuals who will wreak such destruction. Thus money's plasticity, much like cartoons' plasticity, is something that must be actively and consciously controlled. However, these moments of nondiegetic character plasticity in *OK KO* and *Gumball* present a serious challenge to this understanding. In these moments, because they are so brief, because they are immediately undone, because they are presented positively as fun visual gags and punchlines for the viewers benefit, and because they happen without the characters panicking, the plasticity is presented as something that is not innately destructive nor difficult to control. In fact, these moments disclose that cartoon plasticity is already something that is readily within our control. As such, the plasticity is not so much a chaotic force as much as it is a feature or a tool that can be engaged with negatively OR positively. This impulse cannot be easily mapped onto any orthodox or many heterodox implicit understandings of money as an object that will disappear or destroy if not engaged with correctly. This aesthetic impulse instead more easily maps onto the neochartalist assertion that money is no object but rather a way to organize and an expression of our implication in distant social relations. Put differently, money's plasticity (and money more broadly) and cartoon plasticity need not be reined in, curtailed, and controlled, because it is already something

that we can control. Thus, the limited way we engage with either is an active choice, albeit one that can be modified or reversed.

That said, both shows are nonetheless confronted by the limitations of the contemporary aesthetic project. That is to say that although both shows seem to want to re-imagine plasticity as not an entirely threatening, frightening feature, they can only do so up to a point. These limitations are most obvious in two ways: First, all of these moments of unfettered plasticity are confined to the bodies of the characters. Aside from perhaps one or two passing moments in either show, the world's plasticity is consistently framed as catastrophic and predicated upon disaster. Although these cartoons worlds are abstract, both shows struggle accepting the world's quintessentially abstract form. *Gumball* acts out borderline paranoid fantasies of its world's disintegration into the ether, while *OK KO* can only openly acknowledge its world's abstraction as a disruptive, disconcerting problem. Secondly, all of these moments are mostly non-diegetic. The non-diegetic nature of these moments is not inherently a problem. In fact, that these moments' place outside of the diegesis of the shows are in part what enables their ability to explore new ways for viewers to relate to plasticity and abstraction more broadly. It is for this reason that I assert that these shows are challenging the limitations of the contemporary aesthetic project. However, both shows can only do this outside of what they establish as the diegesis of their world. Thus, while both shows are pushing against the neoliberal aesthetic project's tendency to minimize, marginalize, and otherwise push abstraction to the periphery, they themselves limit their positive engagement with their abstraction strictly to the non-diegetic. Perhaps more than anything else, the self-imposed delineation of nondiegetic plasticity as playful and permissible and diegetic plasticity as distressing and impermissible is the major barrier these shows face. This division between diegetic and non-diegetic plasticity becomes all the more arbitrary when you realize that even these non-diegetic

moments of plasticity are, in reality, quasi-diegetic. Although no one comments on Gumball's brief transformation into a terrible beast in "The Scam," the fact that he did must be understood as at least somewhat diegetic as the story he's telling the other characters doesn't make sense otherwise. This limited positive engagement with cartoon plasticity strictly to the bodies of the cartoon characters in moments that are supposedly non-diegetic causes these shows to echo a fundamental misunderstanding of the money form: Cartoon worlds and characters, like money, are presupposed to have some kind of concrete "thisness."

CONCLUSION: THAT'S ALL, FOLKS?

OK KO and *Gumball* are interesting case studies to examine the contemporary aesthetic project's anxious, limited engagement with aesthetic abstraction. Both shows (but particularly *Gumball*) specifically connect aesthetic abstraction with money. Whereas most texts are bound to and contend with monetary abstraction implicitly and/or on the sub-textual level, these shows make this connection almost textual. Perhaps because both shows are so fixated on their essentially abstract form, they simultaneously uncritically demonstrate and seriously challenge the contemporary neoliberal aesthetic project.

OK KO and *Gumball* cleanly conform to neoliberal assumptions in how they engage plasticity in how they present diegetic character plasticity and how they present the cartoon worlds more broadly. Whenever the characters in either show are diegetically acknowledged as undergoing some kind of major transformation, this becomes a point of tension. The characters find that they are unable to navigate or “fit in” with their worlds anymore and thus want to turn back into how they were. Shapeshifting characters in both shows are also presented somewhat anxiously. At worst, they're positioned as worthy of hostility (Shannon in *OK KO*) or suspicion (Clay in *Gumball*). At best, these characters are presented as highly disruptive but worthy of our sympathy since their chaotic plasticity must at all times be carefully controlled (Penny in *Gumball*). This consistent portrayal of diegetic character plasticity as disconcerting and destructive is linked to the economic demands on labor in a globalized, neoliberal economy. Because workers, including the animators behind these shows, are frequently asked to “stretch themselves” thin by working longer

hours, receiving fewer benefits, accepting less job security, and even expected to adopt a second job if need be (a practice Uber condescendingly calls a “side hustle”), the characters similarly undergo such major transformations in service to a plot line only with the utmost antipathy.

The cartoon worlds can only really engage with their plasticity in even more negative, and frequently apocalyptic, terms. Whenever the abstract, constructed nature of the animated world is referenced or acknowledged in either *OK KO* or *Gumball*, it is in the context of a world-ending catastrophe. The worlds dissolve or slowly break, causing some kind of panic. In these episodes, the break down that starts within the cartoon worlds will frequently come to gradually break or infect the characters as well. This can rather easily be connected to the general suspicion neoliberal capitalists levy towards any major changes to the status quo. Both shows will commonly indict money and the economy when this happens and play out latent neoliberal assumptions in this way. However, *Gumball* will play out tensions within the neoliberal worldview in a remarkably direct way, at once bemoaning the pervasive monetary scarcity of the world while also asserting the necessity of an under-/un-employed class. In fact, the discomfort both shows have towards the plasticity of their worlds is so profound that they cannot embrace their essentially episodic structure without some qualification. *Gumball* has dedicated an entire episode lamp-shading how the world gets a soft reset after every episode (in spite of the fact that 75 episodes without this justification), and *OK KO* has adopted the more common contemporary approach of qualifying its episodic nature with some small degree of over-arching narrative development that can be easily ignored or overlooked. Despite both shows’ fascination with their plasticity, they have thus far only been able to explore the plasticity of their worlds in negative terms.

That said, the both shows also engage with their plasticity in a way that also pushes against the limitations of the contemporary aesthetic project. In general, contemporary neoliberal

aesthetics minimize or malign their engagement with abstraction. This has even impacted animation, which, since the worlds are entirely constructed, are predicated upon abstraction. Although *OK KO* and *Gumball* also engage with this by maligning abstraction in particular contexts, they also explore their own abstraction and plasticity in a positive manner when these explorations are confined to the bodies of the characters and non-diegetic. This strict limitation on positive explorations and expressions of both shows' essentially abstract nature does, in part, stem from the neoliberal desire to see a status quo, a kind of continuity, maintained. Since this abstraction is confined to the bodies of the characters and understood to not literally be happening, it is controlled in a way that cannot be disruptive. That aside, the brief moments inadvertently reveal a vital misunderstanding of aesthetic, and by extension monetary, abstraction: The "chaotic plasticity" of both is neither entirely chaotic nor in need of active efforts to strictly control it, because it is already well within our control. Thus, this limitation on positive expressions of plasticity to characters' bodies and non-diegetic change are more imposed and imaginary than they are material. There is no essential "thisness" to either the cartoon characters or the worlds that must be maintained in order to preserve either. As revelatory as this limitation is in both shows, however, it would be a disservice to ignore how these moments present their plasticity as an enjoyable, pleasant feature of the medium. Afterall, these moments typically operate comedically as punchlines and visual gags played up purely for the viewer's benefit. In this way, *OK KO* and *Gumball* push the contemporary aesthetic project forward, particularly when you consider them in the context of most contemporary mainstream animation that does not engage with its plasticity or abstraction nearly as often.

In fact, although both shows certainly represent an extreme in contemporary animation's engagement with plasticity, the trends that they represent are not unique to them. Many other

contemporary animated shows malign their plasticity in a similar manner as *OK KO* and *Gumball* (that is, assuming that they engage with it at all). However, most shows will not engage in the same positive explorations of character plasticity. A select few shows, such as *Stephen Universe* and *Adventure Time*, may engage in this positive framing of abstraction, but not nearly with as much frequency or to the same degree as *OK KO* or *Gumball*. Although I have confined my analysis to animated cartoons on television, much of my critique on the ambivalent engagement with animated plasticity can be applied to recent major animated motion pictures, such as *Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse* (2018). While it is disappointing that comparatively few other mainstream animated series or films engage in the more playful, non-diegetic plasticity that *OK KO* or *Gumball* will, the wider experimentation with the plasticity of the animated medium is a sign that it is progressing in some way. Perhaps the next reasonable progression for mainstream animation is to play more with the plasticity of the animated world without it being so threatening, possibly by making these moments similarly non-diegetic. This seems most likely to be the next step forward in contemporary animated aesthetics, as both *OK KO* and *Gumball* will engage with their abstraction in this way, albeit incredibly rarely.²⁴ Even more radically, animated products could entirely dissolve this artificial categorization between diegetic and non-diegetic plasticity and present them both as equally valid and not inherently threatening.

All art is closely linked to money, but this is especially the case for art that is expensive to produce, such as animation. It is thus not surprising that, as Ferguson asserts, all art allegorizes money and monetary relations in some way. Contemporary aesthetics are somewhat confounded

²⁴ The way this happens in both shows is that the background of the cartoon will suddenly be replaced by a more expressive background that emphasizes a character's or characters' reaction(s). This is generally done over a cut. In *Gumball*, this is always connected with a dramatic, highlighted instance of character plasticity. *OK KO* sometimes does in in that same context, but it will just as often have this done with (comparatively) more subdued character reactions that play on more subtle instances of character plasticity. That said, these moments are incredibly rare in both shows such that it would be incredibly difficult to explore them with the same depth as the other forms of plasticity that have been investigated.

by how to deal with whatever level of abstraction they naturally engage in, and neochartalist aesthetic theory asserts that this is directly related to the pervasive discomfort with money's essentially abstract nature as a mediator of distant relations. Animation thus becomes a critical site of neochartalist aesthetic critique, since animation is an inherently abstract medium. This has only become truer as most animation nowadays is done on computers rather than with ink and cels. Plasticity, the ability of an object to freely give and receive form, is a major way that animated cartoons can express their essentially abstract nature. Therefore, it is not coincidental that even shows like *OK KO* and *Gumball*, that frequently predicate themselves on their plasticity, nonetheless express ambivalence if not outright apprehension towards this plasticity, since this notion mirrors a similar ambivalence towards money. Money, after all, can be understood as a plastic instrument.

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