

Latin American Online Animation:
General Overview of its Contextual Conditions and Analysis of its Formal Traits.

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Abstract:

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Oslavia Danaé Linares Martínez

The Latin American children of the late 1990s and 2000s grew up watching cartoons, just like those decades before; however, for the first time, many of these cartoons were being made by them. That was only the beginning... Benefiting from new digital animation technology and Internet availability as much as from a renewed sense of what cartoons were and for whom, online animation became one of the earliest and most popular forms of online media in Latin America and the world. And yet, their popularity is relatively confined to the Internet and their academic study remains scarce. This thesis aims to remediate this absence and to provide a base from which to give a better account of Latin American online animation. In doing so, it can improve our understanding of other online media's connection with socio-economic, technological, ideological, and aesthetic imperatives. I highlight the role of economic class and cultural imperialism in online animation's aesthetic and contents, consider the role of cable networks in both shaping these tastes and offering a precedent for online platforms like YouTube, and review the technological limitations leading to an online animation vernacular (regional and global). I focus on this vernacular's formal traits as a necessary first step to approach online animation and potentially other media. Ultimately, I provide a socio-economic and techno-historical context for Latin American online animation's visual culture and its media and geo-cultural specificity. This research is all the more necessary in the face of the impermanence of online media.

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Introduction

With the arrival of the Internet and the personal computer in Latin America in the late 1990s came a boom of online animation parallel to that of the artistic animators and commercial studios. This boom was formed by a generation of amateur and small studio animators, who influenced by anime and cable network cartoons, quickly filled the Internet with parodies, fanfictions, original stories, personal reflections, and sociopolitical critiques. While they were not the only ones to take to the internet, amateur and small studio animators became masters of the medium.

Independent artistic animators and studios also used the Internet as a supporting form of distribution, especially artist collectives (Vázquez 61-75; “Moebius Animación”). This allowed for immediate access to content or at least for its promotion (mostly for commercial works), and for the online archiving of the animated works (mostly for independent artists). Hosted on websites from collectives such as Moebius or MUVLabs, government institutions, or festivals, or uploaded to platforms like Vimeo and YouTube, artistic and studio works have catered to a wider general public that extends outside each animator’s country of origin and usual channels of circulation, including educational content that was hitherto very limited outside of educational institutions. Thus, online distribution has expanded the niche audiences for artistic animators and favored the production of animated works. At the same time, this online usage has been secondary to the main venues of artists and studios,¹ who mostly produce for offline screens at film festivals, cinema theaters, and television channels. This means that the online popularity of these artists and studios most often trails far behind those of amateur producers, who produce primarily for the web and who have benefited the most from online distribution.

Amateur producers in Latin America pioneered online animation before studios and artistic animators did, and in greater numbers. Much like in the U.S., China, and other parts of the world, online oriented animators found an uncensored venue and a receptive community for their works – a community which was critical, participative, and instructional. Even though online animators lacked the official recognition granted to celebrated artistic auteurs or to the booming animation industries, online animators grew to reach millions of viewers in a synergic exchange between audience and maker, user and producer, that

¹ Although, some major studios, such as Anima, have also begun using the Internet as their primary form of distribution specially in the case of series. For instance, Anima Studios *Las Leyendas* became the first Netflix commissioned animation in 2015 or for Chilean Fernanda Frick and her series “Raise the Bar.” (Netflix Media Center; Amidi 2018)

often blurred the lines between each. Animators and audiences fed from each other, whether by promoting, prompting certain productions, training new animators, or forming networks around a style, technique, or topic. They share a common visual culture, paratextually and intertextually referring to anime, MTV, children's and adult cartoons, but also referring to each other, to Internet culture(s), as well as to national and regional social developments.

Hence, in a region that has long had isolated national animation industries (in terms of intraregional consumption), online animators and their viewers constitute a regional community that learns, fosters, and collaborates with each other across countries – especially through online video platforms like YouTube. Moreover, while online animation was initially ignored by the general public, it has since grown in popularity and has branched out to media like broadcast and cable television, cinema, and film festivals, earning some recognition, ratings, and revenue along the way. Despite this, Latin American online animations (like most online animations) remain almost completely unstudied.

This thesis aims to address the absence of study by providing a general overview of the online animations of the region, primarily of YouTube-based ones, and by focusing on their formal traits. I focus on formal traits as they can be considered the primary site where the effects of Internet consumption and production of online animation are visible. Formal traits record the socio-economic profile of producers and their audiences. They also reflect the visual culture and technological possibilities of online animations. In other words, I argue that formal traits are co-determiners of types of content and dynamics of consumption and association. This analysis is part of a broader characterization of the thematic contents, modes of consumption, demographic profiles of producers and audiences, and networks of association of Latin American online animations.

But what do I mean by online animations? And why do I focus on those hosted in YouTube? Also called “web animations” or “Flash animations,”² by online animations I am referring to those animations specifically created for online consumption. That is, they are not just any animation uploaded to the internet. Rather, they are made primarily for Internet distribution and for an Internet audience, and as such, their specificity is worth noting. Online animations possess certain *recurrent medium* specific traits that differ from other animations and from online video.

² While this latter term just comprises the 2D vector technique and refers to its original Macromedia (later) Adobe Flash software, the early (and current) prevalence of the software to produce online animation has made it paramount with it (Gay). See chapter two section 1, subsection 2 (2.1.2). Moreover, the few studies of online animation often focus on animations employing the term “Flash animation.” For example, those by Vlad Strukov and Wu Weihua.

0.1 On the Medium Specificity of Online Animations

As a medium, animation itself has an ontological specificity derived from its production. This medium specificity of animation is its creation of a new illusory movement, or better phrased, a previously inexistent series of graphic positions conforming to an illusory movement as a rate of change (or order).³ When discussing online animation, however, this specificity denotes aspects related to its digital production and – especially – to its Internet distribution, which in turn largely informs certain characteristics of its content and consumption. These medium specific traits emerged along online animation and largely continue with current (primarily YouTube-based) online animations. As I will show in what follows, these traits manifest themselves through formal, thematic, and consumptive aspects that, given their online distribution, are common to most online animations, even those with different themes, styles, and audiences. In many ways, these traits have become part of a vernacular language of online animation⁴.

These traits are largely determined by the demographic profile, visual culture, and technological limitations of online animators and audiences, but also by the possibilities of digital production and online distribution. All of this includes, of course, the dynamics of online video platforms and informal fan practices. These determinants result in a set of traits notable in: (1) recurrent types of content (themes, tropes) and formal elements (styles), reflecting producers and audiences preferences, demographic profiles, and visual culture (largely intertextual); (2) a mode of consumption reflecting the interface design bias of the platform or site where they are viewed (van Dijck 9, 21), adoption of globalized media consumption patterns (Katz 49-53), and the appropriation (or hybridization) of foreign content with local one (Cobos 16-19); and (3) modes of association, reflected in online animations' initial

³ I offer a more elaborate argument for animation's ontological specificity in "Criteria for defining animation: A revision of the definition of animation in the advent of digital moving images." (see Martinez, for personal reasons my author's names differ from that of this thesis)

⁴ The notion of a recurrent style of online animation is often on par with the program most widely used for them, Flash. Several authors note this aesthetic whether explicitly (Weihua, Olson, Gay, Muncie) or implicitly (Strukov). Academic Ross Olson even coined the term, "Flash Aesthetic" early on the onset of its emergence. "The Flash aesthetic has a number of elements that set it apart from traditional cell-animations." (Olson) Nevertheless, In this thesis, I expand the notion of an *aesthetic* to that of a *vernacular language* to incorporate the contexts of production, content, consumption, and audience. For instance, the pairing of one content with a certain style(s) or an aesthetic with the technologies used to view online animations (mobile phones, video platforms). Moreover, the concept of a vernacular language is more localized to a region (Latin America) and its visual culture(s). More on this on chapter two (C2).

community-oriented groups, the social functions integrated into the interface (such as sharing, commenting, and liking), audience feedback suggesting content, direct interactions between audiences and producers, and the paratextual and intertextual associations among online animators (like online collectives and multichannel networks), with other online producers (vloggers, gamers), and convergence⁵ with other media (such as television, streaming services, and cinema).

Examples of these resulting traits can be appreciated in the most common type of online animations: satirical animations. Arguably the first type of online animation, thematically and formally speaking, these often feature limited 2D (two dimensional) animation, a single scene or shot, “found” online images, and a rudimentary representational style tending towards the cartoonish. Their contents often include adolescent humour, Internet and popular culture references, sexual themes, profanity, politically incorrect views, social and political satire, retelling of myths, and other topics. All of these aspects derive from the visual culture of their makers and audiences but are also bound by the conditions of digital production and online distribution.

Online distribution on its own is a key determinant that allows for two of online animation’s most salient features: intertextuality and interactivity. These features follow the structural and economic logic of the Web 2.0 and its user-generated content and social media emphasis, and also their marketability (van Dijck 9-11). But these two features also partake of prior dynamics with precedents in fan communities (such as Otaku communities (Cobos 25)) and cable television, as well as earlier forms of online distribution.⁶

Intertextuality can be defined as the interrelated creation, distribution, and consumption of different media contents – the “texts.” For instance, satiric animations frequently refer to and parody established audiovisual works such as Japanese anime, Disney Studio characters, popular videogames, and even other intertextual content like Internet memes, user videos, and other online animations. They operate as examples of “transmedia”: as fan-texts with multi-authored and non-linear distribution. In the words

⁵ Conceptually, *convergence* is here the media convergence suggested by Marc Steinberg as in the case of Japanese anime, “the media connectivity proper to the character of and the materiality of media-commodities that support this connectivity” (xv *Anime’s Media Mix*). In the case studied here, that of online animation’s paratextual belonging to technological online and offline distribution networks but also to online and offline fan communities *and* content (characters, cultural myths, ideologies, memes). More on this in C2.1.5.

⁶ See C1.2 and C2.1.3

of Louisa Ellen Stein, “Online fan communities function as transmedia entities, where participants take [pre-existent] stories on multiple directions.” (405)

For its part, interactivity is manifest in the animation’s formal space for intervention as has been programmed into its display interface, in the web video player platform or site where the animations are available for viewing. Examples of these are the options to like and unlike, comment, share, or provide hyperlinks to other content present alongside the viewing window. These options allow for the viewer’s collective response to the content, allowing for feedback beyond ratings, and direct communication between producers and viewers, sometimes in real time.⁷ However, viewer comments on their own (like sharing or linking to response videos) allow for a novel mode of user interaction that fosters online animations’ popularity and audience reach. Thus, animation studios such as Chilean Marmota Studio or Colombian TrineoTV encourage their audiences to submit ideas for content and often directly outsource material from viewer responses.

What these two traits (intertextuality and interactivity) show is that online animation is technologically enabled by its digital production and online distribution, whose structure, as José van Dijck suggests of social media, is ideologically biased: “Sociality coded by technology renders people’s activities formal, manageable, and manipulable, enabling platforms to engineer the sociality in people’s everyday routines” (12, 13, 21). Moreover, online animation adheres to U.S.-based consumption patterns that are subsequently globalized via viewing platforms interfaces and subsequent interactivity (Katz 49-51; Dal Yong Jin 154). But online animation is also enacted by its producers/consumers’ local visual culture, which is in turn affected by the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of Latin America.

In this thesis, Latin America comprises the region of the Americas from Mexico to Argentina, including Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. Particular, though not exclusive, attention is given to the online animation from countries with greater Internet connectivity and more viewers and animators, namely: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico.⁸ These countries are representative of online trends, though they contrast with countries with lower Internet connectivity and less animation production; as such their demographic profiles offer a cross-cut of the prevalent online animation socio-cultural dimensions in Latin America.

⁷ As in the brief case of Mexican producer Negas in YouNow.com from March to August of 2016.

⁸ As seen in chapter one, section 1.

Concerning these socio-economic and cultural dimensions, Latin American online animations are the product of Internet and digital animation software availability in the region, the demographic profile of their makers, the historical influences of alternative⁹ animated content such as anime since the 1970s, MTV and other cable networks since the 1990s, and the emerging commercial studios of the region in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Thematically, they feature a vernacular and transnational diversity ranging from parodies of the Dragon Ball series to animated retellings of regional legends and myths, from fanfictions made with Machinima to political satires of national governments and public figures, from animated vlogs to music videos, and from crude viral skits to elaborate original series.

The socio-economic, cultural, and technological impacts on form are reflected in the predominant 2D vector technique and limited animation, the appropriation of representational styles from anime and MTV cartoons, the recurrence of popular music like Cumbia, the sampling of viral sound bites, and the paratextual use of social media – all of which can be considered formal traits. Thus, formal traits condense most of online animation's determining dimensions (technological, social, economic, cultural) and make them evident in their recurrence as a vernacular style. Furthermore, they favor certain type of contents (satirical, crude), forms of consumption (on video platforms, via mobile phones), forms of production (quick production, short durations), presuppose a certain audience demographic (young urban city dwellers) and user association (online and offline communities, fan funding, cross platform popularity).

Much of these traits owe in particular to the specificity of online video platforms, and it is largely thanks to them that online animations have become vast in number and geographical expanse; thus, I will now refer to some of the general characteristics of online video platforms, particularly YouTube – where most online animations are hosted – as it concerns online animations.

0.2 Notes on Platforms and YouTube.

Unsurprisingly, among online animators YouTube is the most frequent distribution venue. As is the case in most of the world, Google sites are the most visited sites in Latin America (with 168.1 million unique

⁹ By alternative I mean alternative to the, until the 70s, dominant US cartoons.

monthly visitors in 2014 (Katz 213)) and YouTube, in comparison to other video streaming (Netflix) and hosting sites (Vimeo, Twitch, Daily Motion, Newgrounds), is at the top of Latin American online video sites by far. Hence, it is the main venue for online animators – especially the amateur producers who pioneered online animation before studios and artistic animators did and whose content has grown considerably in scale and popularity. However, this regional popularity adopts a globalized pattern of media consumption (Katz 49-51); one effected according to the transnational corporate logic of platforms.

According to scholar Dal Yong Jin, the concept of platform and its implications can be understood as follows:

...the concept of platform can be explained in three different, but interconnected ways. First, a platform is not only hardware architecture, but also a software framework that allows other programs to run... Second, platforms afford an opportunity to communicate, interact, or sell. This means that platforms allow code to be written or run, and a key is that they also enhance the ability of people to use a range of Web 2.0 technologies to express themselves online and participate in the commons of cyberspace... Platforms also can be analyzed from the corporate sphere because their operation is substantially defined by market forces and the process of commodity exchange... Finally, it is crucial to understand the nature of platforms because a platform's value is embedded in design. As several theoreticians argue... technology is not value neutral but reflects the cultural bias, values and communicative preferences of their designers. (Tech Coders.com 2012, Gillespie 2010, van Dijck 2012, 162, Ess, 2009, and Feenberg, 1991 ctd. in Dal Yong Jin, 154)

As Jin states, online platforms operate as structures for online storage and distribution of content. While they allow for user expression they do so through the parameters set by their makers. Thus, on platforms like YouTube, users (content producers and viewers alike) are limited by the set of rules and priorities of the platform's makers (the majority from the United States (Jin 154)). Often, these limits and priorities owe to a commercial agenda, as scholar Tarleton Gillespie notes of YouTube's underlying commercial aims,

The term "platform" helps reveal how YouTube and others stage themselves for these constituencies, allowing them to make a broadly progressive sales pitch while also eliding the tensions inherent in their service: between user-generated and commercially produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content and remaining neutral. (3)

The determining factors of platforms not only affect online animations but their circulation and in turn their makers and audiences, especially as most creators are both. They also place a limit on the types of contents and their circulation. For instance, YouTube not only distributes content but directly fosters or sponsors its creation, as is the case of users who become “YouTube partners.” These are content producers with a certain number of followers who benefit from YouTube’s mentorship, participation in YouTube sponsored events, communities of similar producers, and, most importantly, advertisement revenue. At the same time, as Michael Strangelove notes, YouTube also polices (or tries to police) and restrains the type of content on its site, most notably that which infringes copyright, but also explicitly sexual, violent, and/or offensive content (105-108). Sometimes this censorship is morally dubious. For instance, in early 2017, YouTube removed or placed a warning on videos from transgender vloggers (“YOUTUBE NO QUIERE”). Most often these restrictions owe to YouTube’s catering to advertisers. As Strangelove notes, “YouTube’s words and actions should always be interpreted in light of its primary position as an advertising platform and its need to keep its main client – corporations – reasonably happy” (107-108).

But in tandem with commercial gain, and whether a creator becomes a partner or not, online platforms like YouTube are structured around the content producer’s drive for fame. These user contributors form part of what has been described as “new hybrid economies,” in which “the dialectics of commerce and community, copyrighted material and user-generated content, and the way video is being distributed all relate to economic features of so-called emergent social-network markets” (Snickars and Vonderau 12). Van Dijck notes as much in her assessment of “sociality” as a quantifiable marketable value revolving around popularity (13, 2013). As another author puts it, “the information architecture of YouTube is one that foregrounds celebrity and spectacle by design, even as it deploys a rhetoric response, comment and community” (Losh quoted in Kavoori13).

However, while the drive for fame is exemplified by online creators’ call to like, share, and subscribe to their channels, it is not necessarily opposite to community making. Indeed, it appears fame is part and drive of the platform’s intertextual distribution.¹⁰ Thus, producers often associate their collaborators, friends, and preferred channels in their videos and channels (Thelwall, Sud, & Vis 618-619), operating in

¹⁰ But only in appearance, as van Dijck emphasizes, since 2007 YouTube shifted to the generation of stars with mass audiences, with 4 % of producers providing three quarters of YouTube’s content by 2011 (116-117, 2013)

a manner of reciprocal acclamation that extends to other video platforms (like Newgrounds, Vimeo, YouNow, and others) and social media sites (like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and DeviantArt) – an association that can give rise to exchange networks (be these informal collaborations, studio assemblages, collectives, or multichannel networks).

Because of digital production tools, online distribution, and platform-fame dynamics, the work of online animators can be considered part of the boom of animation production in Latin America. A boom which through digital distribution has reached an expanded audience that is more regional and participatory. This is why online animation's boom, unlike the televisual, cinematic, and artistic one, has from the onset been a participatory and community endeavor (though it has become co-opted by platforms and corporations, much like other early Internet communities¹¹), with an audience that spanned the whole subcontinent. However, this online boom is parallel to that of the better-known national industries and artistic auteurs, the forerunners of animation development producing for traditional audiences in television and cinema (children) or festivals and other art publics. While they also partook of digital production tools and the internet, their dynamics of production and distribution responded more to the larger context of global production. Furthermore, the boom of industry and artistic animators contextualize that of online producers, despite the social disconnect between the former two from the latter. As such, in the next section I briefly survey historical and current animation production in Latin America.

0.3 Historical Overview of Animation Production in Latin America

In the past two decades, Latin America has experienced a boom in the production and distribution of animation, but this industry has not always thrived. Historically, the countries of the region have not been as prolific as the United States, Japan, or Europe. As animation historian Gianalberto Bendazzi describes it, “The production of animated work in Latin America was generally difficult, and therefore, scarce” (383). Making animation in Latin America not only faced the intrinsic technical and financial limitations of the craft but also the lack of acknowledgement from institutions, studios, and audiences,

¹¹ Moreover, van Dijck mentions this in her account of the development of early Web 2.0 and YouTube, from community forums of user generated content to mass audience media with overwhelmingly more viewers than producers (114-116). Studies of early and or current online animation, including Newgrounds.com, suggest as much. See Weihua, Strukov, Fulp, Muncie.

who tended to prefer animation from abroad (mainly the U.S. and later Japan). While the establishment of national studios was already a difficult endeavor – one tried on multiple occasions – all the more difficult was the work of independent animators, who not only had to solve economic limitations but also find an audience for their films. The case of Mexico is somewhat emblematic. As animator Carlos Carrera comments, “Exhibition and distribution have been the Achilles heel of our industry, be this by excessive dependence on the state or the law of the market and the unfair competition of Hollywood cinema...” (Carrera quoted in Aurrecoechea 10, my translation).

Nevertheless, through the twentieth century, there were notable animation producers, from Disney-like tycoons to state-sponsored artists in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico, as well as other countries, though to a lesser extent. In many of these nations, animation pioneers were foreigners who brought their expertise to the region or Latin Americans who learned animation filmmaking in Europe or the United States. Some animators were commercially successful in their home countries and headed big studios based on popular characters and/or advertisements. Salient exponents include Manuel García Ferré in 1960s Argentina; Maurício de Sôusa in Brazil during the sixties, seventies, and eighties; and Nelson Ramírez in the seventies and eighties in Colombia. Others spearheaded national animation avant-gardes including: the Argentinians Quirino Cristiani (animator of the world’s first animated feature in 1917) and Víctor Iturralde Rúa; the Brazilians Roberto Miller, Marcos Magalhães, and Yppe Nakashima; the Uruguayan Walter Tournier, the Colombian Fernando Laverde; the Cuban Juan Padrón; and the Mexicans Enrique Escalona and Carlos Carrera – to mention just a few of the most prolific or renowned (Bendazzi 49, 188, 191, 192, 385-388; Lersundy 5, “La Animacion en...” 4-5).

Most of these productions followed global influences in animation. The most recent influence has been the arrival of digital technologies. However, other developments were cultural, like the adult cartoons introduced by MTV and anime;¹² the presence of international figures like the Canadian Norman McLaren or Walt Disney (during his World War II “Goodwill Tour,” 1941-1943); and other influences owed to binational production ties, like those of Puerto Rico and Mexico with the United States (Bendazzi 188,190, 383, 384, 32; Aurreoechea 56-73; Shale 41-47).

Nevertheless, along or against these international influences, it is possible to speak of a regional cohesion and even a regional thematic discourse, which resembles the current regional exchange. First, this regional cohesion owed largely to a regional exchange: Many animators migrated from less

¹² See C 1.2

developed animation industries (Uruguay, Bolivia, at times Argentina) to hub countries (like Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela); others collaborated across countries, like Juan Padrón or Fernando Laverde;¹³ some catered to a regional advertising market, such as the Colombian Nelson Ramírez; often, animations drew from the shared regional history or from local indigenous myths or from pre-existent cultural works ranging from literature (Laverde with the Argentinian epic poem *Martín Fierro*) to television (Conexión Creativa's *Bettytoons* (2002-2003)) – an animated adaptation of the soap opera *I am Betty, the Ugly One* (1999-2001)). Additionally, it was often the case that authors of comic strips and graphic novels became animators themselves, with some successful examples being Ferré and de Sôusa (Bendazzi 48, 190, 388 390; Lersundy 5-6). These different exchanges and synergies also showed in recurring nationalist, folklorist, indigenous, revolutionary, and anti-imperialistic themes reflecting the common history of the Latin American countries.

Many of these regional themes have continued their presence in online animations, like the critiques of right-wing governments but also of left-wing regimes (such as Puerto Rican *Tripleta Studio* (2011-present) or Colombian webseries *Pequeño Tirano* (piensaenlentejas 2009-2012)), recounting of Latin American myths and legends (like Colombian Hugo León Ortiz Castellanos and his series (2008-present) or Salvadorean Ricardo Barahona with his *Cuentos de Cipotes de Salarrue* (2010)) – but along this continuity, online animations have become thematically transnational and transregional.

Digital technologies have come to coalesce national and regional animations with globalization, disrupting established production modes, making them more susceptible to cultural trends like MTV, Japanese anime, and social media. This has bound them to the technological dominance of U.S.-based online platforms (Jin 154), but also favored a sense of a regional cohesion that is exemplified by regional online animation networks and culturally related multinational audiences. These associations have also expanded beyond the region and in some ways globalized the visual culture of Latin American online viewers. Moreover, this globalizing trend goes on par with that of animation production in the world.

The recent boom of Latin American animation growth is partly due to the efforts of studios and creators, public policies fostering animation, the new possibilities brought to by digital technologies and online distribution, but also a recent global increase in animation production and opportunities for co-productions:

¹³ These kind of collaborations between independent artists and studios have been enhanced by digital distribution but they also constituted the foundational driver of amateur animation communities. See chapter one.

We are increasingly seeing more of the global animation, VFX and games production taking place in a globally distributed mode. Production work is becoming global with tax incentives, regional low labor costs and lower computing costs, which put pressure on companies to reduce costs and set up facilities in tax advantaged or low-cost regions. (Research and Markets)

New digital technologies and increased online accessibility have raised demand for animated content. In terms of numbers, animation's global industry value was of \$244-billion US in 2015 and "US\$ 254 billion in 2017 and is projected to reach US\$ 270 billion by 2020." In 2017 the world's animation industry grew at a rate of 2 per cent year-over-year, with the United States, Canada, Japan, China, France, Britain, Korea and Germany as the biggest markets (Nasdaq GlobeNewswire; Research and Markets). However, developing countries and regions have also boosted demand. In Latin America, by 2014, 84.5 per cent of homes with broadband connections accessed online films and series (Katz 15).

Adding to a higher demand are favorable public policies (such as tax reductions and funding) and lower labor costs in developing countries, which foster international and regional co-productions. As CAMIAT (the Argentinian chamber for the animation industry) points out, the leading regional producers (Brazil, Chile, and Mexico) are countries where public policies, funding, and institutions backed animation production. Screen quotas for 2015 in Brazil were of 3.5 hours per week in prime-time schedules, 26 per cent of animation in Mexico, and 10 per cent in Chile ("Objetivos"). Moreover, these animations are not only promoted within each country but marketed to the region and the rest of the world. Animated series, especially, are pitched at international markets like Kidscreen, the International Animation Film Market (Mifa), and Mipjunior. They are also broadcasted on regional and global networks (like Cartoon Network or MTV) and streamed on platforms like Netflix.

However, national talent has also had a major role in this growth, often by bringing international attention and leading to improved government funding and market opportunities. Flagship projects like "El Heroe," (1994), "Historia de un Oso" (2014), and *Metegol* (2013) have garnered popular acclaim at home or abroad, or by their scale fostered their national industries. Of these countries, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico are the leading animation industries, but growth in productions has also been significant in Argentina, Colombia, and Peru ("Objetivos"). Unsurprisingly, these are also the countries with more online animators.

Online animations are part of this regional and global growth. They partake of the global increase in animated content brought by digital production tools and online distribution, of the increased and cheaper access to the Internet in the region,¹⁴ but also of the coalescing of the regional culture. Their audiences are as new as the technologies but feed from a shared social reality, even of those from appropriated extra-regional elements like anime, even if from different classes and geographies. Online distribution has served as a parallel channel for public television networks that have launched YouTube channels and/or official websites from which to stream their animated content, like the Argentinian educational channel Papaka (on YouTube since 2010) or Colombian channel Mi Señal, the child oriented YouTube channel (2012—) from public broadcaster Señal Colombia, or the parallel online transmission of the political satire *La Mansión de los Políticos* (2011—2012) YouTube channel by Paraguayan news channel Paraguay.com.

Furthermore, some of the most salient works of online animation have gained enough recognition to jump into older media like television and cinema. Beyond their own fans and popular culture conventions where online animators have had a constant presence, animations like *Huevo Cartoon* (2002—) and *La Familia del Barrio* (2008—) have jumped to theatrical and television formats (Vázquez, 85-87, 132-133). Adding to that, since their early days online animations have also been sought by established (often foreign) networks like MTV with *La Familia del Barrio*, *Alejo y Valentina* (2002—present), and Fred Lammie's *Sex Police* (2007); the series *El Mono Mario* (2000—present) by Canadian-owned Much Music; or sponsored productions like the *IrreverTV* animations backed by Mexican broadcaster TVAzteca (Barrera; Trujillo). More recently, streaming services like Netflix have co-produced with Mexican *Ánima Studios* the series *Las Leyendas* (Netflix Media Center, 2015) and Cartoon Network's has funded the Chilean Marmota Studio for their series *¡GOLPEA DURO HARA!* (2018). Additionally, while not common, the Chilean Chilemonos International Animation Festival has included web-based animation as a category in their competition (Trujillo). Hence, one can speak of certain recognition of online animation and these developments have received some attention by news media. However, besides some small studies or mentions in the media,¹⁵ at present very little academic writing exists on the subject of Latin American online animation, and online animation in general.

¹⁴ As will be noted in chapters one and two.

¹⁵ See Cortes, Rodríguez, and Aguilar. "ANIMANDO TRADICIONES SERIE ANIMADA: INFORME Y ARTÍCULO," see also Vázquez's last section of his chapter five.

0.4 On the study of online animation

Within animation, film, and media studies, it appears that online animations have lacked sufficient interest to have a general study. For the most part, academic texts on online video do not include animation or mention it very briefly (Kavoori; Snickars and Vonderau; Strangelove), neglecting its differences in production from video, animation's inherent anonymity, and intertextual relationship to online fame. On the level of animation studies, most historical accounts (Aurrecoechea, Bendazzi, Lersundy) do not include any of its exponents, not even those doing artistic animation (like collectives). One exception is Luis Vázquez' 2015 study on current Mexican animation, but even he covers online animation briefly.

This general absence seems to extend to Latin American animators, promoters, and researchers outside those involved with online animation, while the inverse is true for most online producers, who are mostly unaware of artistic and often national commercial developments. Such unawareness suggests a fragmentation of animation's different communities and a certain ignorance of Latin American animation history, including that of animated online productions.

Moreover, this lack of concern not only owes to the limited awareness of online producers but also to the evanescent nature of Internet content and precarious online preservation, especially from the early period of Internet availability in the region (1990s and early 2000s). This propensity for the incompleteness or disappearance of early online animations is shared with other early online content and in general with the historical study of the Internet. As Niels Brügger writes in regards to web archiving,

...the major challenges for web sphere historiography are to recreate the web sphere backwards in time, and then address the fundamental questions of how and where the web material can be found and how it can be claimed to have formed a web sphere in the past. (760)

Furthermore, many early online animations are either unacknowledged by proper descriptions of their producer's websites or are simply offline, lack archival records of them, are without a clear date or origin, are often known to exist only from the comments of early viewers, or are solely documented by fans. All of this makes their discovery difficult, prone to inaccuracy or overlooking, and their historical reliability limited. Moreover, many online animators and websites have become inactive or faded into the web's anonymity.

But for all its difficulties, online animation is one of the earliest and most popular forms of online media. As with the case in China (Weihua 123, 124, 138), in Latin America online animation has often gained

mainstream notoriety and shifted the popular understanding of animation. In the process it has often lost the community-oriented character of its origins,¹⁶ but it has reached a regional and global mass audience. What is being ignored in not studying this vibrant sphere of online production is a mode of visual culture that is vast, diverse, and expanding. If not fully examined, at the very least, online animations should be mapped and their general features noted. As Brügger notes, in the Internet, the permanence of contents is not guaranteed and may change during their archiving (755, 758). Moreover, as Strangelove writes,

...media theory risks overlooking seismic shifts in the social landscape if it fails to identify truly new spaces of cultural production and consumption. We are on solid ground when we label mass participation in amateur video as a new mode of production and consumption. (8)

The mass participation of online animation and its differences from video still need to be identified and understood. Furthermore, as animation becomes more digital and online, the study of online animation will be more and more necessary for any future study of animation in general. These are part of my thesis' aims.

0.5 On this thesis' aims and methods

This thesis endeavours to address the limited study of online animations by providing an historical and contemporary overview of online animation in Latin America, primarily YouTube-based, by focusing on the formal traits of online animations themselves, as the most specific traits with which to characterize them. As said at the start of this introduction, formal traits largely result from the technological, cultural, and socio-economic conditions of production and distribution and are synergic determiners of the type of content and consumption of online animations. They highlight the technological limitations of their medium but also the ideological bias of their design. In this regard, formal traits are more specific to online distribution than content traits in what concerns differentiation from so-called "legacy media"¹⁷ and online video.

¹⁶ Much like the rest of the Internet and platforms hosting animation, like YouTube. As noted by van Dijck, "YouTube's hierarchical ordering of users into producers and consumers... increasingly gravitated toward viewer-based principles and away from community-oriented social networking." (117)

¹⁷ I.e. cinema and television.

This is in part because formal traits manifest online animation's Internet specificity. Thus, since its emergence, online animation's aesthetic and themes have been affected by its technological foundation (like early Internet speeds, Flash .SWF format, regional Internet availability, etcetera) and the production/consumption demands of online animation audiences (manifest in brevity of duration, constancy of publication, paratextual associations, participation with audiences). The early aesthetic and themes have continued as the vernacular online animation language specific to online animation communities, while audience demands are in part enabled by the interactivity and media availability of the online environment. These last favor direct audience response and the aforementioned fame-driven dynamics that, while having precedents in cable television (van Dijck 117), owe to novel forms of consumption like user rankings and algorithmic curation possible by the technology and user participation (as producer and consumer).¹⁸ Formal traits are directly affected by these online specific modes of historical production, distribution, and consumption. However, this approach is not without its limitations.

The study of formal traits alone necessarily paints an incomplete picture that highlights medium-specific traits and risks mischaracterizing the extent to which online animations partake of similar consumption and content logics with animation from older media. So, for instance, the cultural dynamics of paratextual appropriation, so prevalent in the parodies of Dragon Ball characters and plots, obey more to a logic of visual culture and content distribution of anime than to any de facto formal preference, although some actual formal elements from the referent series (Dragon Ball) are formally present in its paratexts (like the limited animation, graphic style, and voice acting directly imitate actual elements from the series). Still, while centering on formal traits can evidence some realities regarding quality of production, technique, or animation skill, other aspects of online animation can be omitted by solely focusing on formal traits, such as gender dynamics or political sympathies. For these last, the study of content could better serve to examine the effect of demographic and cultural characteristics of producers and viewers. Nevertheless, some of these aspects will be surveyed in regards to online animation's context.

The first chapter aims to provide a context for online animation's emergence in Latin America and to address some limitations of formal analysis by examining the socio-economic and recent visual culture of online animators and audiences. This will be done by reviewing the historical Internet availability in

¹⁸ As was the early case of Newgrounds.com popularity ranking system (Fulp ctd. in Feldman, ctd. in Wright). See section 2.1.4. in chapter two.

the region, the adoption of media consumption patterns, the influence of foreign animation (from Japanese anime and cable networks from the U.S.), and the mutual appropriation by online animators' and some sponsoring corporate networks – all of which constitutes a history of online animation's preconditions and precedents. In this regard, chapter one delves into the historical technological, social, and media conditions necessary to explain early and current Latin American online animation. This concern with historical context is also present in the second chapter, which focuses on Latin American online animation per se. This chapter provides a brief account of early online animation and its features; from there I examine online animation's formal traits as it concerns duration(s), graphic composition, representational style, animation techniques, use of sound, and integrated interactivity. I often refer to the relation these formal traits have with the producer and audience's demographic profile (including socio-economic and cultural specificities), types of content, dynamics of consumption, and modes of association in order to point how formal traits stand as both results and causes of these other aspects of analysis. In doing so, I highlight the cross-cut overview they allow and this thesis' study of them as a necessary step for further studies.

As such, the contextualization of Latin American online animation and the analysis of formal traits done in this thesis is the first step to a broader characterization of online animations by way of their other discretionary aspects: their contents, modes of consumption, demographic profile of their producers and audiences, and study of their networks of association. Together with the contextualization of online animation and the examination of its formal traits, these other aspects can offer a wholesome, culturally situated, and medium-specific account of Latin American online animation. Thus, the account of animation presented here makes constant reference to these other areas that characterize Latin American online animation and that situate it culturally and globally. Formal traits exist in synergy with these other aspects, and while initial technological limitations may render a particular aesthetic, this aesthetic's continuity often owes to historical and cultural preferences.¹⁹

Hence, this study aims to be more than a historical chronicle or summary of formal traits; rather it seeks to address several areas pertaining to online media, visual culture, and the socio-economic realities of online creators and audiences, their adoption of global patterns of consumption, and hybridization-appropriation of extra-regional elements. As such this study is necessarily multidisciplinary. Hence, I address the cultural specificity of Latin American animation by examining its lineage in anime, MTV, and early online animation (in Latin America and abroad), as also by examining some key consumption

¹⁹ See 2.1.2, also see Muncie.

preferences of Latin American online users, and the growth and current state of internet availability in the region. For this last, I focus on five countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Mexico) where online animation production is particularly prolific.

While engaging with these contextual areas I draw on histories of television programming in the region and to national and international Internet availability reports, journalistic articles, and corporate press kits and news releases. I also refer to some theoretical animation concepts as they concern formal aspects or types of content, to scholarly writing about online media, and fan studies to help with this thesis' understanding of general aspects of internet distribution, transmedia fan practices, paratextuality of contents, and theories of the digital moving image as applicable to online animations.

Furthermore, while not necessarily corresponding to their methodology, this thesis falls within the scope of Internet studies and web historiography. In some ways my research responds to Brügger's suggestion to "initiate cross-national studies of the history of transnational events on the web" (762). Moreover, in the vein of van Djick's call for a "*critical history*" of social media, achieved "By exploring technical, social, economic, and cultural perspectives..." to understand "our experience of sociality" (5), this thesis' study speaks not only to the past but to our present experience of online animation and online audiovisual media in general.

Additionally, the research and analyses I present here have peers in the study of Flash online animation²⁰ of countries like China (Weihua) and Russia (Strukov),²¹ which in their respective countries examine the aesthetics and early history of online Flash animation much like I do in chapter two. And yet, while also covering Flash animation the scope of this thesis is not limited to it, rather it includes an array of animation techniques ranging from the ones with limited mobility and simple graphics, to more highly elaborate ones involving time intensive production like frame-by-frame or 3D computer graphics; this thesis encompasses not one country but an entire region and refers to extra-regional influences with detail; it covers a longer period of time (1998-2018 approximately); and addresses in more detail contextual questions like the role of national animation industries and artists, technologies preceding the web (cable, satellite TV), preceding contents (anime and MTV cartoons), and socio-economic and cultural conditions.

²⁰ As in that only using the vector-based program Flash (in its different iterations) and not other techniques/forms.

²¹ The study Abd Rahim and Lucas do of educational animations offers a more systemic method than this thesis but differs in scope. See also Cortes, Rodríguez, and Aguilar's culturally situated but smaller study of animated Colombian myths.

Ultimately, while I refer to some theoretical frameworks and available historical accounts, I base much of my study on primary research and on secondary informal and formal sources.

My primary research comprises quantitative and qualitative information and includes statistical information of online animation channels on the platform YouTube, especially relying on data collected from members of the multichannel network *Átomo Network*, but also from other producers. Although not necessarily included in this thesis, this information includes numbers of subscribers, view count, number of animations (and/or videos), upload dates, antiquity, duration, audience response through the number of “likes,” “unlikes,” and comments. My primary research also relies heavily on interviews with some online animators, be these conducted by myself or from secondary sources. Interviews constitute my research’s main qualitative component. Although these interviews are somewhat biographical in nature, they address some historical particularities of online animators. Also included (or permitting a correlation) are considerations of aesthetic and thematic content, production concerns and techniques, producer-audience relations, and questions about broader or specific online animation communities.

Additionally, to complement this primary research, I employ informal secondary sources such as official social media profiles from many of the online animators, comments posted along some viewable online animations, accounts in fan blogs and threads in forum boards, video accounts from YouTube *vloggers* like La Zona Cero, Vlogbrothers, Kaptainkristian, and FootofaFerret, or even other online animators like Gato Galáctico and HBruna, who have documented the paths of online producers and archived pages from now unavailable websites. These accounts of online animation can be considered a form of fandom in themselves or at least paratextual contents, and although their reliability is hampered by personal opinions and lack of documentation, very often they provide information (sometimes detailed, often just clues) unavailable elsewhere. Moreover, some of these accounts come from members of early animation communities – the same ones from which many online animators emerged.

Through all of these sources I endeavor to provide the general socio-cultural context for Latin American online animations, which in turn will bear upon the description of their formal traits, so as to portray a culturally specific and medium specific academic account of Latin American online animation. That being said, this research remains necessarily limited in scope given the length of this thesis as descriptive study, and it is limited to the contextual and formal elements in its conclusions; it does not, for instance, cover each Latin American country, much less chart all current and past online creators. However, it aims to provide an initial overview of an as yet undocumented, vast, and diverse mode of animation production and consumption – that of an entire region from its early precedents to its present state

(circa 2019). As part of a broader and more fulsome study into the online animation practices of the region, this thesis research constitutes an initial step and a key node from which to embark on further research. While more remains to be done, this thesis aims to give an initial map of most Latin American online animation and its dynamics. Such is the endeavor of the following pages.

Chapter 1: On contextual factors co-determining Latin American online animation

Before beginning an analysis of the formal traits of Latin American online animation or even just a general description of it, it is necessary to review its underlying determinants, which is to say the contextual factors that delimit its emergence and the work of its producers. As in other regions, Latin American online animation is as enabled by its technology of digital production and online distribution, as it is by the socio-economic and socio-cultural reality delimiting who produces it and who just watches.

Internet infrastructure and government policies affect overall access, with countries with higher connectivity having less disparity between lower and higher income groups, and therefore producers and audiences of online animation and video; at the same time producers and audiences' notions of animated content and style (the vernacular language mentioned in the Introduction), are largely informed by the animated content introduced in the last decades of the twentieth century, such as anime and adult cartoons in cable television networks since the mid and late 1990s.²² These last, cable television, was not only a precursor of online animation but often a patron of it, expanding its audience reach in the region and beyond for a few rising stars before platforms like YouTube took hold. However, the aesthetic style of cable adult cartoons mostly influenced those who could afford cable and personal computers (at least at first). Thus, in what concerns technological availability and visual culture, online animation emerged as a predominantly middle class activity.²³ Undoubtedly much of this translates into online animation's formal traits.

Formal traits reflect these different factors: the range of representational styles and graphic compositions tend to reproduce images planted since the 1970s but especially from the 1990s as also directly following an aesthetic that owed/and owes to technical limitations; durations and seriality follow patterns established from the early web series distributed via email or in niche websites, while their consistency obeys to the logic of fame and presence outlined by YouTube (van Dijck 13, 116, 117;

²² The other major influence in style were online animation communities themselves and the technological limitations of early Internet and animation technology, these last two favored the rudimentary graphics and snippet length that are often tantamount with online animation, at least most of it. More on this C2. 2.1.

²³ A situation which has shifted slightly, since current mass audiences reach lower income tiers and yet those who can produce online animation still abound by economic possibilities.

Losh ctd. in Kavoori 13); sound bites follow other social media structures like vlogs or memes; content feeds from established channels of interaction are integrated in the programmed into display window as was done since the early times; and in general the rudimentary techniques initially born from lack of skill and tools, have come to coalesce in an aesthetic that is celebrated and cast as a vernacular of most online animations. These traits owe to digital tools and online distribution but also to audience preferences derived from socio-economic conditions and to a visual culture owing to broader corporate and political moves. These influences crystalize in formal traits which in turn co-determine²⁴ other aspects of online animation, such as content, audience, paratextual associations, cultural belonging (e.g. fan communities, artist collectives), and production feasibility and marketability. As such, they provide an historic, economic, social, and cultural context upon which the current online animation of the region sits, sharing on global currents but also feeding from the cultural specificity of the region.

Hence, In this chapter I will review the conditions of Internet access and platform services that have enabled Latin American online animation, particularly YouTube, and the role that television (broadcast but especially cable) had in informing online animation's visual culture as a precursor and patron—particularly MTV with the first wave of Latin American online animators.

1.1 Internet accessibility and consumption in Latin America.

The Internet enables and co-determines online animations. Internet access and usage co-determines who can produce online animation, what tools they have at their disposal, what kind of animations they can/decide to produce, where they can be seen, and by who. The statistics here presented respond to these questions in terms of national, regional, institutional, and corporate data on the demography of Internet users and, therefore, that of online animators, their audiences, and their communities. Some of these figures offer an historical evolution, while others had to be obtained at disparate dates and provide at best an estimate of what was the Internet in Latin America through the 2000s and ongoing teens.

As such, the review of the region's Internet in this section refers to two considerations: 1) the demographic profiles of Latin American online animation producers and viewers and 2) the modes of usage/viewership that they engage with. The first one concerns the aforementioned description of

²⁴ *Co-determine* is here understood as a short hand for *partly determining*

online animation production as a middle-class activity and the increasing gap with viewers on the basis of their technological and socio-economic regional conditions. For instance, the difference between those with ownership of personal computers and the greater number of smartphone only users. The second one examines the prevalent adoption of media consumption patterns from extra-regional (US-derived) models. This second subsection ties to the next section in regards to the role of MTV in the adoption of US-derived consumption models.

1.1.1 Internet Growth in the Region

To begin with, much like animation production, in recent decades Internet access and usage has increased dramatically in the region, with average figures pointing to yearly 10% (14.1% according to some estimates) increases and a reach (by 2016) of more than 50% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean (Luna; “CEPAL”; Katz; Rojas, Poveda, and Grimblatt 5). While there are notable differences between countries, given the geography of Internet infrastructure and what generations use it the most, in practically all Latin American countries a clear demographic profile emerges: the majority of users are young (between 12 and 29) city dwellers living in countries with extended (above 50 %) Internet connectivity (Katz 31; Rojas, Poveda, and Grimblatt 29). These users constitute most of the audience and producers of online animations.

However, this demographic is uneven in terms of who gets to produce and view and who only views. There are differences in access between countries and, within them, between rural and urban populations, low and high income groups, less and more educated users. Additionally, while most online access is done through mobile devices (around 700 million mobile connections or 58 % of access in 2015 (Luna; CEPAL)), download and upload speeds differ greatly (the regional average for download being of 7.26 Mbps (Megabytes per second) and upload of 2.92 Mbps in 2015 (Katz, 2015)) and the use of animation software has been available mostly to middle class users with a personal computer and a fixed Internet connection. This in addition to the fact that those with the means to produce animations are also conditioned by their audiovisual culture and the platforms they use. Moreover, there is a notable disparity of gender, as most online animators are male.

Therefore, in order to characterize the demographic profile of Latin American Internet users and of online animator producers and audiences, it is necessary to survey the underlying aspect of online accessibility, for it also points to trends in consumption patterns evident in the region’s online

animation, including the prevalent use of foreign (extra regional) platforms for local content and international audiences and the diminished number of regionally based sites. To this end, I will now review the regional and national growth of Internet access and consumption patterns in the region.

Regional Internet Access

The development of online animation in the region primarily corresponds to that of Internet expansion and reflects the initial cohesion and later disparity between producers and viewers.

As a whole, in the last decade, Latin America and the Caribbean have made major advancements in Internet accessibility growing from a 20.7 % in 2006 to a 54.4 % reach of the overall population by 2015. Fixed access for homes doubled to 43.4% by 2015, and mobile access grew significantly, going from a regional average of less than 10% in 2010 to 57.6% by 2014. Between 2010 and 2015 Internet home access in the region grew by 68.9 % while for mobile access this was of 802.5 %. This regional connectivity growth owes partly to diminished costs of Internet service; while in 2010 the average cost of a connection was of 18% of monthly income, by 2016 this cost was only of 2%. (CEPAL; Rojas, Poveda, and Grimblatt 5, 16, 17; Katz 30). This increase in accessibility reflects in the rising popularity of online video in general, and online animation within it.²⁵

Still, for the most part, by 2013 the region remained behind the average of the countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Excepting Mexico and Chile from the OECD averages (members of the OECD), between Latin America and the Caribbean and the OECD average there was a difference of 41.7 % for fixed (home) access in 2015 (85 % for the OECD) and of 34.1 % for mobile access (91.7 % for the OECD). (Katz 34)

However, compared to other regions, Latin America occupied the third place in accessibility by 2014, only behind North America (84.36 % coverage, not counting Mexico) and Europe (with 71.43 %); on average, Latin America was above the Asia-Pacific, Middle East, and Africa averages of coverage. Meanwhile, in terms of growth, Internet coverage grew at 10.52 % between 2010 and 2013, above North America's and Europe's growth rates and below that of the Asia-Pacific region. (Katz 49)

²⁵ This decrease in costs and increase in number of users came a few years later but fitted with the reorganization of YouTube from a producer community to a mass media video platform around 2007 and 2011. (van Dijck, 114-116)

Nevertheless, there are disparities within the region and in each country, disparities which reflect in the number of online animators from each nation. Thus, “...of twenty four countries analyzed in 2015, three [Haiti, Nicaragua, and Cuba] had a home Internet penetration level below 15 %; fifteen were between 15 % and 45 %; three were between 45 % and 56 %, and only Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay reached 60 %” (Rojas, Poveda, and Grimblatt 17). By 2016 this last placement had shifted, with Argentina leading in Latin America²⁶ by 70.2 %, followed by Uruguay²⁷ with 66.4 %, Chile²⁸ and Costa Rica both at 66 %, Brazil at 59.7 %, Mexico with 59.5%, and Colombia with 58.1 % (to name the top 7 places). It is worth noting that this ranking does not necessarily correspond with that of animation productivity, nonetheless it includes the leading countries (excepting Peru with 45.5 % of connectivity). (“CEPAL”; Rojas, Poveda, and Grimblatt 8-10; Broadband Commission 94-95)

Regionally and within each nation, two other major disparities persist: those between urban and rural connectivity and those according to income.

National rural and urban disparities in access

As has been mentioned, most Internet users (and most online animators) live in urban areas, but the difference is smaller in countries with high connectivity. By 2014 Costa Rica, Uruguay and Chile’s rural averages were higher than the urban ones of Guatemala, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, and El Salvador. Nonetheless, with the exception of Uruguay, in most countries the difference between urban and rural coverage is greater than 20%. In Argentina, the difference of home Internet access between cities of 500,000 inhabitants and those below that was only of 3.7 %. In Chile, in 2015, the difference between rural and urban regions was of 27.6 %, with general online access of 70 % in cities and 42.4 % in rural communities. By 2014 in Uruguay the difference between urban and rural was only of 13 %. In Costa

²⁶ But not compared to the Caribbean, since according to the Broadband Commission a few island nations were above Argentina’s average in 2016: Bahamas with 80%, Barbados with 79.5 %, St. Kitts & Nevis with 76.8 %, and Antigua & Barbuda with 73 %. They are not mentioned in the paragraph because the subregion is often considered separate from Latin America, because my analysis refers primarily to countries with high online animation production, and given these islands’ status as Commonwealth countries. (94-95).

²⁷ Although, Uruguay’s own official statistics give the country a coverage of 79 % by 2016, however, I have chosen the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development’s statistics because they are more comprehensive at a regional and global level. (AGESIC and INE 6, 9)

²⁸ Like in the case of Uruguay, Chile’s own 2017 study by the Centro de Estudios Digitales, “Uso de internet en Chile. La otra brecha que nos divide,” gives a greater coverage of up to 76.6 % of connectivity in 2015 (12). However, again I have chosen the Broadband Commission’s figures out of consistency.

Rica²⁹ by 2015 the difference was of 20 %; urban home access had 66%, while rural home access had 46 %. In 2014, Brazil had a difference between urban and rural access of 36 %. In the same year in Colombia the difference was of 41 %. In Mexico online access is predominantly urban and by 2015 five cities were above 65 % of coverage, more than twenty points above the national average (39.2 %). (Gasalla; Rojas, Poveda, and Grimblatt 15, 16; Centro de Estudios Digitales 12; INDEC 9; AGESIC and INE 13; INEGI “ESTADÍSTICAS”; “Costa Rica lidera”; Katz 30-32)

Although in most Latin American countries the difference of access between urban and rural localities has decreased, growth has been unequal. Between 2010 and 2014, urban localities had an increase of at least 5 % (if not more), but in some countries (Bolivia, El Salvador, and Peru) rural access remained the same (low). As Raul Katz points out,

Compared to developed countries, where the mass adoption of the Internet mainly depends of individual preferences or generational limitations, in developing countries, its diffusion is determined by the availability of infrastructure and other socio-economic and demographic characteristics. (31)

Katz’s observation contrasts with the one from the Mexican National Institute for Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI). The INEGI notes that although access is conditioned by things like telecommunications infrastructure and knowledge, some statistics suggest that this is rather a generational gap in preference of usage (3, 9, INEGI “ESTADÍSTICAS”).

But the above cases are true only if the country has extended (50%) connectivity, otherwise the difference between urban and rural online access is significant and visible in the types of animation content. Thus, Internet infrastructure and class limitations appear to co-determine the demographic profile of online animators, their audiences, and cultural preferences. Hence, the prevalence of urban users is largely present in some of the themes and settings of online animations, which tend to be set in cities or relate to city life (like those by Mexican animator “Negas” or the setting for Argentinian series *El Mono Mario*).³⁰ The same translates to other socio-economic aspects in their style, themes, and even ideologies. Thus, it is worth looking at the other demographic disparities in terms of income levels,

²⁹ Like other countries, official figures boast an average higher than that given by the Broadband Commission. In an official 2017 article, the government gave Costa Rica a connectivity figure of 95.5 % of access *through* mobile connections, followed by Brazil with less than 90 % and Uruguay with less than 80 % mobile access. Out of consistency I have selected the ITU figures. (“Costa Rica lidera”)

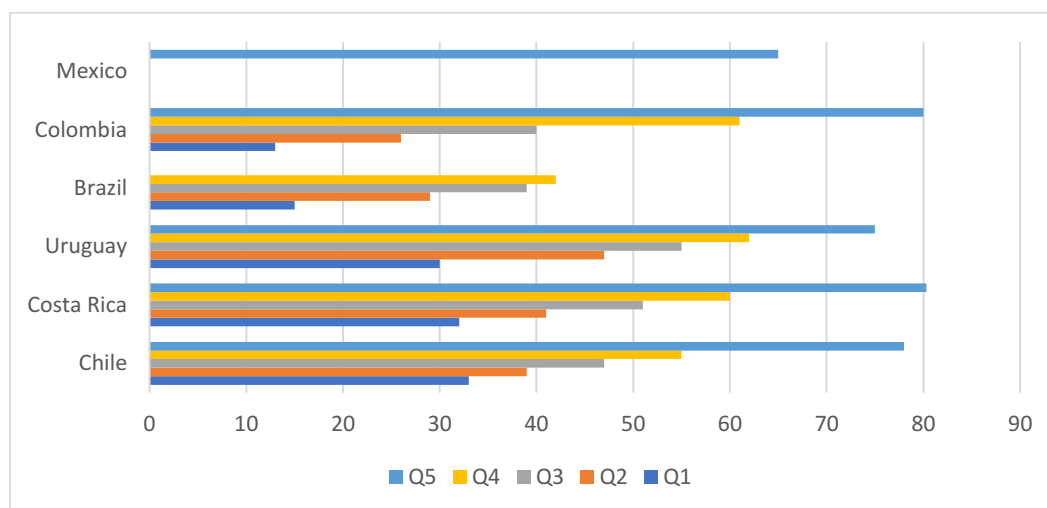
³⁰ To this be added the frequent migration of online animators (much like their analog forebearers) to urban centers, as in the case of Negas, Martín Trujillo, and Raul “Rulo” Barrera (Barrera, Personal interview).

home vs. mobile connections, means of access, and education; it is also necessary to look at age groups as an aspect with less disparity.

1.1.2 Socio-economic disparities in access to the Internet in Latin America

The main aspect confirming the disparity between online animation producers and solely viewer audiences are the income differences between social groups. While in general the trend for Internet service in the region has been for lower costs, affordability is limited within each country by different income levels and type of device used for access. Hence, for those with lower incomes affordability remains a significant obstacle to Internet access. To describe this situation, I will refer to each country's population by income levels, also known as income quintiles.³¹

While Internet access has increased across all income levels, the richest quintiles have benefited the most, although the difference between rich and poor diminishes as the country has greater coverage. From 2010 to 2014, the access of the leading Latin countries' quintiles³² are represented in Table 1:



[Table 1. Internet Access per Quintile by 2014.]³³

³¹ Income quintile levels are the five (20 %) segments of a population, from poorest (Q1) to richest (Q5) segments of a population. These quintiles offer a more detailed description of the affordability of Internet connection, noting the national economic disparities which serve as a better indicator of access and therefore of the audiences and producers of online animations.

³² Missing from this 2014 placement is Argentina, which was not included in the CEPAL documentation from which these figures derive.

³³ Source: Rojas, Poveda, and Grimblatt 13.

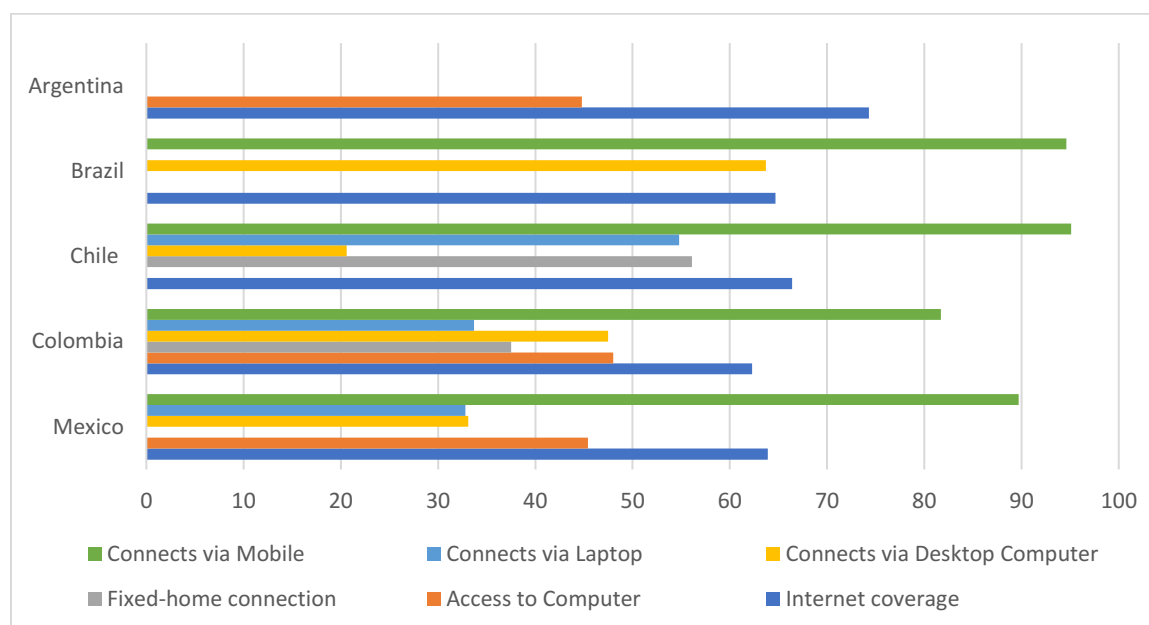
Nevertheless, diachronically there are notable regional tendencies. From 2010 to 2014, the regional average increase in the Q1 population was of 9 % of connected homes, while on the Q4 and Q5 segments it was of 18 % and 16 %, respectively, of new connected homes. In general, the CEPAL speaks of a reducing gap between income levels as Uruguay, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Chile diminished the distance between each income level from 2010 to 2014. In other words, access has increased among all quintiles and the highest growing demographic are lower income quintiles. However, Q1 remains largely behind in most countries and one must note the inequality of this growth in countries like Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, at least by 2014. (Rojas, Poveda, and Grimblatt 12)

This socio-economic dynamic appears to be reflected at the levels of content and formal traits of online animation, particularly as it concerns intertextual referents. Much of the visual culture of contemporary online animations descends from sources like cable television channels (like MTV or Locomotion) or early animation websites like Newgrounds.com. These services (cable television, early Internet access, desktop computers, fixed Internet connection) required a higher income level to afford them. Ultimately, this implies that early online animation makers and viewers would have had to belong to middle and richer economic quintiles, or in other words: online animation viewers and producers would have needed enough money to obtain Internet access and/or pay for the media informing its early visual culture. Furthermore, there are other socio-economic aspects supporting this consideration: the disparities between Internet coverage and access to computers, fixed and mobile connections, the devices used for access, and the proportionate correlation between education level and usage.

Internet access and computer access.

The first correlation to consider between online animation and socio-economic disparity is who gets to make online animation. Thus, having access to computer equipment (and a fixed connection) has been since the start and remains at present, the first requisite to produce online animation. In what follows I examine this correlation between computer ownership and animation production in terms of socio-economic statistical figures (i.e. percentage per quintile). I focus in the following countries with greater Internet access and with the most active animation industries in the region: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. These countries have the most online animators and lead in regional animation production and/or have high Internet coverage. It is important to note that not all countries examined

here provide all percentages of fixed-home connection, access to computer, or device used to connect, hence correlations remain limited.



[Table 2. Comparison between National Coverage and Type of Connection.]^{34 35}

What these figures show is a disparity between users with fixed-home connection and/or access to computers versus those users without either; this limited accessibility to fixed connection and computers contrasts with the prevalence of mobile access in all countries, corresponding to regional trends of higher mobile coverage.

Given that practically all online animators rely on computer-based programs (primarily Adobe Flash)³⁶ to produce their animations, it is worth considering the contrast between Internet access (65.66 %, on average between the five countries) and access to computers in some capacity (55.58 %, independently of their connection to the Internet).

³⁴ Sources: For Argentina 2016 "Acceso y uso" 3; for Brazil 2017, IBGE, 1; for Chile 2017, "Chile: 87.4 % de los hogares tiene conexión a Internet," also "IX Encuesta Accesos"; for Colombia 2017, "Indicadores básicos" 7-9, 14, 18; for Mexico 2017 "Encuesta Nacional" 1, 8, 13.

³⁵ The total coverage between this table and that reported by the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development differ slightly. This because each source has been obtained from a different year with some sources referring to 2016 and others to 2017. For consistency with the reported type of connection I have chosen to use these figures and not the Broadband Commission's ones.

³⁶ Although pre-made animation software like GoAnimate, MikuMikuDance (MMD), and videogame-based Machinimas, have gained a foothold, see C2.2.5. More on Adobe Flash in C2.1.2 and C2 2.1.4.

This disparity suggests that about half of users could use computer-based animation tools while the remainder (44.42 %) could not. Nevertheless, this group also falls within the percentage of those with mobile access (90.27 %, on average excluding Argentina). This contrast would implicitly suggest a percentage of potential only viewers (i.e. 44.42 % who could only watch). To complement these considerations, it would be necessary to delve into the socio-economic status of audiences (of the viewers of online animations). While that is outside of the current reach of this thesis, it is possible to make some correlations on the basis of online animation's history and disparity between upload and download speeds.

Thus, in the early period of online animation, the disparity between those who could produce and those who could only watch was lesser since fixed Internet access via desktop computer was predominant and costlier for most of the population—which means that the socio-economic status of producers and audiences was quite similar. This supposition is reinforced by the fact that, before Newgrounds (2000) and – especially – YouTube (2005) allowed for free hosting and viewing of online animation, the audience for these animators was relatively small and niche, relying on word of mouth of niche sites and community distribution (like email chains) whereas now it has exploded to include (almost half) any user, including those with only mobile Internet connections.³⁷

Consequently, considering the current panorama of decreased service costs, majoritarian mobile access, and that mobile devices and mobile broadband connections tend to be cheaper than computers and fixed connections (Katz 34); the differentiation between home-fixed access and overall coverage points to a significant socio-economic difference between those who can animate and those who can just watch, a difference that has increased over time.

Adding to this last is the fact that upload and download speeds are highly uneven and that Latin America lags behind more advanced regions.³⁸ By 2014, the average broadband download speed for Latin America was of 7.26 Mbps (Megabytes per second) while for regions with greater connectivity (Europe, North America (excepting Mexico)) it was of 32.2 Mbps. The same is true for upload speeds, although the disparity in speed evidences the socio-economic differences within the region; by 2014, the average upload speed in Latin America was of 2.92 Mbps while for the countries with more advanced

³⁷ See C2.1 on early online animations. To this should be considered that since 2007 YouTube favored a mass media model with less producers in proportion to viewers. (van Dijck 114-116)

³⁸ With the exception of Uruguay which by 2014 had download speeds of 22.58 Mbps, on par with that of some European countries. (Katz 41).

connectivity it was of 13.41 Mbps. (Katz 41). Furthermore, when looking at more recent 2017 data of the countries leading in download speeds, Chile and Uruguay, the socio-economic disparity becomes greater, as only 30% of their connections surpass 10 Mbps and only about 15% are above 15 Mbps (Rojas and Poveda 19).

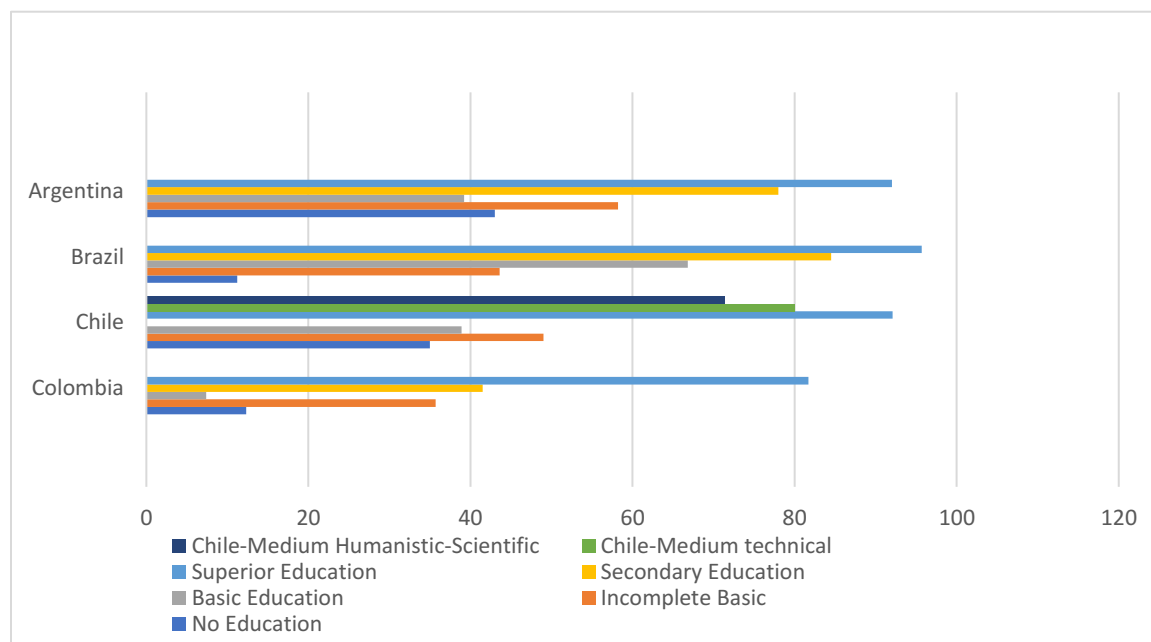
Alongside computer access, upload speeds affect who animates and who just watches. Hence, these income-bound factors (access to computers and broadband connection) suggest that those with higher income have greater ease in producing online animations. The next general disparity to consider is also bounded to socio-economic status: the education level of online animators and audiences.

Educational level of Latin American online users

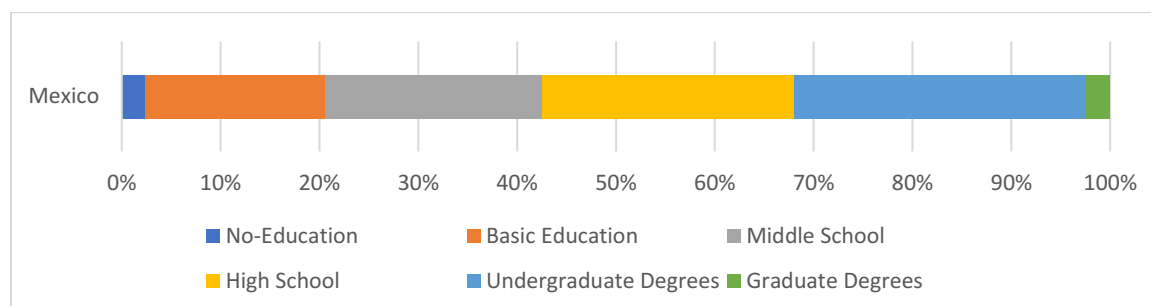
Educational level not only affects who can produce but what they produce.³⁹ In general, the trend is that individuals with higher education levels tend to use the Internet more, though there are variants with this tendency at the lower levels (primary) and the highest (graduate); groups with incomplete studies tend to have a slightly higher usage than their peers with completed levels.⁴⁰ However, as with income levels, the differences due to education in countries with higher Internet coverage are less pronounced. Thus, this appears to confirm the correlation between socio-economic status and online usage with the other disparity factors (income level and access to computers). Contrasting with these correlations, however, is the fact that after middle education levels, and beyond technological literacy, education level does not seem to directly affect who produces online animation. In fact, most online producers appear to lack professional animation education, and some lack completed university degrees. Furthermore, interview accounts suggest that the contrary is the case (Barrera; Trujillo; “Megurine”), and that professionally trained animators appear to not partake much of online animation production.

³⁹ Although the latter question is addressed in the next section of this chapter.

⁴⁰ I would suggest this owes to questions of time availability and lack of occupancy of users and many online animators begun and/or practice their animation as a hobby.



[Table 3. Percentage of Internet Usage as per Educational Level]^{41 42}



[Table 4. Total Percentage of Internet Users as per Educational Level]⁴³

⁴¹ For Argentina, 2016 “Acceso y uso” 7; for Brazil 2016 “Acesso à Internet” 9; for Chile 2017 (with information from 2015) “Uso de Internet en Chile” 22; for Colombia 2017 “Indicadores básicos” 11.

⁴² For reasons of space, an average of Chile’s superior education levels has been made. These are the original figures for 2017: those with completed technical-professional superior level had 90.5 %, those with professional degrees had 93.7 %. The percentage of usage for those with completed postgraduate degrees, 98.3 %, is not included in the graph (“Uso de Internet en Chile” 22).

⁴³ For Mexico 2017 see “Encuesta Nacional.”

Gender disparity among Latin American Internet users

The last disparity of mention is that of gender among online animators, which is less on par with socio-economic status and more with general gender disparities in Latin America. While no considerable gender gap exists between Latin American Internet users, with only minor reported differences in usage (“Acceso y uso” 5; “Acesso à Internet” 1; “Uso de internet en Chile” 29; “Encuesta Nacional” 5-6), the great majority of online animators are male. Of 150 surveyed individual or small studio online animators on the platform YouTube, 142 (94.6 %) were male and only 8 (5.33 %) were female, some belonging to collectives or small studios. For their part, audiences appear to vary according to content,⁴⁴ with producers like “Rulo” Barrera suggesting as much for their personal productions (Barrera). A more in-depth study on audiences and the culture and content of online animations could provide more detail.

However, to an extent, this disparity seems to reflect Latin American culture(s) gender roles in terms of online animation’s content. Some of the female identifying animators created content considered stereotypically feminine by mainstream Latin American media (soap opera style romances, female popstar music videos).⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the leading characters of most online animation series are male, while female characters often reproduce normative and even sexist gender roles⁴⁶ found in Latin American culture(s), as in the case of the series *El Mono Mario*. However, a separate, more in-depth analyses of content, producers, and audiences would better explain the reasons for this gap.

Beyond disparities of socio-economic status and gender, and completing the general demographic characterization of Latin American online users, age range appears as an homogeneous trait.

Age range among Latin American Internet users

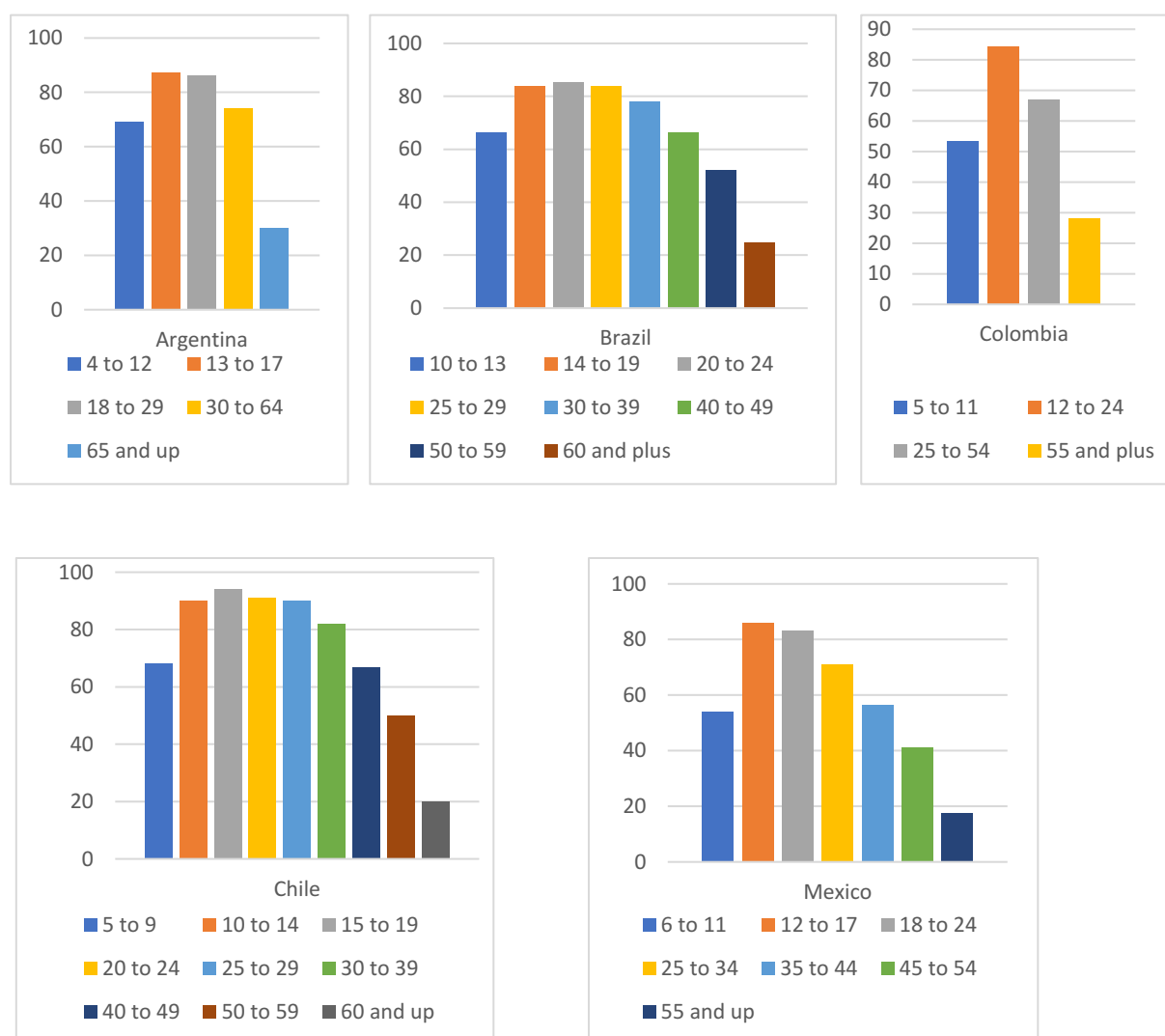
Age range is perhaps the least disparate demographic trait between online producers and their audiences, it is also one that evidences the general youth of online animation itself, reflecting in its style, cultural references, and maturity of subject matter (as in its type of humor and ages of its characters). In general, in Latin America age range percentages tend to encompass relative majorities and to relate to

⁴⁴ Most animators from the MikuMikuDance (MMD) animation community (see C.2, pre-fabricated 3D”) are women but many of their fans appear to identify as male.

⁴⁵ Again, MMD producers like “Gaby Megurine,” who create romantic dramas as well as music videos. (“Megurine”)

⁴⁶ A similar case can be observed in Russian flash animation, where female characters are often portrayed as dependant on male ones. (Strukov 13-15)

cultural and technical skills as key determinants for Internet usage. While the percentage of people below 31 years of age was less in 2014 than in 2010 (due to the integration of older generations⁴⁷), young people remain the majoritarian group of Internet users (Rojas, Poveda, and Grimblatt 29). Moreover, young users are considerably more active than older ones. The following figures of Internet usage per age group illustrate these facts:



[Tables 5 to 9. Internet Usage Percentage according to Age Group]⁴⁸

⁴⁷ "...[users] younger than 31 years of age had a smaller relative weight in 2014 than in 2010, since total user growth [in the region] (22.8 %) was greater than the increase of users below 31 years of age (4.4 % for users below 15 years of age and 16.4 % for users between 15 and 30 years of age." (Rojas, Poveda, and Grimblatt 29)

⁴⁸ Argentina, 2016 "Acceso y uso"; Brazil, 2016 "Acesso à Internet" 9; Chile 2017 (with data from 2015) "Uso de internet en Chile" 21; for Colombia 2017 "Indicadores básicos" 11. Many of these percentages have been composed (averaged) from their originals.

As can be seen in the above tables, in these countries (which range from high to middle Internet coverage) the highest average percentages of Internet usage occur between the ages of 12 to 29. Thus, some reports show an early age adoption of the technology (from ages 4 to 11 in Argentina, Brazil, Chile), while for Mexico Internet usage spikes from adolescent populations (ages 12 and up). This analysis is limited in its description given the different measurements and date when they were made. Some trace back their information to 2010 and show the prevalence of these high usage by young groups as an early trend, while others, namely Chile, present less difference between age groups—but many of the dramatic declines in Internet usage seem to owe to grouping bigger percentages along older demographics. However, even in the countries with a more balanced usage between age groups (less drastic cut) online users below 30 years of age are the most active.

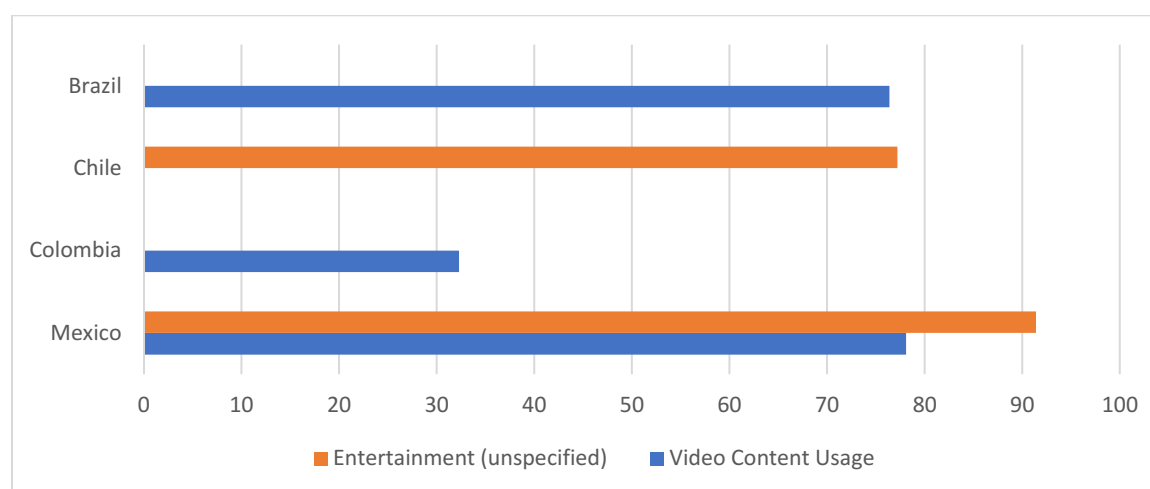
All in all, this segmentation of age groups and usage is consistent with the demographic of audiences and producers of online animations, reflecting in online animation's vernacular language as well as in its lineage. Again, where the real disparities lie is on the level of income and location.

Therefore, these percentages of user age participation ought to be considered along the previously written disparity between income levels, access to computers, and education level but also along homogeneous trends like the general decrease in cost, increased affordability, and greater connectivity; to these should also be added those of geographic location, where urban populations have a higher density of Internet usage. From all of these figures the initially suggested demographic profile of Latin American Internet users appears confirmed: young city dwellers from mostly middle to high income groups. It is they who constitute the main viewers and producers of online animations – however it is also true that these same users have historically tended to be middle class or above. This is the demographic base from which online animators come to which is added income and gender disparities. Such demographic traits co-determine a consistent visual culture, a sort of online animation vernacular. However, before delving into the visual culture of these producers it is necessary to briefly examine the general preferences and patterns of consumption of Latin American Internet users.

1.1.3 Internet consumption in Latin America and adoption of global consumption behaviours

Online animation viewership needs to be contextualized within the regional Internet usage for online video, which falls within its usage for online entertainment. In general, Internet usage in Latin America follows global trends. In 2013 the region had the highest usage in comparison to other emerging regions

(Asia-Pacific, Middle East, Africa) and some Latin American countries' usage was on par with that from regions with higher connectivity (Europe, North America). Thus, in 2013 the average time Latin American users spent online was 21.7 hours per month, versus the global average of 22.8, below Europe's 25.1 and North America's⁴⁹ 35.9 but above Asia-Pacific's 17.6 and Africa and the Middle-East's 13.7 hours. At the same time Uruguay (32.6 hours) and Brazil (29.4 hours) approached or surpassed European and North American averages. This entertainment usage is reflected in that of Latin America's viewership of online video. (Katz 49-51)



[Table 10. Entertainment and Audiovisual Internet Usage.]^{50 51}

By 2013, Latin American online video consumption was on par with global averages and 84.5 % of homes with Internet access watched online video. It is necessary to review the entertainment and audio-visual usage⁵² for the same countries⁵³ with the most online animators. In the case of Mexico this figure was of 89 % and for Peru 90 %. This growth of online video has slowly displaced television, with at

⁴⁹ North America here does not comprise Mexico, the latter is grouped with the rest of Latin American countries and follows their tendencies in terms of connectivity and usage.

⁵⁰ Brasil "Acesso à Internet" 1; Chile "Uso de internet en Chile" 38; Colombia, 2017 "Indicadores básicos" 19; Mexico, "Encuesta Nacional" 8.

⁵¹ Chile's Centro de Estudios Digitales 2017 report, "Uso de internet en Chile," does not provide a single metric for usage, rather it offers different figures for usage based on economic quintile, age group, gender, and/or rural v.s. urban location. Out of consistency I have averaged the figures for male and female populations as they are not very different, except where noted.

⁵² Although YouTube's status as a social network or solely audio-visual entertainment is unclear in these figures.

⁵³ At present, the author couldn't find information on Argentinian usage. However, some sources suggest that 90 % of Argentinians use Facebook and 61 % use YouTube. ("Internet y los medios sociales en Argentina" 2018)

least 10 % of Internet users cancelling paid television services by 2013 (a figure reflecting the decline of cable television channels like MTV)⁵⁴ (Katz 49-51).

Online animations exist within this milieu of online video. However, no government census has incorporated video production, much less animated production; for an indirect estimate of these online productions, I now refer to information about video file upload and download traffic, the adoption of global consumption behaviours, and the prevalence of extra-regional platforms, particularly YouTube.

To begin, a 2016 breakdown of downstream traffic in Latin America posits the category of real-time entertainment⁵⁵ at the top with 50.44 % for fixed access and 34.82 % for mobile one, while for upstream traffic real-time entertainment stands second place (after file sharing) with 17.96 % for fixed access but only 8.94 % in mobile, being surpassed by social media usage with 33.16 % (“2016. Global Internet Phenomena” 12, 13). To understand how much of real-time entertainment could correspond to online video (and online animation) I again examine the online video platform YouTube but in terms of its role in the region, as it is the leading site in terms of downstream traffic and is prevalently consumed on mobile devices.

1.1.4 On YouTube’s Prevalence among Latin American Viewers

The regional growth of current⁵⁶ online animation largely corresponds with the spread and success of YouTube in Latin America. It also corresponds with the platform’s online video consumption patterns, which through the 2000s went from computer-based viewership (as with prior forms of online animation distribution)⁵⁷ to a primarily mobile phone-based viewership. With this shift, YouTube became the main source for online video in a region largely reliant on mobile devices for Internet access. Thus, although online animation’s spread in Latin America had precedents in cable⁵⁸ and platform sites like Newgrounds,⁵⁹ YouTube is the platform that granted online animation its current regional popularity. This owes in part to YouTube’s early and current models of video distribution, including its reliance on online producer and fan communities, its shift from desktop to mobile phone oriented

⁵⁴ See next section in this chapter.

⁵⁵ A definition of streamed content is: “Applications and protocols that allow “on-demand” entertainment that is consumed (viewed or heard) as it arrives.” “2016. Global Internet Phenomena” 14.

⁵⁶ As opposed to “early” online animation (1998-2004).

⁵⁷ Like email chains, niche websites, or even the platform Newgrounds. See C2.1.3 and C2.1.4.

⁵⁸ See subsection 1.2.2. below.

⁵⁹ See C2.1.4.

distribution, and its adoption of some television strategies like the professionalization of amateur producers, programmed bias towards popular content, and the inclusion of professional (studio produced content).

As the editors of *The Youtube Reader* put it, “From a computer-science viewpoint, YouTube is nothing but a database, but in any given cultural context, moving onto the platform and watching a video obviously entails more than that” (Snickars and Vonderau 13); moreover, van Dijck notes that the rise of YouTube reflected a shift from early Web 2.0 participatory online communities to that of mass media (from 2007 and onwards) and, in general, the corporate domination of “sociality” on the Internet via social media sites (114-117, 14-15).

Thus, from its 2005 start, YouTube grew quickly around a model of proprietary platform for user generated content. At some point it grew at 75% weekly and within a year it had 13 million users with over a hundred million clips. The platform outperformed its rivals and a year after its creation it was acquired by Google. This sudden rise was accompanied by the impression that YouTube invented its mode of consumption, prompting some to say that it has given the term platform its online meaning. (Snickars and Vonderau 9, 10)

This is no surprise, while the editors of the *Youtube Reader* reported 90 million users in 2009, by 2019 “over 1.9 Billion logged-in users visit YouTube each month and every day people watch over a billion hours of video and generate billions of views.” Currently, almost a third of all global internet traffic belongs to the site. (Snickars and Vonderau 11; “YouTube for Press”)

Such prevalence is manifest in the region. In 2016 “Netflix, the largest source of traffic in North America, had comparatively low bandwidth share in Latin America...” instead, YouTube occupied the top place of download traffic (with 28.48 % for fixed connections and 26.09% for mobile connections) and was second place at 9.3 % of upstream traffic for fixed connections (second to BitTorrent file sharing) and fourth for mobile ones, with 6.18 %, below social media sites. (“2016. Global Internet Phenomena” 12, 13)

Unsurprisingly, amongst Latin American (and global) online animators YouTube is practically hegemonic. While at the start of the century online animations were often hosted in private websites and although Newgrounds.com can be credited as the first global community of online animators,⁶⁰ YouTube is now

⁶⁰ See section C2.1.4.

their main venue, especially the amateur producers whose content has grown considerably and who constitute the bulk of online animators.

As mentioned earlier, this prevalence among Latin American online animators and their boom in popularity⁶¹ can be correlated with the regional proliferation of mobile devices and with YouTube's shift to mobile phones as its main distribution medium. As a YouTube press statement suggests, "More than 70% of YouTube watch-time comes from mobile devices" ("YouTube for Press"). This increase is consistent with YouTube's transformation from a community-oriented website towards a mass audience platform with a few star producers providing most of the content, it is also consistent with its adoption of televisual star creation strategies and professionalization of contents, and with its move from computer to small cellphone screens (van Dijck 114-117, 118, 121). Overall, YouTube's distribution and consumption fit with Latin America's socio-economic disparities in Internet access and device of usage.

Hence, these developments in YouTube's audience and video strategies, in tandem with the prevalence of mobile access to the Internet, and the economic limitations of Latin Americans' access to the Internet and personal computers, highlight the difference between YouTube's fixed and mobile traffic. So, for instance, the site's placement in upload traffic as second in one (fixed connection) and fourth in another (mobile connection) suggests that users with fixed connections can produce video (and animated) content more actively than those with mobile connections ("2016. Global Internet Phenomena" 12, 13). When this observation is paired with online animation's correlations with socio-economic status, since producing it requires a certain income level (computer ownership and early Internet access), and that animation software to date largely requires computer (not mobile) access, the hypothesis that online animators are socio-economically middle-class and above is reinforced. To these considerations, should be added the tendency of Latin American users to adhere to global ("americanized") usage behaviours.

1.1.5 On Globalized Consumption Behaviours

One may consider that the Latin American user's adoption of platforms like YouTube falls along global behaviours of usage. According to Internet scholar Raul Katz, this usage not only consist of the adoption of these platforms but on the inclusion of local content in them (49-51). As he notes, by 2013,

⁶¹ See the case of *Huevocartoon*'s popularity in YouTube in the next chapter section 2.1.5.

...of the ten most important websites in Latin America in terms of traffic, six have originally been developed outside the region. (...) It is important to differentiate between the contents and the platforms. In the case of social networks, for instance, the contents are surely local (friends, family, etc.) while the platform is imported. Likewise, in terms of traffic, there is a marked difference between the first four Internet sites (Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Yahoo) and the next six. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that despite being developed outside the region, the contents these sites offer can be in their majority local or regional. (52, 53, my translation).

Katz also notes that the only regional sites within the top ten most used websites (*Argentiniens Mercado Libre* and *Taringa*) far behind international – US-based – platforms in terms of traffic. In effect, as Dal Yong Jin notes, this constitutes a form of US hegemony embedded in the platforms' architecture by way of rules and priorities set by their makers (154). Equally noteworthy is that, by the same year (2013), Latin America was the world region⁶² with the lowest access to local websites; with only 26.6 % it was behind North America's (US & Canada) 57.79 % and Russia's 67.22 %. This low usage was despite Latin America's lead in social media use, with 78.42 %, surpassing the global average of 63.55 % and that of any other region [49-51, 54, 55]. It is worth considering that Katz's point of local content being nested in extra-regional (US-based) platforms, describes the dynamic of the large majority of Latin American online animations nested in YouTube.

Moreover, the prevalence of US-based platforms hosting local content is visible in the appropriation dynamics, cultural referents and mode of sociality of current online animation (present in formal traits, content, and modes of consumption and association). These platforms, and YouTube in particular, follow the lineage of cable television and anime as extra-regional cultural referents and purveyors of "americanized" consumption values (in the case of cable). Along early online animations from outside the region, these US-based platforms directly inform early and current Latin American online animation.

Thus, on its direct past, Latin American online animation is largely informed by extra-regional contents and media consumption models, while the current explosion of Latin American online animation is framed within the described dynamic of locally produced media consumed via extra-regional platforms. As will be seen in the next section, cable networks pre-dated YouTube in its role as a distributor, since they catalyzed the expansion of early online animations and even adopted some of their aesthetics, and the platform's adoption of many televisual strategies provided a continuity to them (van Dijck 112, 118).

⁶² However, Katz figures for Asia-Pacific do not specify if they include China.

In other words, there is a continuity between cable television and current models of online distribution, particularly as it concerns online animation.

However, historically and in terms of visual culture, Japanese anime preceded cable's incursion in televisual animated contents, especially as it was the first mass distributed animation to cater⁶³ not only to children, but teenagers and adults. This is, anime not only informs the visual culture of current online animators but set the first precedent of teenager and adult oriented animation in the region. In the next section I will review the role of Japanese anime and then overview the expansion of cable television networks – particularly of MTV, where a few Latin American online animations found success.

⁶³ Unintentionally.

1.2 On the cultural role of Japanese anime, MTV, and other cable networks in Latin America

It was not always the case that Latin American animations had a strong presence in the region. While since the early 2000s, Latin American animation has increasingly occupied a space among regional audiences, via regional licensing and co-productions, online streaming, and venues like film festivals, this is a relatively recent development. Moreover, although several countries have placed mandatory programming quotas for national animation,⁶⁴ these are rather recent and even now do not constitute the majority of animated content. Nor were national animations the most popular, though there were exceptions like the series by Argentinian Manuel García Ferré or those from Brazilian Maurício de Sôusa, with his *As aventuras da turma da Mônica* (Adventures of Monica and Her Friends). Nevertheless, through most of the 20th century most animation came from the US and was marketed to children. (Bendazzi 188, 192)

This prevalence of children-oriented content and of US hegemony began to change towards the end of the century. Since the 1970s there was an increase in the variety and quantity of programmed animated content, starting with Japanese anime and later with satirical cartoons and experimental works from cable networks like MTV. These new influences marked a general shift towards teenager and adult oriented animation and inspired the work of emergent animators in the late 1990s (like studio Conexión Creativa and the web studio Huevocartoon). Anime and cable-based adult cartoons continue to form part of the visual culture of current online animations, as manifest in their parodies, fanfictions, reviews, and other intertextual appropriations of pre-existent animated characters and series. This shift began with programming changes in broadcast television.

Since the 1980s, regional production began displacing United States content to a minority percentage of the overall content in open television networks, to the point that by 2003 US content constituted an average of 18% while 80% was of Latin American origin. However, the US has kept its dominance with certain kinds of more expensive content like action and adventure series, movies, and animation.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Screen quotas for 2015 in Brazil were of 3.5 hours per week in prime-time schedules, 26% of animation in Mexico, and 10% in Chile (“Objetivos”).

⁶⁵ Only considering public broadcasters, but not cable networks where US and other extra-regional content is drastically higher (see below in this subsection).

US animation debuted along the first television broadcasts of the region, and the syndicated shows from studios like Hanna Barbera, Walt Disney, and Warner Bros. dominated the airwaves (up to 61 % by 2003). This dominance helped shape the still prevalent notion that animation was almost exclusively children's programming, moreover it also impacted the region's industry. Local production of original works often sought to mimic the style and themes from US studios or simply manufactured for them, as was the case of Mexican Val-Mar studios and cheap "run-away animation" (limited animation) television series). However, this situation began to change in the late 1970s with the arrival of Japanese anime and much later with that of cable television. (Aurrecochea 69-70; Garza 147-164)

1.2.1 On Anime

Since the late 70's Japanese anime has gradually taken over part of the time programmed for US animation and been shown, haphazardly at times, as children's programming. Although, by 2003, Japanese content in Latin American broadcast television constituted about only 1.2 % of total extra-regional content, anime's cultural impact is significant as a trailblazer for adult animation among Latin American audiences, for the kind of audiences it formed, and as a constant referent for regional online animators. It is also as part of global dynamics of economic and cultural exchange and of regional hybridization (Garza 147, 159; Cobos 2, 10).

Why did Japanese anime become so popular at the end of the century? The growing demand for content and the cost of anime worked to bring the first series in the 1970s. Anime arrived with Spanish dubbing (mostly from Mexico) and debuted in Mexico, Peru, Chile and Argentina with series like *Heidi* (Isao Takahata, 1974), *Princess Knight* (Osamu Tezuka, 1967), *Candy Candy* (Kyoko Mizuki and Yumiko Igarashi, 1975), and *Speed Racer* (Tatsuo Yoshida, 1967). In the 1980s anime's presence expanded to other Latin American countries like Venezuela, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Puerto Rico, which were introduced to the 'mecha' (giant robot) genre with series like *Mazinger Z* (1972), *Voltron: Defender of the Universe* (a US re-edited version of *Beast King GoLion*, 1984), *Robotech* (also known as *Macross*, 1985), along series from other genres like *Kimba the White Lion* (Osamu Tezuka, 1965). Nonetheless, it was in the 1990s that anime had a surge in popularity, with series like *Saint Seiya: Knights of the Zodiac* (Masami Kurumada 1986-1989), *Ranma ½* (Rumiko Takahashi, 1989-1992), *Dragon Ball* (Akira Toriyama, 1986-), *Captain Tsubasa* (Yoichi Takahashi 1983-1986), *Sailor Moon* (Naoko

Takeuchi, 1992-1997) and others (Cobos 12, 13). This last group of series are the ones most often referred to by online animators, with whole paratextual series constituted by appropriated works.⁶⁶

Originally, anime series were broadcasted alongside US cartoons as part of regular children programming and were not considered a distinct type of animation, the term *anime* wasn't used then, but soon the difference in style and the teenage oriented content of many of its stories set them apart. By the 1980s anime was widely popular among children of both genders, however, there were also complains about the violence presented in some of them. Anime was criticized for its violent and erotic themes, yet this owed in part to the unawareness of television broadcasters on the teenage and adult oriented character of Japanese anime and to the (still) prevalent cultural notion that animation is for children.⁶⁷ Eventually, however, with the boom of anime in the 1990s a cultural differentiation was made among audiences and broadcasters. Around then the term *anime* came into common use as so did the emergence of an 'otaku' (anime) fandom. (Cobos 13, 19, 22)

It is worth briefly commenting on Latin American otaku fandom as online animators and audiences often form part of this subculture, within the content but also socially, online and offline; many animators participate and foster their productions at anime events and otaku fans are often also fans of these animators.

Latin American otaku fandoms have appropriated anime culture and contributed to its spread and hybridization with local and regional cultural elements. Through participation in anime conventions and online forums, as well as subtitling and distributing anime. Hybridization has also been the province of national broadcasters which translated most anime from English versions and often engaged dubbing dialogues with regional and national colloquialisms. This hybridization is in many ways continued in online animation's appropriation of renown anime characters, whose voices are mimicked in imitative manner (*Dr. Goku*, "Negas"), with characters saying absurd colloquialisms mismatching their original persona (*Dr. Goku* and other "Rulo" Barrera series, the web series *Pogonyuto!*), or absurdly substituted with mismatching voices (as in the animations by Brazilian channel Reboesteio). However, broadcasters also appropriated anime by editing it, sometimes according to social mores; as they edited opening and closing segments for brevity, censored sections with nudity or violence deemed not appropriate for

⁶⁶ This is exemplified by Barrera's *Dr. Gokú* series (2008—present) or in the brief clips from Brazilian channel Reboesteio (2015—present).

⁶⁷ Indeed, the expectation that animation is mostly for children has limited the funding and audience success of several projects, while also emphasized the teenager and adult oriented character of online animations. For examples see the case of *Huevocartoon* in Vázquez 88-89.

minors, and even drew on top of characters to put them clothing or to make blood look less realistic. (Cobos 16-19, 33-36)

However, the 1990s explosion of anime came with the arrival of cable networks to the region and was part of a general globalization of the region's media consumption.⁶⁸ Specialized anime channels reached most Latin American countries and, unlike broadcasters, aimed their content towards teenagers and adults. The most prominent of these channels were Locomotion (1996 to 2005, later Animax from 2005 until 2010), Magic Kids, FoxKids (1996, later Jetix in 2004, and since 2009 Disney XD, although its focus on anime has decreased), and Cartoon Network (which arrived in 1993 but which later showed anime with its Adult Swim section (2001) available in Latin America since 2005). (Cobos 2, 13,14)

Although most of these specialized channels were discontinued or did not broadcast much anime after 2010, their influence was significant among the emergent generation of Latin American animators, but they were not the only channels to partake on this influence. The cable network most influential on Latin American animation and online animation was MTV.

1.2.2 On MTV and other cable networks in Latin America and their adoption of online animation.

As mentioned in the prior subsections, cable networks anticipated (and fostered) the arrival of online animation and online video in general, particularly in as it shifted from user-generated content communities to mass media channels with a few star producers (van Dijck 14, 114-118). Alternative forms of animation, namely anime, became more popular through specialized channels like Locomotion but also, and prominently, through youth-oriented music channels like MTV (Music Television) and Much Music. Considering the importance and influence of the former's programming to early online animation, I will give a brief historical overview of cable's incursion into Latin American television, and the special place that MTV offers therein.

The case of MTV is paradigmatic not only as it continued the expansion of adult cartoons into the general visual culture of Latin American viewers, some soon to be online producers, but also as it fostered some online animations and even adopted some of their aesthetics.⁶⁹ But this incursion of

⁶⁸ Much along the lines of globalized patterns of digital media consumption, as noted by Katz. (52)

⁶⁹ José van Dijck comments on this adoption of Internet amateur aesthetics by corporate media in general. (118)

cable networks into the region was largely driven by global economic trends and regional media policies in Latin America.

MTV and other cable television channels were part of a late 1980s and 1990s wave of media globalization and technological breakthroughs. Before US cable networks expanded their operations to Europe and Asia, they often found a testing ground in Latin America. Moreover, cable television's arrival was partly thanks to the technological advancements in satellite television (the PanAmSat commercial satellite system begun in 1988) and developments in signal compression allowed a satellite transponder to go from 2 analogue signals to 12 digital signals. The decoder devices associated with this not only decoded these signals but allowed for different audio tracks for the same video, which in turn allowed for Spanish, Portuguese, and/or English audio and thus could cater to the region's different audiences. This was accompanied by new modes of radio wave distribution which lowered infrastructure costs and were simultaneous with favorable neo-liberal policies in the region. (Wilkinson and Castañeda 14-17, 20)

Aside from technological advancements, the sense of a large group of potential viewers, calculated in part through more accurate rating measurement technologies, fostered increased investment from US investors. Many of these investors had already noted the growth of Hispanic audiences inside the US (monopolized by the Mexican owned network Univision) and found the US market saturated.

Additionally, regional changes in the political and legal landscape were also an equally significant factor for cable investment. Since the 1980s several countries implemented neoliberal policies that liberalized trade, foreign investment, and decreased regulations and/or enacted regional trade agreements and common markets, like the North American Free Trade Agreement later in the decade. This led to growing foreign investment in the region, which went from 24 billion USD in 1987 and 1989 to nearly 100 billion USD between 1990 and 1992. Through cable networks, US media companies sought to integrate US Hispanic audiences with those from Latin America. (Wilkinson and Castañeda 14-17, 20)

The first incursions of cable channels were often preceded by Spanish speaking syndicated shows, like MTV's *MTV Internacional* co-produced with Telemundo or CNN's and Telemundo's *Noticiero Telemundo-CNN*, both in 1988. These shows circulated in national Latin American networks and offered a sense of the demand and potential audiences for cable incursions. In 1989 CNN launched the first Latin American service, which broadcasted 24 hours a day, and other cable channels soon followed suit. CNN and other networks dropped their association with Hispanic US based networks like Telemundo and instead opted for associations with national media companies like Mexico's Televisa or Venezuela's Omnivision Latin

American Entertainment, relying on these partners for distribution and marketing but granting only marginal percentages of their programmed content to regional productions.⁷⁰

Thus, in the 1990s, cable networks flooded a favorable Latin American market and, thanks to multichannel signaling, specialized channels were available on multiple languages. While in 1994 Mexico's economic crisis and its impact in South America (the so-called Tequila Effect) and the development of direct to home distribution (and later the Internet) slowed down the pace of cable's incursion, by 2011 there were more than 126 cable programming services in the region. Many of these channels specialized networks offered new animated content that was catered to teenagers and adults, like the above-mentioned anime-oriented channels but also music-oriented networks like MTV. (Wilkinson and Castañeda 17-19)

MTV (short for Music Television) was founded in 1981 as a property of Viacom International Inc. As mentioned, it had already ventured in the region in 1988 with its syndicated show *MTV Internacional*, but it launched as a full cable channel in Latin America in 1990. First it catered to Brazil with MTV Brasil in 1990 and later, in 1993, to the rest of the region with MTV Latinoamerica; this last was subsequently divided into two feeds for the northern and southern hemispheres. While it catered to Spanish and Portuguese speaking audiences, most of MTV's content consisted of English speaking music videos, 70 % of them, and although the network had plans to show 50 % of regional content, typical forms of Latin American music were excluded and those Latin American bands included mimicked or resembled the Rock and Pop styles from Anglophone bands. Moreover, plans to add more Spanish or Portuguese content were often met with dubbed versions of US (English language) shows. In general, MTV's programming sought to homogenize its audiences as part of "an international youth culture" based on the consumption of US goods (including cultural ones), creating an audience which could be sold to transnational advertisers. It would be later in the decade that channels specialized in regional music would emerge, forcing MTV to shift much of its emphasis to reality TV shows; furthermore, the expansion of the Internet and platforms like YouTube have displaced MTV and other similar networks as the main channel for music videos and youth audiences. Before this moment, however, MTV was also influential because of its adult animation. (Wilkinson and Castañeda 19; Banks 44, 49, 50)

⁷⁰ The partnership between Mexican *Ánima Studios* and *Frederator Network* (US) to form the multichannel online *Átomo Network* resembles this association between regional broadcast corporations and foreign (US-based mostly) cable networks.

On the influence of MTV's programming in early and current notions of animation

Although it did not fully displace Latin American preconceptions of animation as a product exclusively for children, MTV's animation, along with anime, had a refreshing effect on the concept of the content, style, and audiences of animation. Beginning in the US with its animation anthology, *Liquid Television* (1991-1995), curated by Japhet Asher, the channel exposed US audiences to animation that had previously only been visible in underground venues and festivals like *Spike and Mike's Festival of Animation*. Among the many shorts (often commissioned) in the segment were Mike Judge's controversial *Beavis and Butthead* (1993-1997, 2011), Peter Chung's *Aeon Flux* (1991-1995), which would go on to have its own series and films, Eric Fogel's *The Head* (1993), *Stick Figure Theatre* (1991-1995), and many other short single installment animations. As one LA Times writer put it, *Liquid Television* "was deliberately crafted to be unlike anything else television has to offer. A lightning-paced mix of underground animation and graphics..." ("Bubbling under the Surface"; Lipton, 1991)

While the *Liquid Television* programming block was apparently not screened in MTV Latinoamerica several of its shows were, as also many later developments. Along *Beavis and Butthead* and *Aeon Flux*, other series well remembered by Latin American audiences were *Daria* (Eichler and Lynn, 1997-2002, a spin off from a *Beavis and Butthead* character), *Happy Tree Friends* (Ankrum, Montijo, Navarro and Graff, 2006, actually created for Mondo Media and licensed to MTV), the stop motion parody *Celebrity Deathmatch* (created by Fogel, 1998-2007), and the also controversial *Ren & Stimpy* (Kricfalusi 1991-1996, produced in the US for the also Viacom owned Nickelodeon network but shown in Latin America through MTV). ("Daria - Watch Full Episodes"; Gutiérrez; Fogel; "Top 100 Animated")

Many of the short animations seen in *Liquid Television* and the longer series like *Beavis and Butthead*, informed the style and themes of early online animations and continued with current ones. They also influenced the themes of early online animation by fostering the acid teenager and adult humor emblematic of MTV's satires. In regards to formal traits, MTV's cartoons provided some stylistic elements in its graphic (vibrant and pale palettes of colors, crude cartoonish character design, quality of line) and duration, as the brief snippets shown in *Liquid Television* and the series *Happy Tree Friends* catered to the short exposure times (and arguably attention spans) of 1990s youth – a trend consolidated by online video. Aesthetic tendencies in particular were reinforced by the feedback loop between cable networks and online animation, as MTV came to adopt some of the aesthetics online

video and online animation owed to early technical limitations in their production and distribution technology.⁷¹

Furthermore, in terms of audiences, MTV showed that television cartoons could be done for teenager and adult audiences and, along with anime, it influenced the emerging generation of Latin American animators. As one journalist put it about Argentina's animation from the early 2000's, "The new [animated] drawing inherits the wickedness of *Ren & Stimpy*, or the mordacity of *Beavis and Butthead*, always in pairs and antiheroes..." (Gorodischer). As an example, Colombian studio Conexión Creativa's debut television series, *El Siguiente Programa* (*The Next Show*, 1997-2000), was aesthetically and thematically influenced by *Beavis and Butthead*, but its style was re-appropriated to the Colombian context.

El Siguiente Programa was a satire of Colombia's celebrities and public figures (from soccer players to guerrilla groups), hosted not by two teenagers but by the cartoon versions of already famous comedians Martín de Francisco and Santiago Moure. Conexión Creativa would go on to produce a similar satire for the Mexican broadcast network TV Azteca, *Descontrol* (2003—2005), although the series was advertised as "100 % Mexican." *Descontrol* (translated as Out of Control) equally scorned Mexican public figures and celebrities and, like *El Siguiente Programa*, drew a similar audience of teenagers to television screens. Another of Conexión Creativa series, *Blanca y Pura* (1998-1999), took this move further when it appropriated and blended the *telenovela* (soap opera) genre and portrayed it with the same cartoony style. (Lersundy 22-26; "Creación")

Although not directly influenced stylistically, some Latin American animated features have also benefitted from MTV's introduction of animation to teenager and adult audiences. Examples include *Boogie el Aceitoso* (2009, Cova), *Huevos en Corto* (2010, Riva Palacio), *El Santos vs La Tetona Mendoza* (2012, Lozano and Couturier), and *Condorito: The Movie* (2017, Orelle and Schuldt) among others. (Pedraza; Dávalos; "Shinku_medium"; Vázquez 153,154, 89; Gorodischer).

On MTV's and Much Music's patronage of Latin American online animation

When considering Latin American online animations, much of what is stylistically vernacular has been derived from MTV but also from content influenced by it. In some ways, web series like TrineoTV's *Vida*

⁷¹ More on this in chapter two, C2.1.2 and C.2.2.

Pública followed the footsteps of Conexión Creativa's *El Siguiente Programa*, and the latter, in turn, was influenced in form and content from MTV cartoons. But where this influence is perhaps most present is on some of the early Latin American web series from the early 2000's, especially those that were adopted by MTV itself or by similar networks. While I will address the emergence of Latin American online animations in the next chapter, the web animations surveyed here started an exchange not only from cable networks to audiences/producers, but also *between television and the internet*. This exchange was in line with other forms of influence and continuity between television and the Internet occurring in the latter part of the 2000s (in the case of YouTube starting in 2007 (van Dijck 115, 116)).⁷²

Moreover, this dual exchange was not exclusive to cable networks and was later tried by some national broadcast networks; like Channel 2 in Panama which broadcasted the Flash animated web series *Wrappy, Sex Police* (2003), later picked by MTV in 2007 (Ball, Baisley); the cases of Mexican broadcaster TVAzteca with its animation section *IrreverentToons* in the show *IrreverentTV* (2012—2014), which gathered many popular YouTube animators; or the case of Marmota Studio for Chilean EtcTV channel in 2013. Some TV stations were also publishing for the web (seemingly as a testing ground) like *La Mansión de los Políticos* (The Politicians' Mansion, 2011-2012) in Paraguay (Barrera; Trujillo; Melgar, 2017; Laborde; "La Mansión de los Políticos"). In fact, before MTV at least another cable network was the first to adopt a webseries.⁷³ While many of the online animations reviewed here could be presented in the next chapter, their inclusion here owes to their presence in MTV and, in one case, Much Music; this last with the webseries *El Mono Mario* (2000-present).

Created in 2000 primarily by then web designers Gastón Pérez Carossio along Diego Domínguez and Ary Gerson. *El Mono Mario* tells the adventures of a promiscuous and irresponsible *ladies' man*, Mario, an exaggerated caricature (a "mono") of the Argentinian macho, all the while the show also parodies celebrities, public figures (not without controversy), and Argentinian social types. The show was first produced with Macromedia Flash with an elaborate scene design and hypersexualized characters (sexist stereotypes) and released in the private *lamarito.com* website. A month after its release in the August 2000 the show went from 800 daily visits to 2000 and up to 50,000 in 8 months, often crashing the servers due to the demand, despite their low memory .SWF files. However, at the time, limitations of Internet speeds made its virality limited until in 2003 *El Mono Mario* was picked up by Much Music and

⁷² See 1.1.3 and 1.1.5 in this chapter.

⁷³ Besides Much Music (Argentina) there was at least also the case of the Panamanian Televisora Nacional Channel 2, in 2004 with *Sex Police*, later taken by MTV, see next paragraph on *Sex Police*.

shown to larger Argentinian and Latin American audiences; the show also began dubbing its audio to English and catering to the US and other regions. However, apparently the show lasted in Much Music only for a year, and in 2004 it went back to being online only. Nevertheless, its success continued in YouTube when it got an official channel in 2013, along its website where, in addition to the episodes and merchandise, users can crowdfund directly the show, like a web only movie released in 2018. (Cicco; “El Mono Mario”; Carossio)

While, Much Music was the first cable network to adopt an online animation for distribution, MTV was more committed than any other network to the adoption of Latin American web series. It featured at least three constant series from South, Central, and North America (Mexico): *Alejo y Valentina* (2005—[Argentina]), *Sex Police* (2003-2012, 2016 [Panama]), and *La Familia del Barrio* (2004—[Mexico]). Additionally, the network had a website for web animation that based on its popularity could jump into its regional programming, in the segment *Flash MTV*.

A first example is the Argentinian series *Alejo y Valentina*, an absurd sitcom created by Alejandro Szykula in 2002. The series was rudimentarily animated with the Macromedia Flash and Paint programs and largely voice acted by Szykula. It dealt with the absurd adventures of a couple (Alejo and Valentina) and a set of mysterious characters that join them in their remote home in the fictional town of Papapipa. *Alejo y Valentina* was first distributed through Szykula’s website locoarts.com.ar (now offline) and was already popular before its release in YouTube in 2005, it was quickly picked up by MTV Latinoamerica in the same year, at which time Szykula hired other animators and formed a studio. It remained in the network for four seasons, during which Szykula had creative differences with the channel, these included music, plots, and scenes, with the network arguing at times that some audiences wouldn’t understand the original content, which included several Latin American countries. Indeed, the series was really localized, not only in its language (including some viral catchphrases) but also in its cultural references (for instance, each character cheers for a different Argentinian league team). But these vernacular aspects were not an impediment to reach other Latin American audiences and it appears to have inspired at least a similar series in Venezuela.⁷⁴ However, due to these differences the network dropped the show in 2009,⁷⁵ although in 2017 MTV begun re-showing the episodes in a late night section. Meanwhile, Szykula has announced a return of the series in that year, though not with MTV. (“Alejo y Valentina vuelve”; Stuardo; Szykula; MTV Latinoamerica)

⁷⁴ Informal source, “Alejo & Valentina – Wikipedia”

⁷⁵ Szykula says the show was dropped in 2009, but informal sources refer to differing years. (Szykula 2009).

Another web series that made it to MTV Latinoamerica was the aforementioned *Sex Police*, also known as *Wrappy* in the US. Panamanian animator Fred Lammie began the series as *El Show de Forrito* (Wrappy's Show) in 2003, using Macromedia Flash animation and his website, mundofred.com (now offline). Within a month of its release his visits hit over 45,000 (a viral record for the time). In this early iteration, the show was about the condom Forrito (Wrappy), who through songs and jokes teaches people about safe sex. In 2004, the TV show *La Cáscara*, from Panamanian Televisora Nacional Channel 2, showcased the clips. Eventually, Lammie moved to Spain, where he brought his project to Paneka Animaestudio; in partnership with the Canadian Comet Entertainment, they produced 13 half hour episodes which were bought and released by MTV Latinoamérica in 2007 for its section Animastosis, as part of its "sex month." In this expanded version Wrappy was the leader of a police team committed to fight irresponsible sex, often in episodes parodying popular culture. Apparently, the show ran for only one season but Fred Lammie's YouTube channel (as also several fan uploads and unofficial sites) still feature the episodes, the latest one being from 2016, along other educational and humoristic animations like his *Casi Creativo* series (ranging from economic inflation to dating advice). His YouTube channel currently boasts almost 2 million subscribers and over 300 million views. He keeps collaborating occasionally with *La Cáscara*. (Fred Lammie, "About"; Ball; Baisley; Melgar)

A third example is the Mexican *La Familia del Barrio*. Begun in 2004 but released on YouTube in 2005 the series began as clips of a few minutes made using Flash and Microsoft's Paint software (like *Alejo y Valentina*). *La Familia del Barrio* has been a satire of everyday Mexican society in a colloquial and crude manner. The series creators Teco Lebrija and Arturo Navarro list among their influences MTV's *Beavis and Butthead*, *South Park*, and *Ren & Stimpy* and in 2012 their show was picked up by the network to produce 30-minute episodes. For this they grew their studio and remade part of the aesthetics. Unlike more short-lived collaborations, *La Familia del Barrio* continues to be produced for MTV and has currently reached its fifth season, the series is being translated to Portuguese to be released in Brazil, and the studio planned to release as a feature film around the end of 2018.

(Moreno; Huerta; "La Familia Del Barrio"; Familiadelbarrio.com)

Although these three series were only a minority of MTV's animated content, the network showcased web animations more than any other network (national broadcasters included). Moreover, in addition to these series, MTV gave space for other web animators to be shown in between shows or to be showcased along other Flash animation in the program *Flash MTV*. At least from 2003 and probably until

2013, when the latest “MTV Flash” animation was uploaded to YouTube,⁷⁶ although there is no official timeline of the program in MTV’s site. However, in its site, MTV offered a space for Flash animators to upload their clips and to be voted by online audiences, those selected works were then showcased in the television section and as bumpers in between programming breaks. The type of content ranged from national culture showcases (such as an animated Mexican luchador cartoons) to violent slap-stick comedy. Unlike other projects it did not move to the YouTube platform, although that is where some of the clips can still be found. (Gorodischer; “MTV FLASH. Motion Graphics”; “Mtv Respetable Publico”; “Organicfields en MTV Latinoamerica”; Alvarez; “Flash MTV – Gentleman”; Conforti and Maksimiuk)

In some ways, the first pan Latin American online animation community was first realized through MTV and many of these web animations inspired the current generation of animators. Moreover, YouTube picked up where MTV left off and become the prime pan-Latin American web platform for youth culture, music videos, and, of course, online animation. For that to happen there had to be a development in Internet expansion and improvement of previously limited traffic speeds,⁷⁷ as also a certain homogenization, in terms of the adoption of global consumption patterns but also of a regional vernacular by the young demographic of Latin American Internet users.

As I have shown through this chapter, these developments in Internet and media culture occurred and ultimately affected MTV and other cable networks showcasing what was until then unconventional adult animation. The Internet’s availability of animated content and the facility of publication offered by platforms like Newgrounds and (especially) YouTube came to diminish or even disappear the animated content shown in the cable networks that informed online animation’s visual culture. Still, while MTV is far from the popularity it had in its heyday and while it has ceased its emphasis on unconventional animation and Latin American online animation,⁷⁸ it had a major cultural impact in the early and current visual culture of online animators. In this impact, we can observe a transitional visual culture from one medium to another (cable television to Internet platform) as also a move towards both a globalist (US-based) visual culture but also an hybridized appropriated one. Online animation’s visual culture reaches beyond national boundaries, into Latin American as whole, and beyond. Although, at first, this move was

⁷⁶ This period is based from informal references in forum posts, YouTube upload dates of past Flash MTV winners, and a single article from the Argentinian newspaper *Pagina12* from 2004. *Flash MTV’s* latest animation I could find was from 2017, uploaded in Vimeo. However, it is unclear if this was done contemporary to or uploaded after its MTV release. 2013 is considered a more feasible date considering forum mentions and other upload dates.

⁷⁷ *El Mono Mario*, for instance, had an initial limited web distribution due to the slow traffic speeds. Its temporary adoption in Much Music was what first led to its pan Latin American popularity.

⁷⁸ Though it still includes *La Familia del Barrio* in its programming.

limited to a certain demographic of viewers of cable networks and early producers of online animation with a certain socio-economic status. Nevertheless, their works would become the foundation of the vernacular language shared with different strata of viewers and manifest in the contents, styles, and relations with audiences and producers of Latin American online animation.

Hence, alongside anime, MTV informed the understanding of animation as a medium that could be used for something other than children's cartoons. Moreover, as a venue for distribution, MTV preceded YouTube in the recruitment of some of the first online animators and showcased them to a wider regional audience. In doing so, however, MTV kept the same bias it had for music, selecting animated works that followed the style of the network's adult cartoons; in turn, these featured online animations would influence subsequent generations of Latin American online animators and audiences.

As the Internet became more accessible, these influences would come to crystalize in the first online animations of the region and in the formal traits that composed early and current ones. These will be the subjects of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: On early online animation and a survey of its formal traits

This thesis aims to understand the historical emergence and socio-economic and cultural contexts of Latin American online animation and provide an overview of its current status and internal dynamics by surveying and categorizing its formal traits. Chapter one addressed questions concerning precedents and underlying socio-economic and cultural dynamics, but the early past of online animations (from the late 1990s to the mid 2000s) remains to be examined to render a current panorama of it. The use of formal traits, as a description of online animation and its internal logic, requires a study of Latin American online animation's immediate past. Many of these traits, now part of a vernacular language, owe to conditions that have left aesthetic, thematic, production, consumption, and association imprints despite technological improvements or socio-cultural changes.

In this second chapter, I will characterize Latin American online animations on the basis of their formal traits. Prior to that, I will examine the history and salient general features of the region's early online animations and then describe the formal traits of online animations. These formal traits conform to technologically and socio-economically co-determined medium-specific traits in general and culturally specific traits of Latin American online animation in particular.

In both sections of this chapter, the socio-economic preconditions of Internet access and usage and of visual cultural influence from anime and cable networks, manifest directly or indirectly in the character of Latin American online animations. However, to these determinants we must add the technological conditions of early and current online animation and the influence of the early visual culture of online animation, modes of circulation, and salient regional examples.

My analyses here are, however, limited in their method and scope. For the one part, early (and even some current) online animations are largely undocumented. To make up for that, I have largely relied on informal sources such as online blogs, comments beneath YouTube videos and related sites, fan reviews, and user responses to my queries; this is in addition to the aforementioned use of online archives, newspaper articles, compiled statistics and personal interviews.

Necessarily, there are some blind spots that cannot be addressed by focusing on formal traits and are only addressed loosely in the first section's historical account, notably questions regarding gender and

ideology which require a more in depth thematic analysis,⁷⁹ as well as that of demographic profiles of producers and audiences. All these limitations result in a partial account of online animations— nevertheless, this thesis’ research into early history and formal traits helps establish initial concrete parameters with which to frame the dynamics of online animation.

I begin where the previous chapter left off; this is, with an exploration of early online animations that were directly influenced by prominent cable networks like MTV, as well as by the anime of the 1990s, and which benefitted from the increased Internet access in the region and a boom in national animation industries. I wish to highlight that what these animations initially show is not only their cultural co-determination⁸⁰ from/by foreign influences and socio-economic and technological conditions, but the paratextual appropriation and hybridization present in most early online animation.

2.1. On early online animation from Latin America

2.1.1. Early Latin American online animation and their study

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, online animation in Latin America grew moderately, relying on the once minimal but increasingly available Internet services, and informed by the last decades of anime, MTV, and other adult oriented cartoons. Creators relied on limited and at times rudimentary distribution channels and catered to niche audiences that formed the communities from which many later YouTube-based animators would spring. Their works are remembered for their influence, permanence, or simply because they remain in the collective memory of contemporary audiences. The following list of early online animations is just a sample of early Latin American online animations, listed according to title, year, director(s), country, and media of distribution. Due to how many of these titles are lost, this list is largely incomplete.

⁷⁹ See sub-sub section 1.1.2 on *Gender disparity among Latin American Internet users* in the previous chapter for a brief review of it.

⁸⁰ That determines along other elements, other determiners.

Humortadela.com.br	by Sergio Batista	1995—2007, 2009—2011, 2012—present ⁸¹	Brazil	Website
<i>El Mono Mario</i>	by Gastón Pérez Carossio, Diego Domínguez, and Ary Gerson	2000—present, 2003 in Much Music	Argentina	Website, cable TV (2003 only), YouTube
<i>Killer Pollo</i>	by Cid Vela	2000-2006 (?)	Mexico	Website, YouTube
Charges.com.br	by Maurício Ricardo	2002—present	Brazil	Website
Huevocartoon.com	by Gabriel and Rodolfo Riva Palacio	2002—present	Mexico	Website, YouTube
<i>Alejo y Valentina</i>	by Alejandro Szykula	2002, 2005— 2017—present 2009 in MTV	Argentina	Website, cable TV, YouTube
<i>Juan Carlos, Merengue y Urca</i>	by Sarlanga Animaciones	2003—2012 (?)	Argentina	Website, YouTube.
<i>El Show del Forrito</i>	by Fred Lammie	2003—2016, 2007 in MTV	Panama	Website, Broadcast TV, Cable TV, YouTube
<i>Dr. Goku</i>	by Raúl “Rulo” Barrera	2003—present	Mexico	Website, Broadcast TV, YouTube
RAL Animation Studios	by Ricardo Adrián Lozoya “Negas”	2003—present	Mexico	Website, Broadcast TV, YouTube

⁸¹ Founded in 1995, Humortadela is the earliest recorded site to which I refer here. See subsection On Distribution. (“Site Humortadela volta”; “Humortadela”)

Mundocanibal.com.br	by (?)	2004 (?)—? offline	Brazil	Website
Cooperativa Tucan Estudios	by (?)	5 Feb 2005—02 Dec 2006	Venezuela	Website
<i>La Familia del Barrio</i>	by Teco Lebrija and Arturo Navarro	2004, in MTV 2012— present	Mexico	Website, YouTube, Cable TV
<i>Zape Pelele</i>	by Diego Cardona (and others?)	2004 (?)— present	Colombia	Website, YouTube

[Table 11. Prominent early Latin American online animations, 1995 – 2005]

The animations in this list show the early spread of amateur, independent, and small studio online animations, the existence of local private websites hosting them before platforms, the synergy of some of these animations with media companies⁸² and the existence of early animation hubs like Argentina and Mexico. While I will only expand briefly on some of these series and studios, I will refer to the general dynamics of several of them through this section.

Much like the lost early features by Quirino Cristiani (Bendazzi 49), many early online animations have been lost to time and neglect, as many websites hosting them have gone offline and/or the details about the animations or their creators were not properly recorded. (Sometimes even the sources informal accounts cite are offline themselves.) Hence, the cross section this list offers is arbitrarily limited by the circumstances in which online animations have endured in the collective cultural memory, the places where they have been archived⁸³ in the web, the facility with which those references or archived versions can be found, and the possibility for any confirmation. Many early works are either unacknowledged by proper descriptions of their producer's websites or are simply offline, all of which makes their discovery difficult and prone to inaccuracy or overlooking. As such, some online animations that were mentioned in blogs are not included in the above list out of lack of information or lesser popularity (e.g. single episode skits). Nevertheless, their presence has been noted by fans and their lineage continued by some current animators.

⁸² See chapter one, section 1.2.2 on MTV and cable networks.

⁸³ Whether formally or informally. Formally in the form of page captures in websites like archive.org or when mentioned by authors from established publications like national newspapers. See Gorodischer.

As the producers of the YouTube channel *ViralGains* say, “when it comes to the history of viral content, you won’t find its beginnings buried in textbooks. The backstory and the future of this social phenomenon reside in one place: The Internet” (“The History of Viral”). Blog entries, video vlogs, forum boards, fan uploads of the original works to contemporary platforms, some journalistic accounts, and a few product descriptions are the records that can help track some of the first online animations from the region. As was mentioned in chapter one, some of these early works jumped to television or feature film, guaranteeing their formal recognition; however, these are but a handful and most are only remembered by their fans.

Scores of fan-made blogs and forum boards recall the early days before YouTube, of slow download speeds, email chains, and niche websites. On YouTube, vloggers like La Zona Cero, Vlogbrothers, Kaptainkristian, and even fellow animators like Gato Galactico and HBruna have documented the paths of online animation producers. These accounts are often a form of fandom in themselves, full of personal opinions, and inaccuracies, but also including long forgotten details unavailable elsewhere. This last is especially the case when the original websites have gone offline and/or when the only examples of works are fan uploads. At the same time, a few journalistic articles of the early 2000’s touted some web animations as examples of the booming national animation industries and/or as cases of online media’s popularity (Gorodischer; Laborde; Huerta; Amidi “Netflix To Develop”; Rempel)

Moreover, in general, online animation is often listed as the first visual media shared and popularized through the Internet. Animations like “The Spirit of Christmas” (1995, Parker and Stone, soon to become *South Park*), the “Dancing Baby” (originally a technical demo file, 1996), *Homestar Runner* (a web series by Mike & Matt Chapman, 2000), and multiple user/fan based animations, like “animutations,”⁸⁴ and animated memes, were among the first (if not the first) moving images to achieve virality on the Internet (“Pre-History”; “The History of Viral”).

This virality was in part the result of the limitations of early computer graphics and Internet technology. The low average bandwidth of 56Kbps (Kilobytes per second), a palette of only 256 display colors (and 216 web safe colors), limited hosting space, the cost of these servers, slow upload and download speeds, and the limits of the file formats for images, audio, video, and interactive media that could be

⁸⁴ Animutations, referred to as “fanimutations” by some (see Hepola) are an early form of Flash animation produced as a collage and montage of graphic elements and audio. In the words of one journalist, “Simply put, animutation, or fanimutation as it’s sometimes called, is a mutated, animated montage of pop-culture images set to music – often Japanese – accompanied by nonsensically incorrect subtitles.” (Rempel)

shared meant *it was easier to distribute online animation over online video*.⁸⁵ This popularity of online animation over online video was possible thanks to the consumer animation software recently available (specifically Macromedia Flash⁸⁶), the ease with which this software (informally⁸⁷) circulated, and the already mentioned decreasing costs of personal computers and Internet services (“Pre-History”).

Thus, in the late 1990s and early 2000s Latin America, the producers that grew up with anime and MTV cartoons now had at their disposal the basic tools for animation production and distribution, a like-minded audience, and an expanding media landscape with a growing demand for digital content. Unlike the celebre artistic animators or the professionals from the surging animation studios, the producers of early online animations most often lacked the aesthetic sophistication, thematic depth, and sophisticated audiences of the former or the production scale, audience reach, quality standards, and family friendly constraints from the latter.⁸⁸ Instead, they were largely amateurish in skill and politically incorrect in their content, their novelty was informed by their fandom, and their distribution was only as consistent as their popularity (and sometimes not even that⁸⁹). Moreover,⁹⁰ in addition to sharing a similar visual culture, this demographic was socio-economically homogenous: urban, middle-class, with at least secondary education, and predominantly male.⁹¹ These animators capitalized on distribution

⁸⁵ Hank Green, one of the hosts from the channel *Vlogbrothers* mentions that it was until bandwidth became better that online video series took off, before that point his account of early viral video refers exclusively to animation. (“Pre-History”)

⁸⁶ More below.

⁸⁷ In Mexico, Flash (and software in general) has circulated with relative ease, often via piracy or simply passed on. Online animator “Rulo” Barrera, mentions how he got his copy of Flash 5 from a high school friend and fellow producer, while this one, in turn, got it from his brother. A similar account is given by producer Martin Trujillo who got into animating after fellow animator “Negas” gave him a copy of the software. (Barrera, 2016; Trujillo, 2016) It is worth pointing out that these three animators are from Mexico, a country that,

...is usually listed among the largest producers and consumers of pirated goods. Among the countries cited by the International Intellectual Property Alliance (IIPA) in its Special 301 recommendations, it routinely places in the top ten in losses claimed by US companies: seventh or eighth in software, second or third in recorded music, first in film, and fourth or fifth in video games.

(IIPA 2010; 2008; 2006 ctd. in Cross 305)

⁸⁸ Although, as mentioned in chapter one, studios like the Conexión Creativa broke ground by producing arguably the first animated series for adults.

⁸⁹ Especially in regards to email chain based communities, which could only become as popular as the size of the mailing list; moreover, many animators produced only one solo work or dropped their series altogether—this last appears to be the case of Cid Vela’s *Killer Pollo* (Barrera, Personal interview).

⁹⁰ As seen in chapter one.

⁹¹ Predominantly male online animation producers. From early to current online animations, the grand majority of found producers were male (142 out of 150 surveyed current YouTube-based animators) as discussed in the subsection title “Gender disparity among Latin American Internet users” in the previous chapter.

through the world wide web and the ease and availability of digital animation technologies, primarily Flash.

2.1.2 Flash

Technology writer Sean P. Aune gives the following account of Flash:

Now known as Adobe Flash, it started life as SmartSketch, a drawing program for PenPaint. After that operating system failed, SmartSketch was re-worked to be a vector animation tool, and was re-branded as FutureSplash Animator and was made to work on multiple platforms. In 1996 Macromedia purchased FutureSplash and contracted the name to “Flash”.

It was in 2005 when Adobe purchased Macromedia that it turned into Adobe Flash, and it was also around this time that Flash began to take off like a rocket around the Web. (2010)

However, long before Adobe’s purchase of Flash, the program was already widely popular online, especially for the amateur production of animations and games. When Flash became accessible to average consumers in 1996 it led to a worldwide explosion of online animations. Its success also owed to its adoption by major companies and browsers like Netscape. Among its early clients, were Microsoft, which used it for its launch of the MSN portal, Fox Corporation, and also Disney Online, which used it “to build animation and the user interface for the Disney Daily Blast.” (Gay; Ozer)

Flash’s creators capitalized on the early Internet’s incipient traffic and its technical possibilities: “We were starting to hear about the Internet and the Web, and it seemed possible that the Internet would become popular enough that people would want to send graphics and animation over it” (Gay). The program’s memory light formats, like GIF. (Graphics Interchange Format) or Flash’s own .SWF (Small Web Format, used to develop both animations and web games), were favorable to the epoch’s limited bandwidth speeds and online animation’s early modes of distribution, like email chains⁹² (Trujillo; Barrera; Vázquez 133; Wright).

Moreover, while some online animators used other (traditional) techniques, especially artistic collectives, most preferred Flash for it was easy to use and to learn and had an online community that served as audience, mentor, and critic. Flash became the hegemonic software for web animation and continues to be popular today, with some animators continuing to use older versions of the program

⁹² More below.

(“Negas” ““NEGAS - La Entrevista”). As technology writer Julie Muncie notes, “In the early to mid-2000s, [Flash] provided a reliable, functional means of embedding full-motion graphics and video into webpages.” The first version of the program only allowed for animation, but its fifth release in 2000 contained useful programmable features (Ozer). Its success was such that in 2008, Jonathan Gay, one of the co-creators of the software, wrote, “Flash has become synonymous with animation on the Internet.”

While Adobe has announced that it will discontinue support for Flash in 2020 (Muncie), its prevalent use for online animation and videogames has resulted in several dominant formal (aesthetic) characteristics of online animation which remain to this day – despite the decline of the software.⁹³ As Julie Muncie writes, “Flash games lent themselves to the exaggerated and cartoonish, a style that eventually evolved into an affection – at least amongst its best creators – for beautiful grotesquerie.”

As I suggested in chapter one, this style fed from adult cartoons like those from MTV and some regional studios. It also comes from the freedom and lack of censorship the Internet offered and which became both its charm and constraint.⁹⁴ Free Internet distribution and receptive audiences allowed and fostered its propagation, “...the aesthetics and mood of Flash games stretched beyond the medium itself” (Muncie). The style of early online animations, alongside its popularity, expanded slowly but surely through the early web and later in platforms like Newgrounds and YouTube.

2.1.3 On Early Circulation

The distribution of early online animations was fragmentary. Before YouTube launched in 2005, online animations relied on email chains, forum posts, and word-of-mouth of certain websites – especially Newgrounds.com – to reach their growing but still niche audiences. Through these channels, pre-existent and new communities of animation fans began consuming and releasing works online.

Some online Latin American animations from the period had their own private websites; although, many of these ceased to exist before YouTube or because of YouTube’s rise to prominence. Some of these allowed for a online community and an exchange of works, others were solely devoted to individual creators or studios. Some of the most renowned sites were Huevocartoon.com, raltoon.com (“Negas”), the collective *Mentes Enfermas* (for Barrera and others), locoarts.com (for Szykula’s *Alejo y Valentina*),

⁹³ See next section on Online Animation’s Formal Traits.

⁹⁴ More below “On Newgrounds” subsection.

mundofred.com (Fred Lammie), lamarito.com (for *El Mono Mario*), Charges.com.br and other. The earliest of which there is record is the Brazilian website Humortadela.com.br.

Founded by Sergio Batista, the name is a play of words on “humor” and “mortadela” (a type of sausage), which could crudely translate as “sausage humor.”⁹⁵ The site offered humorous content in Brazil in an era when, even in the United States, much online animation was only available through email chains. However, the site’s existence has been constantly interrupted: at some point in 2007, it was shut down due to hacking problems. It came back online in 2009, only to close in 2011, and to return later in 2012 after it was reportedly bought by the Brazilian media company Orapois. Currently Batista releases content via other platforms, like Facebook, but the domain itself remains empty since 2016. (“Site Humortadela”)

However, this mode of distribution was limited to those who could pay for hosting services, and on itself was limited by server capacity, animation file sizes and formats, and data upload and download speeds of each country’s Internet connection, not to mention that some webseries like *Huevocartoon* required a pay per view access.

Technical capacities were a major limitation in terms of reach. For instance, Gastón Carossio, co-creator of *El Mono Mario*, mentions that upon its popular release in 2000, his servers would get congested with download requests, making the download of an episode take anywhere from four minutes to one hour. This situation is also remembered on current forums about the show, where one user recalled, “Those of us who remember the bronze age of the Internet, fighting with the modem for 54.4 hours to download a tiny episode of 3 minutes... we shouldn’t forget the effort” [my translation]. Carossio cites traffic limitations as one reason his series was not as popular in Latin America until it was adopted for television distribution by the cable channel MuchMusic in 2003 (see C.1.2.). (Carossio; Bona)

An alternative to private websites were email chains, which offered a cheaper but more limited form of distribution, especially concerning audience reach. Examples include the distribution of Cid Vela’s *Killer Pollo* in Mexico or the Chapman Brother’s *Homestar Runner* series in the United States (both from 2000). While email chains did not have the download congestion problem of private sites, the animations that could be shared via emails had to be small and viewers could only watch them by forming part of the chain. At times, these chains gave way to animation communities that sometimes

⁹⁵ Which connotes a sexual inuendo to male genitalia much in accordance to the abundant sexually themed cartoons in the site.

became production associations, as was the case of the small Mexican collective *Mentes Enfermas* in 2001 (*Sick Minds* which acquired its own site after its creators' initial success). Still, the audience for these communities were only as big as the mailing lists, far from the virality later attained through platforms. A precedent to these last was the site *Newgrounds.com*, which mixed both the niche community character of email chains, the hosting advantages of private websites, and featured a then novel mode of popularity based distribution. Upon its foundation it likely became the most popular site for early online animation in Latin America.

(Barrera; "Cuauh"; "Pre-History")

2.1.4 On *Newgrounds.com*

In the early 2000's some hosting services (platforms) became available, allowing producers unable to pay for server space the opportunity to upload their work. The prime animation platform, in Latin America (as in the United States and other Western countries), was *Newgrounds.com*. The site not only offered a platform for animation, but also its contributors and viewers constituted a community with a special interest in user-generated Flash animation. While the site also comprised videogames, fanart, and otaku fandom, it is largely remembered for its animation focus; "Rulo" Barrera, co-creator of *Dr. Goku*, has aptly called *Newgrounds.com* "A YouTube before YouTube but for animation." Indeed, many prevalent features of today's online animation, and several of its stars came from the influential portal. (Barrera)

Newgrounds' content was primarily user-generated and the site fostered engagement from audiences not only as viewers but also as active contributors able to comment on the content and to create it. According to its founder Tom Fulp,

I had previously used the name for a Neo-Geo fanzine, so I called it New Ground Remix. I was just goofing off. Back then, it was exciting to put something on the Web. [...] I started it [*Newgrounds*] in 1995, but 1999 is when I added the portal, which was originally a place where I would put my unfinished projects. But I also started showcasing other people's Flash work, because other people didn't necessarily have hosting for their stuff, and they thought it would be a good spotlight because we had some popularity on the site from the things I had been making at the time. So many people started sending me their .SWF files and I was managing so many pages, so I brought a friend onboard to develop an automated version of that. In 2000, we launched the automated portal, and ever since then, people have been able to

instantly publish games and animation. [...] I guess Newgrounds as we know it today was born then. (qtd. in Feldman)

Newgrounds' popularity owed in part to Flash's .SWF format which, unlike other early software, allowed for the making of both animation and games, besides its light data weight that facilitated exchange with the limited bandwidth at the time (Wright). But while this technical facility (of hosting user-generated content) permitted the site to operate, Newgrounds' success owed largely to a popularity-based ranking system that favored the content that appealed most to the site's users. Users could rate their peers' animations and the best ranked pieces would not only be shown more often but earn some virtual rewards for their makers (Barrera; Muncie; "TwistedGrimTV"). Thus, the site not only offered one of the first hosting spaces for amateur animations, videogames, illustration, and other types of content, but the curation of these works was open to the community that made them. At the same time, this freedom and popular voting system favored controversial content (like Fulp's game titled "Club a Seal") and limited the site's possibility for revenue from advertisers, unlike YouTube (Fulp ctd. in Feldman). Nevertheless, for Newgrounds' predominantly teenager demographic (the same demographic who watched anime and MTV), this freedom outdid such concerns and as Fulp recalls,

I think a lot of people underestimate the importance of not having gatekeepers that determine whether or not you can put something out there. [...] When the Internet came along, we just let all those untapped feelings out. (qtd. in Wright, 2017)

It was this freedom of publication and community curation that carried Newgrounds through the first decade of the 21st century, peaking in popularity in 2008⁹⁶ (around the same time as Flash itself) with a global community of users, including from Latin America.

While it was based in the US, Newgrounds had a strong Latin American presence. What Latin animators contributed often reflected on their (collective) cultural/regional identity, sometimes in opposition to racism or discrimination. Such was the case of the fan remake in Flash animation of the song "Frijolero" by Mexican hip-hop band Molotov ("Frijolero" meaning the derogative term "Beaner"). Some of these Latin American users formed an inner group within the Newgrounds site to the point that in 2003 they launched a Latin American version called Latingrounds.net. That website, though, appears to have lasted only for a year and by 2005 it had been taken down. ("Internet Archive")

⁹⁶ Just a year into what van Dijck identifies as YouTube's restructuring towards mass audiences (2007-2011) (115-116), and which has since largely displaced Newgrounds as the main channel for online animation as accounted by some online animators like TwistedGrimTV and "Rulo" Barrera.

However, many other Latin American animators in Newgrounds didn't always mention their regional origin or reference it in their works and were perceived as being from the United States. For instance, Chilean animator Nico Ortega, better known as "TwistedGrimTV," mentions viewers' surprise upon learning he is not from the US. His is not the only case, as a string of animators, especially Chilean, published in English for Newgrounds, YouTube, and other platforms. ("TwistedGrimTV")

The case of "TwistedGrimTV" also exemplifies another aspect that was nascent at Newgrounds but that became more synonymous with YouTube: monetization. "TwistedGrimTV" came to online animation via Newgrounds due to the monetary awards he earned for the popularity of his first works; however, these incentives have long since been withdrawn given the slow decline of the site. While Newgrounds was still strong in 2008, the emergence of online videogame sites like Steam and the eventual dismissal of Flash from Apple and other mobile devices marked a decline in Newgrounds' popularity. Moreover, the launch of YouTube in 2005 gradually but decidedly shifted Newground's prominence as the platform for online animation, partly because of YouTube's technical ease of upload (not limited to .SWF files or file sizes), its fast-growing and far reaching mass audience (the biggest by far), and its possibility for monetization ("TwistedGrimTV"; Wright, 2017)).

2.1.5 On Monetization and the case of Huevocartoon

Monetization was an elusive incentive in the early days of online animation. Besides awards, some sites relied on the sale of merchandize, like *El Mono Mario* did, or on pay per view access to their animations, like Huevocartoon. The former case was dependent on the marketing skills and suitability of content of each studio, while the latter tended to discourage users from visiting the sites and to upload pirated versions instead. This dynamic between popularity and revenue is best embodied in the case of Huevocartoon. (Vázquez 85, 86)

In some ways the Mexican web series *Huevocartoon*, by the commercial studio of the same name, is one of the most emblematic successes of early online animation, not only for its continuity and popularity but for its jump into theatrical features and the growth of its licensing revenue (at least for the first decade of the millennium). As mentioned in the introduction, at the time of its launch, Mexican animation was undergoing a renaissance that was part of a regional boom of animated production. Independent artists like Carlos Carrera (winner of the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1994) were receiving national and international praise, while commercial studios were venturing beyond one-time projects.

For instance, in 2004 *Ánima Studios* released its feature *Magos y Gigantes* (dir. Couturier and Sprowls), the first animated feature to be produced in Mexico in almost thirty years. The same period also witnessed the rise of animation collectives, festivals, animation educational institutions, government initiatives (originally focused on artistic works but expanded to theatrical features and videogames), and, of course, online animations. These years were also when Internet use in Mexico began to accelerate, going from 7.1 million users in 2001 to 10.7 million in 2002, and eventually, to 71.3 million by 2017. Nevertheless, at that point, few studios had ventured onto the internet as their main form of distribution for commercial productions. (Vázquez 6, 39-40; Aurrecoechea 138; 2, “Estadística a propósito”; “Encuesta Nacional”)

It is in this environment that in 2002 and with limited resources, brothers Gabriel and Rodolfo Riva Palacio founded Huevocartoon.com, an online site featuring cartoons based on egg-like characters parodying social types, public figures, or celebrities. The cartoons offered colloquial adult humor and were of variable duration, ranging from 10 seconds to 5 minutes. Within a year, Huevocartoon.com had received more than three million visits; nevertheless, the siblings and their associates were losing money. Although the site required paid access to its contents, Huevocartoon was heavily hacked, its contents leaked and circulated virally through third parties, while its physical merchandize was also being pirated.⁹⁷ It appeared that success would be short-lived when the brothers struck a deal with the licensing company Tycoon Enterprises and were able to use their cartoon’s popularity in their favor with a flood of licensed products like school supplies, cereals, and cellphone backgrounds. (Vázquez 86)

With a steady revenue from licensed products, Huevocartoon offered its content for free and opened an official YouTube channel in 2007, where its animations quickly became viral and displaced previous fan uploads⁹⁸ (85, 86 Vázquez). This YouTube channel currently⁹⁹ has over two million subscribers and more than five hundred million views; it contains all of Huevocartoon’s materials except for its feature films.

Huevocartoon’s theatrical feature, *Una Pelicula de Huevos* (*A Film About Eggs*,¹⁰⁰ my translation), predates its YouTube presence but buttressed the studio’s popularity. The film was released in 2006 to a very successful revenue of 142 million pesos (approximately 7.5 million US at the time). It became the

⁹⁷ See footnote 6 in this chapter.

⁹⁸ This concern with piracy can be attested in the current YouTube channel, where in the channel description the studio kindly requests users not to re-upload their animations. (*Huevocartoon* “about”)

⁹⁹ January 2019.

¹⁰⁰ The title would literally translate as *A Film About Eggs* or *A Film of Eggs*, yet the colloquial translation of its title would be something like “A Very Cool Film.” Subsequent *Huevocartoon* sequels have made similar play on words, often with more vulgar connotations.

second biggest national box office success for a Mexican production (including live-action films). This result was largely thanks to the *already* existent audience for the shorts, the vast merchandise presence, from cereals to cellphones, and to the film's commercial production quality. The feature obtained the first official animated feature Ariel¹⁰¹ award from the Academia de Artes y Ciencias Cinematográficas de México (Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences of Mexico), and has had two sequels, in 2009 and 2015, which have obtained less but still considerable revenue (Vázquez 87, 88).

Arguably, *Huevocartoon's* jump to licensing and theatrical releases can be seen as monetization pushed into franchising and into a form of media convergence, albeit one going from the Internet to toys, school supplies, and cinema. As it concerns a character-based monetization scheme over a multiplicity of media and merchandize, *Huevocartoon's* franchising is a form of media convergence that has been called by some a media mix. As Marc Steinberg explains,

Since the 1980s, the term *media mix* has been the most widely used word to describe the phenomenon of transmedia communication, specifically, the development of a particular media franchise across multiple media types, over a particular period of time. In a word, it is the Japanese term for what is known in North America as *media convergence*. (135 *Anime's media mix*)

As Michele Hilmes has noted, convergence has preceded its current academic emphasis and the phenomenon itself is not novel to the digital age, since television has borrowed from cinema as much as radio has borrowed from studio recording. As she writes, "Convergence is not a new phenomenon: it is the very hallmark of modern media." (27)

Following both notions, it therefore follows that digital media – particularly online animation – would borrow from prior forms of visual media, as has been the case with televised content like MTV and anime. This has always been the case for animation, since its origins were often comic strips and graphic novels that have crossed over to animated versions (serial or theatrical), and which have not only been limited to the content but tied to the careers of the producers themselves.¹⁰² Moreover, *Huevocartoon's* move to licensed goods and to an off-line platform was not the first: recall the early inclusion of Argentinians *El Mono Mario* on MuchMusic or Szykula's *Alejo y Valentina* on MTV; however, the *Huevocartoon* web series can be considered the most commercially successful example of an early (and

¹⁰¹ Arguably the first such prize would be for *Tlacuilo* by Enrique Escalona in 1988, as noted earlier by Aurrecochea (108-109, Aurrecochea).

¹⁰² Such as Manuel García Ferré in 1960's Argentina and Maurício de Sôusa in Brazil during the 60's, 70's, and 80's (Bendazzi 188, 192)

still current) online animation, especially as it did not depend on a television network to expand beyond its internet audience.

Huevocartoon also exemplifies one of online animation's recurrent limitations: the cultural and age range of its target audience, a trait that – in general – is an overarching limitation of online animation and which can be considered one of its medium-specific traits: the uncensored themes of its works. Although its features catered to children (one of the conditions for government funding), the humor of the original online shorts catered to an adult and teenager audience. The case of the failed theatrical release of the adult-oriented *Huevos en Corto* (2010) suggests this link between type of content and mode of distribution. (In other words, the mode of consumption favored (and co-determined) its content.) Much like the case of Newgrounds.com, where the lack of thematic restrictions favored politically incorrect themes, Huevocartoon's online distribution is both liberating and limiting concerning content and audiences. This is evident specially when the producers try to bring their work to another medium or when marketing it to sponsors. In these cases, like with Newgrounds.com, they are limited either by their content or brand appeal.

This limitation, *content delimiting audience and distribution*, is prevalent with most early and contemporary online animations. As Luis Vázquez notes, there is a link between the public to which an animation caters and its aesthetic, theme, and distribution platforms. For instance, consider the failure of the feature film *El Santos vs La Tetona Mendoza* based on a newspaper comic strip by Mexican cartoonist Trino (Vázquez 89, 151,153,154). However, there are some medium-specific differences: in the case of Trino's character, its adult audience is found among the readers of major circulation newspaper and political satire magazines (likely adults); while for Huevocartoon, its audience are the younger Internet savvy generation who consume content from other smaller producers and almost in an anonymous fashion. As one of the founding brothers, Rodolfo Riva Palacio, says "No one wants to see *Huevocartoon Pelados* [Raw Eggs] (in movie theaters), for that you do it in the intimacy of your home in a computer, that is the hardcore *Huevocartoon* market." (Qtd. in Vázquez 89, my translation).

This content-audience limitation derives from a medium-bound trait of online animations, a trait that can be considered specific to them and favored by its production and distribution conditions. Alongside foreseen socio-economic and cultural dimensions, online animation's production and distribution also render other medium-specific traits that are more or less constant with the majority of current Latin American online animations (primarily YouTube-based ones). Formal traits, in particular, come to be

some of online animation's most salient medium-specific traits, as they owe historically to technological, cultural, and socio-economic limitations. I will address these formal traits in the next section.

2.2 Formal Traits of Online Animation

2.2.1 More on Online Animation's Medium Specificity

The aesthetic traits that emerged with early online animation have continued with current YouTube-based animations, despite technological advances and the demise of some creators and websites. These traits originally owed to the technical conditions of digital animation production and online distribution: file formats, file size, server space, download and upload speeds, and digital animation software. Added to these were some socio-economic and cultural determinants like Internet availability, the adoption of globalized consumption, adult-oriented animations, regional growth of the industry, and patronship from corporate networks, online platforms, or studios. Moreover, as online animation emerged, it coalesced certain formal and thematic traits from early online animation communities.¹⁰³ In this manner, the synergy and growth of these communities, of animators and audiences, has derived in a vernacular of online animations, one that conjoins styles and themes – still largely conditioned by technological, socio-economic, and cultural factors, but largely coalesced by its own communal aesthetic tastes, as dictated by both animators and audiences.

An aspect where this vernacular language crystalizes, this is, where it evidences its co-determinant aspects in a manner specific to itself, is in its formal traits. While limited and not comprising a complete description of other key areas (like political ideologies, reduced participation of women, dynamics of association, the animators' aims towards the audience, more detailed description of their monetization and post-online careers), formal traits nevertheless engage with online animation's ontology qua the aesthetic composition of *online* animated content. In other words, formal traits can describe online animation based on what makes it online and not just animation, on what makes it online animation and not just online video – i.e. as a modality of animated moving images produced with digital tools and released for online distribution.

A way to achieve such understanding of formal traits is by categorizing and contrasting the different elements composing online animations, many traits which are present in a great majority of these animations, and which in many instances are dictated by either Latin American cultural specificity or

¹⁰³ And amateur videogame communities. See Muncie.

specific kinds of hybridization with other cultures.¹⁰⁴ While such typology is hardly found in other studies, some scholars of animation and online video and Internet studies have already engaged with different formal aspects in their analyses as a way to address or categorize salient aspects of their objects of study. For instance, van Dijck addresses the snippet form of early YouTube in contradistinction to the longer forms currently favored¹⁰⁵ (121). Marc Steinberg considers formal aspects as it concerns the mobility, immobility, and the drawn nature of anime and its characters, especially as it concerns such characters' transmedia possibilities through media with different formal properties (*Anime's media mix* 83, 84). Thomas Lamarre does as much regarding anime's in-depth movement and two-dimensionality (specially his commentary of Japanese "superflat" theories) (114, 115, 136). Meanwhile, Wu Weihua and Vlad Strukov emphasize salient features of Flash and take them as paramount with online animations. Furthermore, the categorization of formal elements delimits the scale and range of this thesis and of any web study, as Niels Brügger remarks on the levels of study or *strata* possible for online historiography (754).¹⁰⁶

However, it appears that at present no study of online animation offers a typology of the *formal elements of online animation*; hence, in the following subsections I aim to offer such a typology, relying on notions from some of the aforementioned scholars, on the historical developments surveyed in the previous sections (e.g. two-dimensionality of Flash, color palette limited by technology, grotesque and rudimentary cartoon depictions), but also on some of the production concerns of online animators, like sound design or even quality of line.¹⁰⁷ The traits that I have chosen to focus on are discrete (i.e. distinct from each other), even if interrelated, and exist on what Brügger would call the level of the web element and within (754, 755) (i.e. different aspects within an animation: like line quality and animation technique, voice and sound quality), except for the elements of interactivity. I find the inclusion of interactivity necessary as it is formally integrated not in the animation per se but on its online display, and because it sometimes reflects in the content of the piece (as when animators or their characters invite viewers to pitch ideas or participate). As for the arrangement and presentation of these formal

¹⁰⁴ For example see the discussion on anime's representational style in subsection 2.2.4, on limited animation in 2.2.5, and on music and its inclusion of popular genres in 2.2.6 in this chapter.

¹⁰⁵ This is nowadays causing trouble to online animators who can't produce such lengths. See Amid.

¹⁰⁶ Brügger suggests the following strata: the web element, the web page, the website, the web sphere (about a topic), and the web as a whole (753, 754).

¹⁰⁷ For instance, "Rulo" Barrera has considered things like his sound design as it concerns production. Meanwhile, "Negas," who is renown for his acid ironic views, has had his characters self-reflect on their own rudimentary design in one his later animations, the self-referential episode "DONMAKILA - "Evolucion" de los monos (#NEGAS)."

traits, these have a logical succession. For example, questions of graphic composition inform those of representational style and in turn these do so with animation technique. Thus, in what follows, I analyse online animation's formal traits in terms of their duration, graphic composition, representational styles, animation techniques, sound composition, and mode of interactivity.

2.2.2 Online Animation's Durational Traits

One of the most immediate aspects to notice about online animation is its duration, its durational traits.

Individual duration

The first durational trait is the duration of individual animations themselves, i.e. the animated clip, which has a tendency towards *brevity*. While online animation clips can be long (like half-hour special episodes, Q&As) or very short (promotional trailers, animated advertisements), the average duration of most current content (circa 2019) is (three minutes and forty-one seconds). This tendency is on par with much of YouTube's content; as van Dijck notes, the so-called "snippets" were the product of YouTube's legal constraints and media features and acquired status as "an autonomous cultural form." (119) However, unlike online live-action video, online animation's brevity also owes to technical production limitations and consumption demands of its audiences.

In terms of technology, online animations were originally brief given the early limitations of animation software, file size, traffic speeds, and online hosting, and which resulted and favored the spread of GIF and .SWF animations. The arrival of online platforms (Newgrounds and YouTube), better animation software, increased bandwidth speeds in the region, and YouTube's recent push to prioritize longer content¹⁰⁸ has helped to bypass these limitations.

Nevertheless, the tendency has remained towards brevity, especially as it concerns release quotas and audience preferences. In order to achieve a constant viewership, build a subscriber base, and (in most cases) monetize toward profitability, online animators aim for constant release quotas (such as twice a week or once a month). Thus, animators like "Rulo" Barrera, Martin Trujillo, "Negas," Alejandro Szykula,

¹⁰⁸ However, Australian online animator Ross O'Donovan has claimed that, "YouTube has switched its algorithms for determining "premium content." While they used to reward video views, now they reward minutes of video watched and frequency of uploads. Channels that excel in the latter two metrics will receive more prominent placement on their platform, as well as attract the premium advertisers who pay higher CPM rates." Thus creating a major disadvantage for online animators. Ctd in Amidi "Is YouTube Making."

studios like Marmota, Combo Estúdio, TrineoTV, reviewers like Chucho Calderón, vloggers like Ricardotaku, and many others have grown their audiences by adhering to a certain weekly or monthly schedule and suffered reversals when not (as in the case of Martin Trujillo).¹⁰⁹ This has led to the notion among online producers that a channel that doesn't publish dies. Moreover, constancy of publication is an aspect fostered by multichannel networks like Frederator and Átomo, as a strategy that favors the growth of an animator's popularity.

Additionally, audience preferences for shorter content mean that online animations tend towards brevity. Animators like "Rulo" Barrera and Martin Trujillo note that shorter animations tended to be more popular than longer ones (Barrera; Trujillo). This owes largely to the mode of consumption of online content which, as seen in chapter one, in Latin America is predominantly done via mobile devices (Rojas y Poveda; "YouTube for Press").¹¹⁰ Some video production companies also consider this notion and argue that "Online video has long been associated with short video" ("The Best Video").¹¹¹

Serial duration

The brevity and constancy of publication partly result in the seriality of animated content. Single episode animations were popular in the early days, such as the viral "The Dancing Baby" (1998) or the animation "All Your Base Are Belong to Us" (2001?), and they were and remain popular in platform websites like Newgrounds, especially on works by amateur animators. However, more constant producers (and constancy appears as key for popularity) engage with semi-serial or serial animations with recurring characters or tropes. In these modes of publication, characters and settings reappear with cumulative or disconnected histories, dying and reviving in the next episode (like "Nega's" protagonists in his series *Niño Rata* and *Poppa Pig*, or the parodies of Argentinian "MatiasTV Telechubbis"), or continue a narrative progression (like *Dr. Goku* by Barrera or *Personas Cetaceas* by Marmota) or have a character with narrative presence (Panamanian Fred Lammie's animated narrations in *Casi Creativo* series or Combo Studio's animated vlog's *O (sur)real mundo de Any Malu*) which lend them greater familiarity and helps them gain viewers. These animations recycle their characters, settings, and graphic components, both narratively and formally, fostering techniques like limited

¹⁰⁹ After ceasing to publish in his channel in October 2016, Trujillo's channel, *Atoon*, has slowly gone from 401,298 subscribers in August 2016 to 384,253 (as of June 2019), with a steady decline of a few tenths of subscribers per week.

¹¹⁰ See chapter one, section 1. "More than 70% of YouTube's watchtime comes from mobile devices," "YouTube for Press."

¹¹¹ Although, as mentioned, this tendency is beginning to change. See Amidi "Is YouTube Making."

animation,¹¹² still images, and fixed mise-en-scene where the whole action of an episode often develops entirely. In other words, online animation's seriality and reuse of stylistic and narrative elements, owe as much to online animation's consumption as they do to their production conditions.

Second, there is online animation's production process. While animation's early small file size favored its brevity (and contributed to its popularity), unlike video, online animation's duration is largely limited by its production. Simply because of the release schedules and compressed production times, online animators are at odds to produce clips longer than a few minutes. As Australian animator Ross O'Donovan notes, "producing animation is far more labor intensive than producing live-action content. Independent animators cannot create long videos or upload with the frequency that YouTube's algorithms require for premium placement" (ctd. in Amidi, 2014). In this regard they face what artistic animators widely faced in the past, a labor-intensive process too slow for online audiences, despite fostering a more rudimentary graphic style.

Moreover, most often online animators (as social media profiles suggest and personal interviews confirm) do not animate as their main occupation, nor have had professional formation – many of them (most) do it as a hobby and have learned via their peers or on their own (Barrera; Trujillo; Pastén ctd. in Laborde; "Megurine"). Additionally, online animators often have limited access to more advanced animation software, like 3D animation, and lack the computer power to render much 3D or elaborate 2D animation; they may also lack the technical skills or even just the incentive to produce works more elaborate than that accustomed by the community.¹¹³ For instance, an animator as famous as "Negas" often declares that he is not an animator and that his work "are not animations, they are *monos* [cartoon illustrations]... [they] are like newspaper comic strips that move their mouth" ("Negas" ctd. in Vanrub; qtd. in Radio Anime my translation). Instead, most online animators have favored simpler software like Flash, Microsoft Paint, or prefabricated animation software like Miku Miku Dance or Go Animate which are easier to learn, operate, and – importantly – allow them to produce more quickly. These production and consumption conditions have, in turn, favored a set of graphic compositions and representational styles.¹¹⁴

¹¹² See section 2.2.5 on Animation techniques.

¹¹³ Original online 3D animation is uncommon and of limited duration, instead, pre-fabricated 3D animation is more frequent, specially among certain communities like MMD and Machinima. More below on subsection 2.2.5 on Animation Techniques.

¹¹⁴ More below.

2.2.3 on Graphic Composition

The predominant visual composition of most amateur online animation goes back to the early days of online animation, owing to its technical limitations and its prevalent production tools (namely Flash and Microsoft Paint) and has continued despite the overcoming of technical limitations.¹¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, the prevalent graphic composition has remained rather simple: two-dimensional (2D), composed of simple shapes, simple coloring (cel/cartoon shading or no volumetric shading), predominantly outlined, occasionally drawn by retracing photographs (often for rotoscoping) or using pre-drawn characters (often as part of limited animation, more below),¹¹⁶ often overlaid on pre-existent backgrounds, often with no background, at times including cut-out photographed objects or people, live-action video, and pre-existent .GIF animations (as a sort of mixed media, much like “animutations”).

Most of these formal traits are highly recurrent and constitute a sort of vernacular style recurrent not only in the region’s but in the world’s online animation – for many, this style has become synonymous with the style of web animation.¹¹⁷ Much of this consistency owes to online animation’s paratextual subject matter, as it references established anime like *Dragon Ball*, *Pokemon*, or *Naruto* and thus mimics their original cel shading and graphic composition. Moreover, the rudimentary palette of shapes, coloring, shading, and drawing seem to owe to the amateur training of many animators – which is largely informed by online animation communities. This rudimentary character is reinforced in animation relying on pre-animated software like the ones made with MikuMikuDance or Go Animate. By contrast, when online animations contain more elaborate graphic elements, this is often because the animators have acquired professional training (like in the case of Marmota Studio or the webseries *Vete a la Versh* (Alatriz, 2009 – present)) or when they are from a professional animation studio (like Combo Estúdio and TrineoTV). But these often also conform to a certain aesthetic reveling in rudimentary graphics and, in general, low production value.

Nevertheless, even within this milieu of low production values there is some formal variety, especially when it concerns original content or the work of prolific and older producers who have tried with different graphic elements and techniques for different narratives, like “Rulo” Barrera and “Negas.” Thus, for instance, Barrera often traces from live action characters while “Negas” has progressively added photographic elements and animated GIFs to his later works like *Niño Rata*. At the same time,

¹¹⁵ See Muncie, see section 2.1.2 On Early Online Animation Production

¹¹⁶ See 2.2.5 on Animation Techniques

¹¹⁷ This embodies what Katz described as the adoption of global digital media consumption trends. (49, 51)

certain graphic compositions have become associated with specific producers whose style has remained constant through the years (like Szykula's *Alejo y Valentina* or *La Familia del Barrio*), even when they concern different diegetic and original narratives (like the work of Marmota Studio).¹¹⁸

Many of these graphic traits are tied to certain representational styles with thematic implications and recurrent animation techniques. I examine such styles in the following subsection.

2.2.4 Representational Style

I use the term *representational style* to categorize the type of stylized depiction of characters, settings, and objects in online animations – how these are represented in the animations. In this regard, the following categories delve very little with non-representational, non-naturalistic animations, such as abstract animation or data visualization; rather, these representational categories concern animations aimed to entertain. While this is limiting in terms of content, addressing online animations in terms of their representational style sheds some light into their thematic contents and their relation to other factors like technological limitations, socio-economic and ideological status, and cultural background – a more elaborate analysis of content would complement the correlations here only suggested.

To begin with, I have chosen to subdivide the representational styles of online animation into six identifiable categories: rudimentary cartoonish, consistent cartoonish, anime depictions, realistic depictions, live-action based, and photo cut-out. I suggest these categories based on the patterns of representation I have observed in early and current online animation but also inspired by the aesthetic classification proposed by animation scholar Maureen Furniss, what she calls a continuum of “motion picture production” with two tendencies: mimesis and abstraction. She describes mimesis as conforming to a representational desire tending towards naturalism, towards the imitation of real life, the pole to which cinema tends; on the opposite end, she speaks of abstraction as leaning towards “the use of pure form,” conceptual abstractions of reality, therefore the pole of animation’s propensity (5,6).

Considering Furniss’ aesthetic continuum, the prevalence of certain animation graphic compositions and animation techniques, but also the diversity exhibited by some online animators, I will describe and

¹¹⁸ Like the different series by Marmota Studio, from *Nadki Mágico* (2015—2016) to their Cartoon Network sponsored *¡Golpea duro, Hara!* (2018).

analyze the following styles as part of an animation spectrum with an abstract (more cartoonish) pole and a realistic-naturalistic one.

Rudimentary cartoonish

Rudimentary cartoonish encompasses crude, (intentionally) poorly drawn or built depictions of characters and elements. It is often a trademark of teenager and adult humour and the style tends to emphasize comedic and/or grotesque elements of the picture. Its crudity is often contrasted with realistic or photographic backgrounds and objects and complemented by equally rudimentary animation techniques,¹¹⁹ which tend to emphasize the crudity and limited nature of the work. Examples include *Killer Pollo* (2010 – 2011, Mexico) by Cid Vela, *Niño Rata* (2016 – present, Mexico) by “Negas,” *El Gaucho Zoilo* (2002 – 2008, Argentina) by Conde Pablo, *Los Bobotes* (2014 – 2017, Dominican Republic) by Livio Ozuna Estudios and many, many others...

Consistent cartoonish

Consistent cartoonish depiction is an umbrella term for online animations with a consistent (2D, 3D, cut-out, or otherwise) cartoonish depiction of characters, objects, and settings. It is often partly reliant on techniques like limited animation but often is fully animated,¹²⁰ specially for original productions. It is also often paired with original/and or narrative content (as opposed to paratextual content). Examples include all the series by Marmota Studio (2012 – present), Colombians *Desocupe Masivo* (2007 – present) by John Ramirez, *Vida Publica* (2011 – present) by Colombian TrineoTV, *O (sur)real mundo de Any Malu* (2015 – present, Brazil) by Combo Estúdio, and *Vete a la Versh* (2009 – present, Mexico-US) by “Darkar” Alatriz.

However, in some instances, cartoonish depiction applies to the copying of pre-existent characters, like those from Disney franchises or children series. Examples include the series *Grimes* (2016) by Barrera, and *Poppa Peg* (2015 – 2017) by “Negas,” a parody of the children series *Peppa Pig* and which on its own fits in the rudimentary category. This last use of copied (paratextual) cartoonish depiction is frequently used among anime depictions.

¹¹⁹ See next subsection.

¹²⁰ See in next subsection.

Anime depictions

Anime depictions, as a category, evidently refers to online animations emulating or deriving from a predominantly Japanese anime style of character drawing. It is most often used along limited animation and for parodies or homages of established anime series like *Saint Seiya*, *Dragon Ball*, *Pokemon*, *Naruto*, *YuGiOh!*, *One Piece*, and others – this category also includes original content heavily inspired by anime. Examples include the Mexican series *Dr. Goku* (2008¹²¹ – present) by “Rulo” Barrera, *PoGonYuTo* (2010 – present) a series based on a blend of the series *Pokemon*, *Dragon Ball*, *YuGiOh!*, and *Naruto* by Cha Studios, and the animations by Dandre Productions (Colombia 2014 – present). It is worth noting that the majority of anime stylized depictions appear to be made by Mexican animators; this is likely a by-product of the earlier popularity of anime in Mexico than in the rest of Latin America (Cobos 12, 13) and the synergy between Mexican online animators, who often influence each other and collaborate.

Realistic depictions

Realistic depictions aim for naturalism in their (mostly drawn) representation style. This is often obtained via rotoscoping and animated as such but is also present in limited animation. Its use is frequently parodic and juxtaposed with absurd visual or plot elements. It is often used for original content (humor and narrative) but also, because of its realistic quality, for satirizing real life celebrities or public figures. Examples include the series *Blackman* (2015 – 2018) and *Velociraptor de Harvard* (2015 – 2017) by “Rulo” Barrera and the 3D series¹²² *Mitos y Leyendas mas Conocidos de Colombia y America* (2008 – present) by Hugo León Ortiz Castellanos.

Live-action based depictions

Live-action based depictions here refer to animations relying on live-action elements (such as stop-motion animation or framed photographic animated GIFs) but mostly mixing their animations with live-action video, as a mise-en-scene template where animated characters are added. This style of representation approaches the same pole of animation as realistic depictions and photo cut-outs, but the animations juxtaposed with this style frequently contrast with simultaneous cartoonish depictions (rudimentary or consistent). However, in some cases the video element is dominant and used as part of a more standard video vlog. As examples we have the Brazilian producer Gato Galactico (2013 – present,

¹²¹ Though in his interview “Rulo” Barrera mentions that the series pre-dated YouTube.

¹²² Although, it remains unclear to what extent the producer relies on pre-modeled characters and elements.

a semi-animated vlog), the also Brazilian *O Spectacular Renato (O Homem Spider Man)* (2015 – present) by Reboesteio, *Grimes* (again) by “Rulo” Barrera, and some elements of “Negas” *Niño Rata*.

Photo cut-out depictions

Photo cut-out depictions, as the name implies, include found images and photographic elements incorporated or constituting the representational style of online animations. It can be considered a still image version of the live-action based depictions but also an inversion, because the photographic elements exist in a predominantly animated environment, often with a visually jarring sense of humor. The most salient example, once more, is “Negas” with his *Niño Rata* series.

Representational styles are, in many respects, the locus of online animation’s vernacular language. This since they are formed by certain recurrent graphic elements and follow online cultural trends, as also the logics of production and release times. These last two tie representational styles to recurrent graphic elements but also to certain animation techniques, again, with thematic implications. The latter are examined in the following subsection.

2.2.5 on Animation Techniques

Online animation techniques are, unsurprisingly, mostly digital and relatively simple. Unlike artistic animations’ experimentation with unconventional methods or the technological feats of commercial animation, online animation’s palette of animation is more modest. Its shorter production and release times, reduced crews (often individual), a general lack of training, and the intertextual nature of its contents foster simpler easier to learn and to use techniques. Since its early days, this tendency has been enhanced by animation communities employing them and teaching them among their members, specially 2D vector animation. Nevertheless, within such an array of techniques there is plenty of formal and thematic diversity, and some of the oldest online animators have explored and experimented with different styles and themes. Here, I’ll present the most recurrent techniques, while also noting out that these are frequently employed together. These are: two-dimensional (2D) vector animation, 2D limited animation, 2D frame-by-frame animation (drawn or pixilated), prefabricated 2D animation, original three-dimensional (3D) animation, prefabricated 3D animation (including machinima), and rotoscoping.

2D vector animation

2D vector animation is the prevalent animation technique. It is also the most frequently associated with online animation. This is unsurprising, given its early presence, its technical and cultural prevalence,¹²³ and its popularity among amateur producers. As such, vector animation is often called Flash animation, conflating its still prevalent production software with the 2D vector technique it is used for (Gay). Vector animation is easy to learn, specially using Flash, easy to process with a personal computer, and has a vast and veteran online community of makers and viewers (Barrera; Trujillo; “Negas” ctd. in Vanrub; ctd. in Radio Anime). Its popularity has grown through the years with its adoption by studios who have favored vector animation in place of frame-by-frame 2D animation or the more demanding 3D graphics. Its range of representational styles is broad and combinable with live-action or found images (like Internet memes).

Notable examples of 2D vector animation are the series *El Mono Mario* (2000 – present), *Vida Pública* (2011 – present) by Colombian TrineoTV, the parodies by Chilean animator “HBruna” (active 2011 – 2016), the series *Astenia* and its continuation *La Caja de Pandora* (2008 – 2017) by the Costa Rican Macho Gonzalez, the animations (2011 – 2018) by Salvadorean channel *Neon War*, the Ecuadorian series *Un Minuto con Francisco, la Serie Animada del Papa* (2013 – 2016) animated by Canva Byron Lam, Honduran series *The Focking Team* (2012 – 2018) by Eddie García, the animations by Mexican “Hagen Wolfhowl” (2013 – present), the Dominican series *Los Bobotes* (2014 – 2017), Uruguayan short series *¡MANÍ!* (2015 – 2017) by Martín Benedetti, the political satires (2010 – present) by Venezuelan Gil Laya, and many, many others.

Limited animation

Limited animation is the other most common technique and is often mixed with 2D vector animation. As Marc Steinberg notes, in limited animation, “Immobility rather than movement dominates most scenes, and often the life of the characters is sustained by the voice or narrative alone.” Furthermore, he notes that limited animation also includes the use of static images on their own, with ‘camera’ panning or still framing to portray character reactions, crowd scenes, or even dialogue with no movement. (198 –199 “Immobile sections”)

¹²³ See 2.1.2 on Flash animation software.

Among online animators, the reason for limited animation's popularity largely owes to production constraints: lack of animation training, the facility of its craft (only a few elements in the frame are animated), and the production speed it allows and which favors faster releases. This technique is frequently found with the anime representative style, much like the use of limited animation in the original Japanese anime, and online animators keep an little to unaltered resemblance between their copy and the original characters they refer to. This technique is also commonly used with the realistic style, specially when it involves traced or semi-traced photographs of people (not to be confused with rotoscoping), which adds to the consistency of the picture's realism. Some examples employing limited animation are the Mexican series *Dr. Goku* (2008 – present) by “Rulo” Barrera and *Producto Robot* (2010 – 2018) by Steve Morales.

Added to these traditional notions of limited animation, one may consider techniques like vector stretch and squash (of the whole element versus a key-frame or frame-by-frame renderings) as other examples of the same technique. Both of these techniques facilitate a form of automated animation used in live animated streams. An example are the streams by “Negas” in the platform YouNow.com (“YouNow – negas”).

Prefabricated 2D

Some 2D software allows producers to build narratives with pre-built in characters, sets, and animated motions like walking, talking, and gesturing, which a user can then arrange in a plot and add their voice to. An example are the popular culture jokes *Chistes de Pepito* (2013 – present) from producer Redmau and the similar skits by the channel Milagrosas (2015 – present), both of whom use the program Go Animate (now Vyond). (“GoAnimate is now Vyond”; “Redmau – YouTube”; “Milagrosas – YouTube”)

Frame-by-Frame animation

Compared to vector (key-framed) or limited animation, frame-by-frame animation is relatively rare among online producers. This is in stark contrast to its popularity among commercial and artistic animators, some of whom upload to the Internet many of their works but who mostly cater to offline audiences. In simple terms, the technique is understood as the frame-by-frame rendering of key poses and in-between transitional drawings that together produce a type of fluid movement. Even when used with 3D models, frame-by-frame animation is rarely produced for the web. As is evident, this method is more labor intensive and requires more formal training than vector or limited animation, thus being less common. Nevertheless, there are a few examples in *Vete a la Versh* (2009—present), the shorts by also

Mexican studio 4TAKEN (2012 – 2016), Uruguayan series *Supermartu* (2012 – 2015) by Martín de Benedetti, and the Chilean Marmota Studio for their series *Personas Cetaceas* (2012 – 2017). It is worth noting that these three producers have professional training and aspire (to an extent) to produce animation for more conventional markets (for instance, Marmota Studio recently released their *iGolpea duro, Hara!* series in Cartoon Network).

(Marmota Studio; 4TAKEN – YouTube; de Benedetti, 2013)

On 3D computer animation original and pre-fabricated.

Although less common than two dimensional (2D) techniques, three-dimensional computer-generated animation (3D CGI animation) has always been present in the Internet, and at least one of the first viral online animations was 3D, The “Dancing Baby” (1998). This was originally a technical demo file done by animator Michael Girard using consumer software in a personal computer and quickly became viral, first via email chains and then through its upload in websites to the point that it was showcased in a 1998 episode of the tv series “Ally McBeal.” (Lefevre; “Pre-History”) Unlike the “Dancing Baby” meme, however, most original online 3D animation has met with limited success and is far less common than original 2D animation. Nonetheless, its presence resembles th

pattern of 2D animation: in Latin America, original 3D works are rare but there are vast communities of pre-fabricated 3D practitioners. I will refer briefly to both.

Original 3D computer animation

I here consider an online animation to be original 3D animation if the animation and the 3D construction (modeling, rigging, lighting) were done by the online animators themselves. Whether with rudimentary or realistic movement, original 3D animation is a rarity among amateur online animators, and although it is more common among artistic collectives uploading or even catering to an Internet audience, even among them 3D animation is rare. This is unsurprising, considering the technological and professional capacities demanded by 3D animation and the conditions in which most online animators operate. Nevertheless, there are at least three examples of original 3D animation: the Colombian *Made in Colombia* short series (2014) by Alejandro Celis, the Latin American myths and legends series by amateur animator Hugo León Castellanos (2008 – present), and the Ecuadorian web series *Simon Limon* by “Gino Imagino” (“La animación ecuatoriana”). The description of *Made in Colombia* summarizes the situation and possibilities of original 3D online animation in Latin America,

With the aim to demonstrate that it is possible to optimize 3D production processes for the Colombian audience and to promote the good things that happen in our country, each episode of Made in Colombia has an average production time of 5 hours and only one digital artist [Celis himself], to publish in social media in the manner of a web series an episode of 30 seconds per week with topics of national actuality. (Celis, "Series web," my translation)

Prefabricated 3D animation

Prefabricated 3D animation is far more popular than original one simply because, like pre-fabricated 2D, its models and often its animation are premade or facilitated by 3D CGI programs. This allows for an easy-to-use alternative for amateur producers who do not need to invest as much time in the production and rather can focus on the narrative aspects of the content. These animators often form large communities around the same programs and/or associated types of narratives. Two notable examples of prefabricated 3D animation are Machinima and MikuMikuDance (MMD).

Machinima

Machinima is one of the earliest forms of web animation. Contemporary with 2D Flash animation, it has been dated as early as 1998 and circulated via email chains among makers and enthusiasts. The term refers to a contraption between "machine" and "cinema" and describes a mode of animation using the real-time 3D Computer Graphics of existent game engines from games like *Halo*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *The Sims* and any other game with an accessible game engine. Machinima's circulation predated platforms, but specialized websites and eventually YouTube favored its popularity. This is partly due to Machinima promoters, like the "talent agency" Machinima.com, but also to the vibrant community of users and viewers. However, by its very origins Machinima's community extends and overlaps with gamer culture and this reflects in its content, and their fictions differ from recorded gameplays in that they use the game engine outside the games' original set up.

Formally speaking, Machinima producers often (re)mix characters from different videogames, mixing the heads and the bodies, importing vehicles or objects across games, and various settings as paratextual and intertextual appropriation in a manner that constitutes a cross between universes and fandoms. It appears, however, rare to include original 3D models or animation besides the one incorporated in the game engines themselves.

The result is a form of digital puppetry, where character performances are done by the (fan) producers, sometimes on multiple collaborations. In Latin America, several producers release machinima works on YouTube, sometimes forming loose associations, and their most recurrent game engine is from Microsoft's *Halo* game series. Examples of these producers include "Ultimo Player" (Argentina, 2008 – present), "MachinimaMexicana" (Mexico, 2008 – 2015), and the collective "Legión Machinimadora" (multiple Hispanic countries, 2015 – present). (Lowood 26, 27; "machinima - Word Spy"; "Guía: Cómo Hacer Machinimas.")

MikuMikuDance

In some ways MikuMikuDance (MMD) is a form of Machinima, albeit not based on video game engines but on a paratextual music software. MMD is a free 3D CGI animation program designed by Yu Higuchi and published in 2008 as an accessory product to Crypton Future Media's Vocaloid singing voice synthesizer launched in 2004. MMD's original release featured a moe (anime) style female avatar named Hatsune Miku, who has become a virtual Japanese idol.¹²⁴ Besides the global popularity of the character, MMD became highly popular as an animation software, forming an international community of users who have produced their own characters and narratives. This expansion was facilitated by the .pmd and later .pmx¹²⁵ data files of MMD which allowed for greater variety and functionality of 3D models, the 2012 Creative Commons license of Hatsune Miku by her parent company (Crypton Future Media; "Joe Mello"), and the popularity of J-Pop, K-Pop, and anime in Latin America. Of this last Tania Lucía Cobos notes,

The arrival of anime and manga to Latin America have also generated, like in the rest of the Western world, the birth of a new subculture self-named otaku... [...] the members of this suburban tribe are characterized for being consumers not only of Japanese animation, but of products related to and in general from "Japanese culture." (24, 25, my translation).

MMD users, like many online animation producers and audiences, are part of Latin American otaku circles, offline and online. In Latin America (and elsewhere), MMD producers use the site DevianArt.com as a community and publishing platform, this in addition to YouTube, where they publish their animated

¹²⁴ "'Idols' or aidoru refers mostly to the young women and girls who sing, dance, and act for their adoring fans, most of whom are male." [Yamamoto and Adelstein]

¹²⁵ ".PMD file is a MikuMikuDance PolyMo Model Data" (datatypes.net "PMD file extension...") while ".PMX file is a MikuMikuDance PolyMo Model Data." "[...] PMX (Polygon Model eXtend) is the next-generation file format 3D objects in [which] MikuMikuDance [files] are stored in. They have advanced capabilities such as the ability to use Expressions in altering the properties and attributes of a 3D model." (datatypes.net "PMX file extension...")

works. They sometimes customize or produce 3D models and animation but most often rely on the pre-existent set of characters and actions or on those produced and shared by other users. These users are also some of the main promoters of the software, mentors of it, and the audience for its works.

Examples of MMD makers include “Gabi Megurine” (from Paraguay, 2013 – 2018), “Natix” (Colombia, 2012 – present?), and the channel “MMDChile” (Chile, 2012 –2017), among others. (“Megurine”)

On Rotoscoping

Rotoscoping is a technique very rarely used in online animation. Ignoring questions of its ontology as animation, rotoscoping can be bluntly defined as “...the art of animating on top of live-action film.” (Brennan). Originally this was achieved by projecting still frames of live-action film onto an animation cel where the artist would trace it,¹²⁶ “giving animated characters more fluid, life-like movement” (Fleischerstudios.com). Nowadays digital technology allows animators¹²⁷ to trace in the screen or to partly automate the process with software like Bob Sabiston’s Rotoshop. As Sabiston notes, even digital rotoscoping differs from motion capture in that artists hand draw the characters (ctd. in Lukmanto), to this can be added the minor imperfection and/or customization that such tracing allows to derive a fantastical image or juxtaposition.

Writing about its use in cinema, Douglas Brennan notes that, “...rotoscoping allows live-action’s boundaries to be seamlessly transgressed...” So much is at play when used in online animation. As an example, animator Barrera uses it in his series *Blackman* (2015 – 2018) and *Velociraptor de Harvard* (2015 – 2017) to grant superpowers to human characters or juxtapose regular people with a velociraptor. In both cases, the technique accentuates the juxtaposition of a very mundane storyline with an absurd situation; presenting office workers and ‘johns’ with a realistic quality of movement that works with their realistic depiction and starkly contrasts with more rudimentary 2D vector techniques.

¹²⁶ And patented as such by Max Fleischer in 1915, co-creator of Betty Boop and Koko the Clown. (Fleischerstudios.com)

¹²⁷ For the purposes of this study, I will not address the ontology of rotoscoping as animation but will consider producers using this method as animators, partly because many who use rotoscoping animate with other techniques.

2.2.6 on Sound

On Sound: technical aspects and design

Sound is perhaps the least considered element when discussing online animations (whether in fan blogs or in the sparse academic mentions) – however, it plays a crucial role as a formal structure for the thematic content and the particularities of online animation, especially amateur one. The music, sound effects, and voices evidence the limitations of most online animated content but also the creativity of many of its producers and their cultural specificity. In terms of production quality, while early web formats offered uncompressed (.WAV) and compressed sound (.MP3), Flash's .SWF format was all that was required.

Flash incorporated sound since its third release in 1998 and was playable by most browsers, given Flash Player's ubiquity¹²⁸ and the small size of it and the .SWF files, which facilitated download through low bandwidth connections. .SWF had early video and sound synchronization problems but not with animation and so, until the arrival of platforms (offering uncompressed audio formats like .AAC or .WAV in YouTube), its capabilities were largely the capabilities online animators had available (Ozer).

To this limitation are added those of amateur audio production: lack of proper audio recording equipment and/or training to use it. Hence, most animated works are amateurish in their recording and use of voices, often featuring echoes or muffled speech, or sampled sounds. Naturally, studios or animators with access to professional equipment produce work with better sound quality. These aspects have largely remained as part of the simplicity of online production and partly as a form of vernacular reinforced by shared practices among online animators.

Indeed, some producers have embraced the poor quality of sound as part of a kitsch or anti-art aesthetic, at times even when they have professional recording equipment, as in the cases of the animations by producer "Negas" and Alejandro Szykula's *Alejo y Valentina* series (2002 – present), where poor recording, economy of voice acting, and sampling is used aesthetically. Additionally, individual (amateur) producers also embrace their technical limitations by using sound that is "organic" to the Internet, like sound effects, sound bites, samples, or automated voices as in the animations of Peruvian producer "Starfox 665," "MatiasTV Telechubbis," or again "Negas."

¹²⁸ To date, "Flash Player already reaches over 98% of Internet-enabled desktops and more than 800 million handsets and mobile devices." (Adobe)

In what follows, I will examine some of the ways in which these and other online animators use music, sound effects, and voices. These formal usages belong to the general set of vernacular traits characteristic of most online animated works and in a few ways specific to Latin American ones.

Music

Most online animations feature music. Music variously serves as an identity tag, a formal structure, a tool for narrative emphasis, or a comedic mood element.

As a formal structure it introduces and ends a clip, providing an opening and a closing theme (often only few seconds long but at times an entire song), these themes also play the role of identity tags, presented in tandem with the animators' logo and, at times, a voiced reading of the studio's name. But music is also formally used as a background component, at times indifferent to the plot and at others in function with the narrative. In this regard, it serves for narrative emphasis, like in the animations of Colombian Hugo León Ortiz Castellanos (2008 – present), and in animations with no voice acting at all, it is used to convey as the main component to convey a certain mood to the story, like in the by animations Paraguayan "Gabi Megurine's" and those by Chilean producer "GeoExe."

One of these moods is irony, frequently achieved by way of juxtaposing known tracks for comedic purposes and even commenting on the social context of those tracks. For example, the way Alejandro Szykula incorporates blues for the *Alejo y Valentina* episode "Termineitor D.O.S versión WEB sin censura (2006)," and the way "MatiasTV Telechubbis" uses regaetton in "TELECHUBBIS: TARJETA DE NAVIDAD PARA ENVIAR," both of which provide an absurd contrast to the silliness of what is being shown. This juxtaposition of known tracks partakes on the culture of online pastiche and can be considered an organic form of online comedy, but this comedic use of music can also be representational (and self-referential) of certain cultures or popular tastes in Latin American. This is very noticeable in the case of popular music genres like cumbia.¹²⁹

Barrera, for instance, includes cumbia songs as part of his *Dr. Goku* series in episodes 29 and 30, where one of the characters is distracted by a playlist of the popular genre, as well as in other episodes where cumbia is part of a satire of Mexican social types. A similar social satire using cumbia can be found in the

¹²⁹ In this regard, online animations engage in the opposite of what MTV did: the exclusion of local genres (Banks 49—50); quite the contrary, since, although mostly parodic, online animations feature popular music genres as representative of the animators' culture or as an hybridization element along extra-regional content like anime.

animation of Argentinians Pablo Conde and his *El Gaucho Zoilo* (2002 – 2008) and in by in social satires by Magrioanimaciones, as also in the Salvadorean series *Neon War* (2011 – present).

Other regional music genres are used as well, like Argentinian tango in the series of “Borges Animado” (2014 – 2015) by Magrioanimaciones, regaetton in Colombian “Desocupe Masivo” (2011 – present), or hip hop in the rap battles of Dominican-US based “Creci2,” among others. These genres are played along more global styles diegetically or non-diegetically, at times serving as character identifiers.

In general, the tracks used tend to be appropriated, with or without permission, and only a minority of producers feature original soundtracks. Examples of series with original music include “Rulo” Barrera for his (partly appropriated) *Dr. Goku*, *Desocupe Masivo* by John Ramirez, the series from Marmota Studio, and those from Combo Studio’s *O (sur)real mundo de Any Malu*, among others. It is worth noting that most series with original music feature original content.

Sound Effects

An equally common and constant element in online animations are their sound effects. Most surveyed online animations include sound effects with different representational and narrative qualities and diegetic and non-diegetic uses. These sound effects often partake of modes of Internet pastiche and of different cultural elements, including online cultures and local-regional ones.

Diegetic usage

Sampled sound effects largely conform to conventional diegetic usage, contributing to ambient sound or corresponding to the actions of characters and objects. Likewise, these sounds tend to correspond not only to their world setting but also to the genre and representational style of their contents. Thus one finds video game sounds in video game inspired or based settings like in the animations by “Legión Machinimadora” and “GeoExe”; office sounds in the fictional workspaces of *Don Makila* by “Negas” or Marmota Studio’s *Personas Cetaceas*; rural and natural locations in Ortiz Castellanos’ series of myths and legends; and others using diegetic sounds as extensions of their theme and their narrative. Diegetic usage of sound also has a comedic effect while still being representationally consistent, as when it over emphasizes character actions like blinking or biting. Such emphatic usage of sound can become a substitute for dialogue, as is done extensively in the series *John Death* (2015 – 2017) by the Mexican studio Mako Animation.

Non-diegetic usage

Nevertheless, there are instances of sound that do not correspond to the representational world. Sounds accompanying most online animation intro titles or end credits exemplify this non-diegetic usage which is still consistent with narrative conventions. These sounds often become representational of the studio, the series, or even certain characters. Another instance of narrative non-diegetic use are effects like canned laughter in shows like *Vida Pública* (2011 – present) or *O (sur)real mundo de Any Malu* (2015 – present); yet another non-diegetic usage is when sounds are juxtaposed in a jarring manner for comedic purposes as done in the Brazilian channel Reboesteio (2010 – 2018) or the series *Niño Rata*.

Sound effect's source

Most surveyed online animations had sampled sound effects, while a few (at least four out of a hundred and fifty) occasionally had voiced ones (like “MatiasTV Telechubbis” (2008 – 2017)), and very few had none (four, three of them MikuMikuDance ones). In general, most are conventional sound effects, but some, like Reboesteio, “Negas,” Chilean channel Murciegaloco Animations or “MatiasTV,” incorporate found sounds, often accentuating the poor sound quality of their samples. Many of these incorporated found sounds are recognizable, like the Internet modem dial sound of the protagonist of *Niño Rata*, Rodolfo González, or the pokeball sound from the series *Pokemon* in an episode¹³⁰ from Murciegaloco. In some cases, this mode of appropriation extends to popular dialogue clips with the status of memes or even entire appropriated dialogues from gameplays and interviews (like in some animations by “MatiasTV” or in some animations by Chileans “GeoExe” and “Murciegaloco”).

Voice

Usage

One of the most iconic aspects of online animations is its use of voice acting. Voices are mostly used for the characters of animations, but also for narration of fictional or real contents, as part of the producer's titles, and to communicate with audiences. These usages are impacted by the quality of the voice recording and the performance of its owners.

As it concerns these voice recording's technical quality, access to audio recording equipment and the skill and knowledge of their producers vary and determine the quality of sound. Hence, studio producers

¹³⁰ “LOS POKEMONES...”

produce high quality sound and contrast with the recordings of most amateur animators, however, when the latter keep producing over time, they tend to professionalize their audio. For instance, producer “Rulo” Barrera mentions acquiring professional recording equipment as one of the things he has done for improving his animations (Barrera). However, the quality of voice recording does not appear to affect the popularity of an online animation, if anything the opposite is occasionally true.

On the one part, voice acting appears to make up for the rudimentary style or poor formal execution of several online animations, as characters may speak with limited animation for their mouths or consist of completely still images;¹³¹ on the other hand, as with music and sound effects, the poor quality of voice recordings is also appropriated as an aesthetic element by some animators, like Alejandro Szykula, “MatiasTV Telechubbis,” and “Negas.”

Solo voice acting of online animators

Voices also enhance an online animation by the skill and talent of the voice actors, becoming emblematic of some popular online animations. As certain voices turn into a constant presence associated with the online animation per se, they give a distinct identity to many online animations. Moreover, the voice acting of online animation contrasts with the occlusion the medium usually grants to most other animators. As Laura Ivins-Hulley writes,

Outside the credit sequences, audiences are rarely confronted with the existence of the animator. His existence is disavowed by a medium intent on maintaining the illusion of reality within its worlds. This encourages the audience to identify with the animated figures directly instead of the person imbuing them with life. This means when we literally see the imprint of the animator’s hand on the screen, the identification process must change. (5)

The online animator’s imprint is not on the screen but on the speaker system. By engaging with the voice acting – performative – aspect of the process, online animators partake of the prestige of voice actors and live-action vloggers. Rather than displacing their “performance to construct the life of objects for the audience’s benefit” (Ivins-Hulley 3), online animators become endeared to audiences by being paramount to the characters and contents they produce. Through voice acting, they can match the charisma that endears live vloggers to their audiences, since their voices recurrence can become sufficiently appealing on their own; as when producer “Negas” is asked at live-events to perform his

¹³¹ Much like in limited animation. (Steinberg 198 – 199 “Immobile sections”)

characters' voices or when he offers his voice acting in exchange of donations in his Patreon.com page¹³² ("Concomic Acapulco"; "YouNows del #Negas.>").

The talent to mimic recognizable character voices is also a motif on its own, especially as it is done intertextually in reference to well known characters like Goku and Vegeta from the *Dragon Ball* saga, Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street*, or even from other online animations or famous vloggers. Thus for instance, "Negas" and "Rulo" Barrera imitate the voices of several *Dragon Ball* characters or from other series, "Negas" has imitated and parodied the voices of vlogger "DrossRotzank," while "MatiasTV Telechubbis" has done episodes referring and imitating older Argentinian online animations like *El Mono Mario* or *Juanca, Merengue y Urca* by "Sarlanga" ("LOS TELECHUBBIS"). In addition to this we often find the parodying and imitation of voices of public figures like politicians or celebrities.

Furthermore, through their voice, the animator's presence is also often integrated formally in the figure of the narrator—specially for producers presenting folkloric or cultural traditions like Colombian Hugo León Ortiz Castellanos or Salvadorean Ricardo Barahona with his *Cuentos de Cipotes de Salarrue* (2010), an animated version of tales by also Salvadorean author Salvador Salazar Arrué — but also for narrators of an essayistic or autobiographical style, such as Fred Lammie's series *Casi Creativo* (2012 – present) or the opinion/comedic pieces by Mexican animator "Cyan." Like live-action YouTubers, some of these animators have gained a following largely based on their audio presence. "Cyan," for instance, has made her voice a matter of commentary or play ("Cyan" "MUESTRO MI VERDADERA VOZ"; "QUIEN ES CYAN," "Mi primer idioma").

Voice acting by actors

While individual creators highlight their presence through their voice acting, the use of additional voice actors is also quite common and partakes of dynamics of collaboration and exchange. Voice actors are prevalent in the online animations from studios and collectives. Thus, a small studio like Marmota initially relied on the collaboration of fellow animation students (Laborde), but otherwise Marmota and many other online animators rely on collaborations with fellow online animators and other, live-action, YouTube producers. For instance, the pan-Hispanic collective Legión Machinimadora features the voice acting of its contributors, who play their machinima characters as part of their collective productions. Another example, would be the former collaboration between Barrera, Martín Trujillo, and "Negas," as also the occasional collaboration with YouTube star "Morfo." These voice acting collaborations often

¹³² Patreon.com is a subscription-based service allowing producers to crowdfund directly from their followers in order to produce more content. (patreon.com)

conform to characters or series cross-overs and to the association of their producers. In so doing, they partake of paratextual collaborations on the level of narrative. (Barrera; Trujillo)

Additionally, voice acting reveals the demographic and national belonging of the producers and actors in question. Beyond the consequential aspect of the producers national and regional accents, slangs, and dialects, online animators also make use of these aspects to socio-culturally situate their characters. They do so by engaging in modes of cultural satire towards the ways of speaking of members of a national group, social class, and recognizable minorities – often in a politically incorrect manner reiterative of the status quo. One can find such characterizations in the Salvadorean series *Neon War*, Argentinian series *Alejo y Valentina* and *El Mono Mario*, in the satires by Chilean producer “Murciegaloco,” the series by Puerto Rican collective Tripletapr (2011 – present), or US-based Venezuelan animator Gil Laya (2011 – present). Argentinian producer “aru-chan Kawaiiballs” uses such national portrayal of accents and ways of speaking in her simple soap opera characterization of countries as anime characters (2014 – 2016) as so does the series *4 Extraños en D.C.* to portray the different ways of speaking in Colombia.

On sampled, automated, and or absent voices

However, the opposite, the sampling, substitution, and/or removal of the animator’s/performer’s voice is also an iconic and organic mode of Internet pastiche and of digital voice creation. As a first instance, one can consider the sampling of voices that producers like Rebosteio or “MatiasTV” employ in some of their animations, operating as part of the logic of Internet pastiche described for other sound and formal elements.

This sampling can be total when a producer relies on pre-recorded audio to animate their characters, as the aforementioned examples of sampling, by Chilean producers “Geoexe’s” gameplay animations or “Murciegaloco’s” animated YouTuber vloggers. Sometimes this pre-recorded audio belongs to previous work by the animators themselves, in a manner of recycling, as is often heard in *Niño Rata* or the series by “MatiasTV.” A second, though relatively rarer, instance is complete substitution via automated voices, as with most of the animations by Peruvian animator “Starfox 665.” Such voice substitution can be considered as a typical trait of digital production that has become an endemic mode of speech in the Internet, usually associated to video producers seeking to hide their identity (by using the Microsoft default *Narrator* program for instance). Finally, one may consider modalities where speech is completely absent and is, instead, surmounted by audio effects (like in many of the animations by “GeoExe” and fellow Chilean “TwistedGrim” animations), or without any audio substitute for voice like in the short

series *Made in Colombia* and most MikuMikuDance animations. For some producers, these replacement or absence of their voices has to do with preferences for anonymity. Furthermore, in the case of MMD, subtitles are used to convey dialogues, reaching to a formal extreme that merges character voices and the animator's presence with the moving image they produce.

While the animator can use their voice to make themselves present and interact with the audience, interactive tools are integrated with the means of display, i.e. the interface. Sometimes animators themselves refer to these elements when speaking (e.g. when addressing commenting and sharing) to their audiences. In many regards, these interactive elements are typical of online animations.

2.2.7 Interactivity, Sociality, and Interface

While not necessarily in the strata of the web element,¹³³ the interactive features of online animations are web elements on their own right and interrelate with the form of online distribution conditioning many other features of online animation. These include features concerning audiences and modes of association, and, on their own, merit their own study on the level of the overall web dynamics of online animation, (for instance in the cases of the social networks of producers like Channel Frederator, Machinima, or Átomo Network). Interactive features also tie to the broader dynamics of Web 2.0 and its dynamics of marketable sociality and popularity logics (of YouTube and other platforms) and which conflate mass viewership with participatory culture. (van Dijck 11, 13; Snickars and Vonderau 12; Losh ctd. in Kavoori 13)

Audience participation can be considered along two modes: direct interactivity and viewer response. In the first case, audiences can participate through the content's formal space for intervention as has been programmed into the work or intervened and appropriated by audience members (e.g. fan uploads, other fan-texts, montages, hacking, etc). The other mode of participation, most frequently referred to by YouTube scholars, is the social response of viewers to the content.

In this subsection I will refer primarily to the first one but touch upon the formal structure of the latter. A study of online animation's content and consumption would address audiences' feedback more properly and complement this formal analysis on interactivity, but for now I will look at formally integrated interactivity as it appears in online animator's interactive works, live-streams, audience

¹³³ See Brügger 753-754.

feedback tools in YouTube's interface such as the "like," "unlike," and the comments section, and hyperlinks within animated content.

Interactive works

Flash videogames and web animation were born at the same time and they were hosted in the same entertainment sites like Newgrounds (Muncie), to the point that their communities still largely overlap; however, most online producers do not appear to directly produce videogames. Here I include those that engaged in both practices.

Concerning the first, my research found few examples, half of them unavailable. On one end were the videogames by now defunct Colombian studio EtherealGF and those by also inactive Mexican producer "Frutabomba," who focused on 2D animation, interactive, and graphic design (Vázquez 72, 73). Both produced animated content as a side product unrelated to their interactive works but promoted them along their animation uploads in their YouTube channels and websites. More related to animation practices are the interactive works by "Negas" and fellow Mexican studio QCreativo, run by Rodrigo Herrera. "Negas" has been releasing videogames based on his original animations at least since 2010, with the more recent examples being those based on his series *Lataman* (2014 – 2015) and *Niño Rata* (2016 – present); meanwhile, QCreativo has produced at least three videogames based on the animated characters "Kike" and "Gus." The videogames from "Negas" and QCreativo, resemble the format of Flash games from the late 1990s and early 2000s and operate as paratextual products that rely on the pre-existent popularity of their characters. For instance, "Negas'" videogames consist on 2D action games, of the platform and run-and-gun styles. The games' progression feature limited storylines following the title characters through different levels that may or may not have to do with narratives from the original series. Characters like "Rodolfo González," are simplified versions of the original animation design (already rather rudimentary). "Negas" originally released his games from his own website raltoon.com ("ral ANIMATION studios") but nowadays does so through the platform GooglePlay. He also includes gameplays in some of his YouTube uploads. Meanwhile, Herrera's formation as a videogame programmer grants some diversity to his games, which consist also of two-dimensional depictions featuring his main animated characters "Kike" and "Gus." The three games he released offered different challenges to the player, like flying the characters along a 2D space (*Crash Pollito*), hammering them in a faux 2D depth cemetery (*Waketazo*), or memorizing numbers (*Darkatas*). ("QJuegos")

It is worth considering the small number of animation producers doing videogames and the discontinuity of most of the surveyed ones (only “Negas” actively continues releasing games). This absence is notable, considering that videogame and online animation communities overlap, frequently engage with each other, and that there is a joint effort in funding animation and videogames as part of digital production initiatives by government and professional organizations (Vázquez 143; Barrera). Nevertheless, it is also worth considering how the two longest running animator/video game producer examples, rely or relied on video games as a supplemental form of monetization. Absent from this consideration would be the work of Latin American Flash game producers in sites like Newgrounds and others, and which for are out of the scope of this thesis.

On animated streams

Another, perhaps rarer, form of integrated interactivity in animation are live-animated streams, such as the one performed by “Negas” on the site YouNow.com from March to August of 2016. Twice a week, in those live-streams, “Negas” spoke in the manner of an audio podcast but using his animated characters as avatars (with their respective voices), interspersing improvisational jokes with pre-animated cuts. “Negas” was basically retaking his initial YouTube videocasts *Podcastinis* (2009 – present) but making them with live animation. However, this incursion into live-streaming was temporary and while “Negas” YouNow page has reached 41,600 fans, this is little compared to his over two million YouTube subscribers. Furthermore, “Negas” is the best and perhaps the only example of a Latin American online animator who did live-streams of animation. This thesis’ research could not find other examples of online animators engaging in live-streams, this is probably in part because YouNow.com has, in the last few years, declined in popularity. (“QJuegos”; Tynan; “How popular is YouNow.com?”)

On the “like” and “unlike” buttons and the “comments” section

But of more immediate interest for this subsection are the formal devices for audience interactions within YouTube’s interface and in the work of online animators itself. The features integrated to the interface are standard for any uploaded and displayed YouTube video, though the comment’s section can be disabled; these are the “like,” “unlike” buttons and the comments section below the video display in a video page.¹³⁴ These options provide the layout for most of the synergic audience-producer

¹³⁴ Other options like “report,” “share,” “subscribe,” or “save” (to a playlist) are not here engaged with.

interactions addressed in terms of content and consumption;¹³⁵ they also delimit the extent to which most users can engage with online animations and the animators themselves within the formal space of consumption. This formal (programmed) incorporation of interactive elements within the space of display, is an integral part of the online animation's character and renders online animation as a mode of animation directly affected by its viewers. Nonetheless, this medium specific feature is not specific to animation but shared with live-action YouTube videos and other online media. As some researchers have noted,

One interesting feature of YouTube is its interactivity because viewers can post video responses or text comments after watching a video... When someone views a video, they can respond or interact in four ways unless the owner has disabled the features: by rating the video or a comment as good or bad, by posting a video response, or by posting a comment about the video to the video page. (Thelwall and Sud 617).

Short of considering audience video responses (paratextual production¹³⁶) the formal options of liking, unliking, and commenting follow the same fame-based logic on which YouTube's circulation of content is grounded: the users drive for fame. Once more quoting Losh, "the information architecture of YouTube is one that foregrounds celebrity and spectacle by design, even as it deploys a rhetoric response, comment and community." (13 quoted in Kavoori).

This mode of user participation has precedents in forum sites, private animation websites that allowed for public comments, blogs, and platforms like Newgrounds, which allowed to rate user-generated content and text responses. Newgrounds, as mentioned earlier, owed a considerable part of its popularity to the ability of users to rate the available works on the site (Fulp ctd. in Wright). Similarly, comment participation on YouTube has favored the formation of publics and associations of users (as audiences or producers) and thus it appears to be common for users "to connect to others producing similar content..." (Thelwall and Sud, 618-619). This dynamic results in communities based on common taste and fostered by internal content-related discussions within and outside them. Such content related discussions allow for a display of fan appreciation and are at times initiated by the producers of the animation, who ask viewers to leave their thoughts on a given topic or aspect of the animation (such

¹³⁵ Audience-producer interactive relations in terms of content (feedback based production) and consumption (paratextual distribution, paratextual creation of content) fall within the social aspect of interactivity and require a more in depth study of consumption.

¹³⁶ Paratextual production as it concerns Latin American online animation also requires complementary thematic content and consumption studies.

as narrative development or future productions). Additionally, the amateur character of online video has been considered as one contributing to a video's popularity; with some researchers suggesting that, "the audience might feel closer to amateur producers" (Thelwall and Sud 620). The possibility to formally respond to this kind of video further accentuates this audience 'empathy,' as it fosters interactions between audiences and animators on the same level. In this light, it is worth considering if amateur online animations draw the same sympathies as amateur online video, which would explain some of its viral appeal and the popularity of the rudimentary aesthetic used by animation veterans.

Furthermore, the comments' section is often the main channel for communication between audience and producer, at least formally integrated, as most channels have no direct message option. Thus, channels like Mexican "Niño Guero" ("Rulo" Barrera), Colombian TrineoTV, and Chilean Marmota Studio directly base some of their content on viewer response in the comments section. Barrera, for instance, asks for humorous romantic phrases to be read in a segment by Napa, a parodic version of the actual *Dragon Ball* character of the same name. Somewhat at a contrast but partaking of the same logic, TrineoTV originally based its *Vida Pública* episodes on highlighted tweets in which the studio was tagged. In this last regard other social media contact options and hyperlinks complement the formal space of comments for paratextual discussion of online animated contents.

Hyperlinks

Hyperlinks appear in the space of the video description (below the display space), where they bridge to other online presence of the producer in social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Deviantart, Newgrounds and other accounts; links to other collaborating producers (thus connecting their different audiences and tastes); or simply links to other videos or creations of their own, related videos by other producers, donation pages, official websites, or merchandize sites (independently of the recommended videos in the adjacent right side bar). Hyperlinks are also often integrated within the viewing space with a trend for them to appear at the end of the animation and with similar related connections as those in the comments.

Through the interactive options integrated in the display interface, the participatory aspect of online animation converges with the modes of engagement of videogames and social media and offers an additional dimension to users' interactive experience. These modes of participation (interactivity and viewer response) are possible thanks to these animations' online distribution and partake of the social

media economies that grew out of more communal online practices (Snickars and Vonderau 12; van Dijck 11-12)

2.2.8 Conclusion on the study of formal traits of online animation

The study of formal traits of online animation provides a cross section view of most of its contextual determiners like socio-economic class, Internet access, influences from cable and anime, emerging animation industries; and resulting aspects like production practices, online animation audiences, thematic and narrative contents, forms of association, and aesthetic style. While formal traits are what largely constitute online animation's aesthetic style,¹³⁷ these traits interrelate to something other than themselves and rather respond to and affect contents, consumption, and distribution (including that via interactive tools) and reveal the vernacular language, the medium, and the cultural specificities of Latin American online animation.

Online animation's formal traits can be considered as enabled and limited by their digital production and online distribution and inherited from the early days of limited Internet traffic and production tools, by the visual culture of the region and hybridized/adopted from anime, cable networks, streaming services, adult cartoons, and the socio-economic realities of Internet accessibility in Latin America. Most traits are not specific to just the Internet distribution aspect or to the production limitations of online animation but rather result from the interplay of both. Aspects like the labor-intensive process of animation are affected by online audience consumption habits; the rudimentary aesthetics that emerged from the limited production tools and skills of early online animators, were also passed on as a style and reinforced by their popularity and association with certain themes. Thus, the study of formal traits grants insight into online animation's socio-economic and socio-cultural context, its emergence as an early form of online visual media, and its correlation with certain themes that together constitute a vernacular language.

At the same time, while formal traits are a crossroad of influences and an influence node on its own, their study alone is just the first step to properly encompass the multiple dynamics at play in Latin American online animation. The typology offered in this second chapter's second section feeds on the work of the prior sections and chapters; it can now be deployed as an organizational tool with which to

¹³⁷ See footnote 4 in C0.

note correlations between other aspects like contents or audiences, or to compare online animations with other forms of online media (like online video) or animation. In doing so it serves as a departing point to expand on this research in areas deserving their own analysis.

These other areas encompass aspects not directly discernible solely as formal traits, though related with them. Thus some questions remain in the case of production like a demographic characterization of online animators,¹³⁸ the regional and specific history of online producers, their acquisition of software, the funding for them, the considerable absence of women online animators, and the limited presence of traditional techniques and professional practitioners; in terms of contents such as a more detailed picture of online animation's visual culture, the recurrence of politically incorrect representations, the ideology of animation producers and audiences, relations with advertisers, cultural specificities of the region, hybridization and appropriation practices, fan piracy; consumption aspects like more detailed descriptions of monetization, audiences' demographic profile, paratextuality, and fan practices (including documentation); and modes of association like the formation of clusters of creators and networks of association. Thus, while marginally touched in the historical description in the prior section (2.1), these aspects require their own analyses. For these future studies, the review of the historical context in the previous chapter and sections and the study of formal traits provide a necessary foundation.

As such, this thesis points into those directions of research, as also into more points of connection with other fields of study like live-action online video, vloggers and YouTube stars, computer graphic aesthetics, digital performativity, online video game cultures, media appropriation and hybridization in Latin America, software studies, web historiography and many others. In this regard, the analyses and research offered in this section, this chapter, and the first chapter, aim to provide a starting point for the neglected study of Latin American online animations. As a first study of Latin American online animation, and a more holistic study of online animation in general, this thesis provides an important first step.

¹³⁸ Though the socio-economic characterization carried in chapter one offers a foundation for a direct census of producers and audiences of online animation.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to examine Latin American online animations' historical and current context, in terms of their socio-economic, cultural, and technological conditions, and to provide a representative overview of most of them and their internal dynamics. I attempt to provide this last by way of a study of online animation's formal traits, arguing that they constitute a cross-section of online animation's particular characteristics and cover a range of themes with which they are correlated. As a node of contextual historical aspects, formal traits are in turn a determinant and determined by other aspects like contents, distribution, consumption, and association. This study of formal traits is, in turn, just the initial step of a broader study adding producer and audience demographics, thematic contents, consumption, and modes of association in relation to animation and online video more broadly. Such study of online animation has yet to be made and would require the same level of attention as that given here to formal traits. That being said, some of the conclusions arrived at in this thesis' chapters offer foundational steps for further study.

The introduction presents Latin American online animations as a recent thriving phenomenon – specially fostered by the platform YouTube. I posit the importance of their study as a vast yet largely undocumented mode of online moving images, I address the scholarly neglect their study has had, and how this thesis aims to make up for that absence. Drawing on a set of multidisciplinary theories (including those from animation, television, media industry, and Internet studies) and methods (qualitative social science research, bibliographical research, web historiography, journalistic research), the role of original research is presented as necessary in the absence of sufficient specific information on Latin American online animations. I suggest that their medium specificity and formal characteristics constitute an ideal entry point of study as it intersects different socio-economic, cultural, and technological co-determiners like Internet access and use, national animation industries, precedents in anime and cable television, and the technological limitations of earlier online animation, particularly as it concerns style, with which to examine online animation production and distribution. Referring to various media theorists of platforms,¹³⁹ I also note the dual character of online animations as both geo-

¹³⁹ See Jin 154; Snickars and Vonderau 12; van Dijck 13; Losh quoted in Kavoori 13.

culturally situated and globally influenced and the ways in which online animations have become increasingly reliant on YouTube and its celebrity logic.

The first chapter concerns the contextual socio-economic and technological determiners underlying the production and consumption of online animation and its precedents of visual culture in televisual developments like anime and MTV. The recurrent conclusion of this section's different subsections is that online animation was at its onset a middle class activity and that despite greater Internet access in the region, its production continues to be so. Disparities including income, national and geographic placement, educational level, age group, gender, upload and download speeds, access to computer or mobile devices largely reaffirm that class differentiates who can produce and who can just watch. These conclusions also extended to its precedents, particularly to its inherited visual culture from cable, in particular MTV, whose influence was direct on those who could afford cable. Moreover, MTV and cable network viewership responded to the adoption of an "Americanized" and globalized (US based) patterns of consumption. This cultural impact of US patterns of media consumption has continued with the current prevalence of US-based platforms, which, with YouTube at the helm, dominate the current online media landscape on the region—including that of online animations.

Nevertheless, chapter one's research also accounts for a degree of appropriation of these extra-regional consumption models and contents, with a degree of incorporation or hybridization with local visual culture(s), as is particularly the case of Japanese anime. Anime has remained a major paratextual referent for online animations, providing a form of content and style that has been incorporated and mixed with the local culture(s). Along MTV, anime contributed in shifting cultural perceptions about animation's content and audiences (no longer just for children), informing much of the early wave of online animated production. Moreover, MTV sustained an early patronage of online animations, many of which are considered referents by later ones. In this regard, anime and MTV offered a transition from adult televisual animation into online viewership.¹⁴⁰

Chapter two continues the lineage of online animation as pertaining to its early technological conditions and early iterations in Latin America and the US, and the prevalence of US-based platforms for the later development of online animation. I begin with a brief historical overview on the emergence of online animation in Latin America and, when necessary, the Americas more widely. This historical examination

¹⁴⁰ Although some informal sources have listed online availability of adult animation and anime as contributing factors to the decline of cable channels programming, namely Locomotion demise and MTV's cancellation of most animated shows. ("Locomotion (TV channel)").

included a characterization of technical determinants particular to the early states of digital animation: early software and Internet traffic, early forms of distribution (e.g. email chains), dynamics of funding, and the salient example of Huevo Cartoon as a successful and also an exceptional case embodying several traits of early online animations, including monetization through character franchising. This last aspect engages with issues of transmedia convergence. This historical examination offers a brief description of the other aspects not engaged in detail by this thesis, namely, those concerned with producer and audience's specific demographic profiles, (evolution of) thematic contents, and modes of consumption and association among Latin American online animation communities.

From such historical overview I note the continuation and emergence of formal traits and committed the second and last section of this thesis to the examination of each of these formal traits as medium specific, socio-economically, culturally, and technologically determined aspects. In turn formal traits are shown to correlate with certain thematic contents and audiences. Nevertheless, despite the use of formal traits in other studies of animation and online media,¹⁴¹ the absence of an existent typology of online animation's formal traits requires making a typology categorizing and contrasting the different elements composing online animations. Thus, I offer such typology by dividing the formal traits of online animation in the areas of duration, graphic composition, representational style, animation technique, sound usage, and integrated interactivity in a manner of logical succession for most of them and with some intrinsic subdivisions of categories and/or studied aspects. In this examination I constantly referred to specific examples of Latin American online animations but do not focus in detail on any specific producer, despite there being many salient ones like "Negas," "Rulo" Barrera, "MatiasTV Telechubbis," Szykula, Marmota and others.

In this regard, the limitations of this thesis's method and research scope become most evident in this last section, particularly in its limited reference to other aspects beyond, though in relation with, formal traits, namely contents, producers' and audiences' demographic and ideological profiles, and modes of association. However, any attempt to study these subjects will be incomplete without an historical socio-economic study and a study of formal traits, for it is through the later that the thematic and ideological features come to manifest in concrete reality. Nevertheless, issues of scope are not the only limitations, the sole study of historical socio-economic contexts or formal traits is prone to the difficulties of any study of online media, loss information, inaccuracies, unreliability, different archived

¹⁴¹ Van Dijck 121; Steinberg 83, 84 2012; Lamarre, 114, 115, 136; Weihua; Strukov; Brügger 754.

versions – all of which makes online animation’s documentation all the more necessary and time sensitive.

The prior section of the chapter addresses these major limitations in the study of online animations, and of any poorly documented early Internet content in general. As Brügger notes, online contents are susceptible to change (or disappearance) while they are being documented (758). This has certainly been the case in this thesis. As noted at the start of chapter two, many early Latin American online animations are documented poorly or informally, sometimes surviving only as mentions by fans or former viewers. Moreover, even more direct and official sources, such as national statistics institutes or studio’s websites, ceased to be accessible, were taken offline, or have no longer been updated. Less official sources fare no better; in the span of this research, an interview with Chilean animator “TwistedGrimTV,” went offline, as did the webpage of Mexican animator “Comesesos,” and Atomo Network member Martin Trujillo ceased producing animation briefly after I interviewed him.¹⁴²

Further limitations of study concern not only these areas but salient specifics like online animation’s overlap with other online communities and subcultures (like otaku, webgames, video games, and vlogger subcultures) referred to in passing in this thesis’s second chapter. Ultimately all work exists within a wider media ecology. However, given the lack of a wide-ranging analysis of online animation, particularly Latin American online animation, this thesis has focused on a longitudinal analysis of online animation (rather than an analysis of its wider media ecology, which would have taken my research too far afield). Social concerns are briefly addressed, in addition to more general concerns also barely mentioned; like the reduced number of women animators, the political incorrectness of many (likely most) online animations, the ideologies of producers and audiences, forms of association like collectives and networks (especially as they played a role in early online animation), and other aspects better explained in terms of content analysis and demographic profiles. Ultimately, a more in-depth approach to those areas requires greater study, in particular a demographic census and more comprehensive analyses of audience responses in the comments section and other forms of response to online animations – as it is likely here that the culturally situated character of Latin American online animations would become manifest in their consumption.

¹⁴²For information on Jonathan Ostos, aka “Comesesos,” see Vázquez 70, 71. Nevertheless, I found his website no longer available. His YouTube channel’s last published video is from September 2014. (“WireStories”) Also see Trujillo; “TwistedGrimTV” in “HBruna.”

These limitations of study, particularly those innate to the Internet's impermanence, make it difficult to assess the fate of Latin American online animations. While these emerged in the early 2000s and have experienced a boom up to the early teens, recent changes in YouTube's algorithms appear unfavorable to the production of animated content (Amidi), while many of the animators mentioned in this study, including salient producers like Martín Trujillo or Cid Vela and even Huevocartoon, have ceased to publish any works or do so very sparsely—nevertheless, this caducity is somewhat organic/innate to online animations precarious way of being. Originating as experiments, among amateur producers, through flimsy Internet connections and obscure Internet sites, subject to the changing winds of technology, the demise of platforms and file formats, the tastes of audiences, limited funding, or simply the animator's motivation – online animations have always been an underdog player in the broader scheme of animation production, as well as of online video. The memorable successes of Huevocartoon and *Alejo y Valentina* are but a few in a hundred, or more.

Culturally, the odds are stacked against online animation's spread outside its online platforms, as even online animators themselves are isolated from artistic animators and for the most part the industry. Producers like "Rulo" Barrera and "Gabi Megurine" confess to this disconnection, commenting that they are more familiar with live-action YouTube vloggers than the smaller online animation communities (Barrera; Trujillo; "Megurine"; Calderón). But the actual size of these communities is not per se small.

Just for this thesis survey alone, I registered one hundred and fifty Latin American online animators, through a keyword search selecting up the first twenty results, but in no way being exhaustive of smaller, less renown or trackable, animators – even if each country is uneven in the number of producers. The hundred and fifty animators in no way include all of Mexico's, Argentina's, Chile's, or Colombia's animators – in fact, my thesis sample does not measure against the almost three thousand independently owned channels of global online animation networks like Frederator Network, considered to be the world's largest animation network, or the animation from regions with Internet ecologies less influenced by the US, like China and Russia. (Baisley; "Who are we?"; Weihua; Strukov).

Moreover, as van Dijck notes, mainstream media has relied on platforms like YouTube, and prior to it the web, to find new animations stars (117). Indeed, the patronage MTV gave to *Alejo y Valentina*, *La Familia del Barrio*, or *Wrappy*, or that Much Music gave to *El Mono Mario*, were early instances of that. Some other online animations have gained renown in television networks like Nickelodeon, Nick Jr, and Cartoon Network. What is more, web-based enterprises like Frederator have aimed to find and gather

online animations with the Internet as the main form of distribution, specially through YouTube. The case of Frederator deserves further comment.

The online based studio primary channels, Channel Frederator (launched in 2007) and Cartoon Hangover (2011), have more than a million subscribers each, and Cartoon Hangover was the second fastest growing channel in 2014. But the main source of views are Frederator's member channels, many of which include popular online series like *Simon's Cat* (Simon Tofield, 2007 – present, with more than 4 million subscribers), "Domics" (Dominic Panganiban, 2012 – present, with over 4 million subscribers), Jason Steele's FilmCow channel (2006 – present, with 1.5 million subscribers), and US-based Mexican *Vete a la Versh* ("Darkar" Alatriz, 2009 – present with over 9 million subscribers), to mention but very few of the most popular. As reported by Animation World Network (AWN), Frederator gained many of these members over a short period of time, notably during 2014, when the network was joined by hundreds of already famous producers (Wolfe).

Moreover, as part of its expansion, Frederator teamed up with Mexican animation studio *Ánima Studios*, to launch the Atomo Network with the aim to,

... act as one of the world's largest recruiters and incubators of Spanish-language animation. The Átomo Network will provide its network members the same services, resources, promotion and unparalleled audience development and programming expertise as The Channel Frederator Network. In addition to this, the Átomo Network will be providing translation and dubbing services to select members of The Channel Frederator Network, to help their English language channels and shows expand their audiences to Spanish-speaking audiences. ("Frederator Networks and Anima")

Átomo, Frederator, *Ánima*: the efforts of this network and animation studios owe to the sudden growth of online animation production in the region, begun since the early period of online animation and the first decade after YouTube's launch (2005). These periods of online animation growth parallel that of global and regional booms in animation production but, again, is more uncertain than those, as evidenced by several of Átomo's members inactivity.

Likewise, the number of online animations keeps changing, fluctuating as older animators cease to publish and newbies join the ranks. The reasons for this fluctuation and what are their current and historical trends require a more in-depth study of producers' demographics, but with the information here acquired it is already obvious that many (most) online animators do not make animation production their career and thus become less prone to produce as time goes by. I am referring to the young demographic of middle class, urban, mostly male, and educated group of producers but as these

people leave their formative years behind inactivity tends to happen, either they abandon the craft (ironically true for animation students alike) or they professionalize themselves and make online production a primary occupation, often to the point where they have hundreds of thousands or millions of channel subscribers and monetize their works by way of multiple revenues. As Barrera describes it, “YouTube income is meagre, unless one is in the millions of subscribers” and even then, producers like “Negas” and “Darkar” Alatriz, complain that’s not enough to sustain production (Barrera my translation; “Negas is creating”; ““Vete a la Versh”).

As it stands, the popularity of online animations appears largely contained within the web, i.e. among Internet audiences. Online animation’s current limitations are less socio-economic and technological than in its early days and, as the case of Huevocartoon shows, still largely cultural. This situation persists despite their mass audiences. However, the medium is young and as a hybrid modality of animation and online content, the diversity of themes, including sociopolitical critiques, diffusion of literary works and popular myths, and culturally situated narratives (including paratextual) suggest that there is much potential to be had.

This thesis has committed itself to do the necessary first look at this emerging form, examining its context, emergence, and key aspects. I offer a historical context that takes into account not just a cultural genealogy of online animation’s aesthetics, but the socio-economic and technological conditions enabling and co-determining it, i.e. Internet services and their accessibility, the inclusion of extra-regional animated content in anime and cable television networks, and, to a lesser extent, nascent national animation industries. Moreover, the analysis of these contextual co-determiners evidences the class bias and the political and geopolitical ideologies underlying the development of online animation (like neoliberal policies fostering cable networks incursion in the region, “americanized” patterns of media consumption, prevalence of US-based platforms over local sites, and corporate and nationalist policies benefitting online animation). Although these ideological elements are left for continuation in further studies, they are manifest in the technological infrastructure, online and offline social dynamics, and in the cultural genealogy of online animation. Thus, I argue, the result from these influences (socio-economic, technological, and cultural), plus the early tools of online animation, and the ingenuity and taste of online animation communities can be best grasped in its formal traits.

I focus on formal traits not only since these intersect online animation’s conditions but because they best embody its online and cultural specificity, vis-a-vis other forms of animation and other forms of online content like live-action video vlogs and webseries. In this regard, the work of this thesis is not

only pertinent to online animation, or even animation alone, but to the study of online media in general, media industry studies, and studies of Latin American media. It can offer a contrast and a model of research for the study of the online animation of other regions and genres. Moreover, the methods used here also offer an approach of analysis but also in their constraints (lack of reliable information from registers and informal sources, survey of indirect socio-economic indicators, cultural genealogies) can contribute to discussions of Internet historiography. Therefore, further study of Latin American online animation and other related areas can follow from this initial effort. On the meantime, the story of online animation continues, and it remains to be seen what its future will bring. As an animation researcher and Latin American, I look forward to those developments and to understand them through the lenses of their past and present.

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