



## EXPLORING THE LANDSCAPE OF ENTERTAINMENT ON NETFLIX FOR YOUNG CONSUMERS: CELEBRATING SURREALISM IN CHILDREN'S CONTENT THROUGH ADOPTION OF HYBRID-MODES OF FILMMAKING

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### ABSTRACT

Young children now have access and exposure to hybrid mode programming, which is essentially a combination of live-action and multiple animation styles, on platforms such as Netflix. This paper attempts to position the hybrid modes of filmmaking for children's content as best suited for exploring the surreal dimension. By conducting analysis of various episodes of children's programmes which employ hybrid film-making modes, the paper establishes surrealism as children's natural way of interpreting the world. It helps that media as a product has the potential to look at children as active consumers as compared to other goods and services, since the act of consuming the product (content) is long drawn and engaging. This provides opportunities of playful interventions to, and for, the young consumers. This is the premise of this exploration, from which emerge three dimensions of socio-cultural implications for the young audiences. These dimensions are *children's dominant identities in terms of their agency & intelligence while engaging with hybrid content, children's re-appropriation of the media itself and its meaning, and children's positioning of the self via real-life actors in hybrid mode content*. The availability and consumption of such content styles acknowledge children as intelligent audiences, who are capable of appreciating the shift in modes within a single episode. While the integration of multiple content modes in one episode may be expected to cause disillusionment to its young audience, the cases in this paper establish otherwise. The exposure to the surreal dimension via hybridity of modes emerges as critical in acknowledging the interpretive abilities of the children.

### Introduction

*'This cartoon is completely unrealistic. Recyclable items do not have eyes or personalities. They do not go on adventures. I do not appreciate being condescended to. Real life is way more complicated than that.'* (Charmatz, 2024, 00:08:24)

These are the thoughts of the protagonist Orion, in the DreamWorks-Netflix film, *Orion and the Dark*. Orion is a pre-teen boy who eventually comes to terms with several surreal ideas he had earlier dismissed in his daily encounters of dealing with insecurities. He is taught to accept his fears and re-examine his skepticisms by none other than a personification of darkness, conveniently and poignantly named Dark. The theme of the film revolves around a child being able to accommodate ideas of 'real and surreal', thus being able to believe, largely, in life itself.

In a way, this film and many others like it proclaim that children's content can represent such dimensions, because children are equipped to acclimatize themselves with multiple truths (and fiction) as complicated demonstrations on the reality spectrum. Such complications are made easy to portray through technical and technological interventions in the domain of film making. The most popular medium of representation for children's content has been animation, despite its limited treatment in media studies from the vantage point of film theory (Leslie, 2014). Nevertheless, the filmic treatment of children's content remains critical to their engagement with the ideas of the world, real or otherwise. Children's text such as *Alice in Wonderland*, whether in literature or in media, establish the significance of magical, dream-like elements interplaying with a child's

exploration of life, thereby balancing the real-life lessons with the candid naivety of believing in the wonderland (Rader, 2023).

Indeed, beyond its articulation as a mode, animation holds depths of representation and metaphorical indulgences, as depicted through the fantastic case of the film *Ratatouille*, where only via the mode of animation was it possible to symbolize the idea of sensation- the one brought about by an artistic understanding of food by the protagonist rat (Herhuth, 2017).

Also interesting to note is the work around surrealism and child-consciousness, which itself has been studied from the perspectives of children. According to such work, in most children's stories, seemingly mundane things eventually turn bizarre and abnormal- thus highlighting their propensity to understand by exaggerated imagination, as well as the problems they may be trying to escape from in reality (Chistyakova, 2020).

This research attempts to explore the surreal through animation in children's work, while simultaneously trying to establish animation as a filmic mode to experimentally treat with surrealism, which is the critical ingredient in children's engagements of 'play'. This proposition stands validated through studies on children and surrealism, where the child herself is looked at as a surrealist- for the young mind portrays even the most routine of everyday life as incredible abstractions of human imagination (Griffin, 1941).

### **Surrealism, Media and Children**

Films have been understood as that art form, which of all the other forms, is the closest to being able to project reality to its audiences. This realization has been argued in multiple discussions of cinematic realism (Aitken, 2022) for live-action films. The argument, interestingly, seems to be counter-balanced at the other end of the reality spectrum by demonstration of the surreal in films which are not live-action, but employ a different mode, such as animation. It makes for a contemplative paradox between cinematic realism and surrealism.

Children and *their world*, so to say, is foundationally imaginative, which allows for exploration of creativity. These articulations

have been validated in scholarly discussions where play itself has been looked at as art - and art as play - for even the artists painting surrealist impressions were, at core, *playing* (Spitz, 2009). Moreover, the child herself has been studied as the original surrealist, where demonstrations of her thought are actually abstract renditions of art, and where the rational relationships as existent in the real world, or thoughts of logical order, hardly matter (Griffin, 1941). The exploration of association between children's texts and philosophies like surrealism, which highlight the experimental nature of creative manifestations of children, are critical to understand both, the relevance and reason, of demonstration of art to them in non-conventional, supernormal ways. One of the movements that explores this phenomenon is the Avant-Garde, which too challenged the normalcy of the observed around us, and applied itself to every art form, including children's literature, where the visual and verbal rendition of stories, perhaps, was important to be looked at from the surrealist lens (Ørum, 2016).

In the realm of surrealism and entertainment, from Salvador Dali's *Dream of Venus* to the wonder and bewilderment sold through advertising films - the foundation for the depiction of the surreal was laid in its ability to build 'dreams, desire and domination'(Eggenger, 1993).

A rich playground for a surreal artist is found in the wonderlands of *Alice in Wonderland*, where not only the story by Lewis Carroll is set in a land powered by the subconscious of the little girl, but also varied opportunities for surrealist interpretations are provided to the many illustrators of this beloved children's book, including Salvador Dali (Hiltz, 2011). In fact, one of the more popular and successful producers of children's content, Walt Disney, makes for an interesting case on the paradox between the apparently uncomplicated, middleclass depictions of his characters, and the unnatural, *manifested* ideas of these uncomplications of the so-called real life, which were in fact uncanny, and not simple as intended (Figgis, 2009).

These discussions necessitate the exploration of the scope of academic literature around children's television, to be able to make

connections between the surreal for the child, and the content for the child.

### **Children's Television**

Among other stakeholders, media consumers include young audiences, who have now gotten a hold of the variety and versatility this medium affords unto them, both in terms of the kinds of content, and the ways in which it can be consumed. Not only does the new media equip and empower its consumer, but it fosters exploration of the world and community building, while simultaneously equipping them to be better citizens and consumers (Montgomery, 2000).

With adequate intervention and parental control, children's television can be used to direct educational messaging to children, and enhance their learning- while improving their overall cognitive abilities- as derived from television content (Kirkorian et al., 2008). Reception of pro-social and educational programmes has been better in those children who have been exposed to similar content since early childhood, and they go on to display value-oriented behaviour, irrespective of whether they have watched commercial or educational programming, as long as it is edutainment (Calvert & Kotler, 2003). However, it is not to say that the landscape of children's entertainment has only good stories to exemplify the positive effects of the medium. The discourse on the ill-effects of television programming on children has been replete with data on unpleasant display of behaviours by children too, but such findings have often been also simultaneously balanced by the data that informs us of the sensitization to emotions and orientation to creativity that happens to children as a result of engaging with television (Rai et al., 2016). In light of these realizations, it becomes pertinent to take note of the kind of content being meted out to the young audiences, where, for example, masculine and feminine stereotypes are emphasized across children's animated content (Jaggi & Reddy, 2017). Along the same lines, constructs such as how 'real' the characters feel to the children, and how the programme content appears to them- whether educational, or emotional or fantasy- plays an important role in their perception of such content, and how they interact with it (Kilicgun, 2015). Children have demonstrated treating the characters from a 'cartoon world'

as real, and have shown they would interact with such characters as they would with real people (Hyde et al., 2014). This is important for premise setting in this study as well, for the surreal must appeal as the real for a young mind to believe in it - where belief is a function of multiple things, including how enlightened and literate are the young minds to the medium itself.

### **Children and Media Literacy**

For children's programming, it is important that the young audiences are equipped to fundamentally decipher them, if not for the subtle nuances of political undertones, but at least for the social ones. For that reason, it becomes important to participate in discussions of the state of media education across schools, the significance of traditional and digital media, and the value of such media for information acquisition and utilization by children (Supsakova, 2016). The scope of media literacy enclosure for children includes all engagements across mobile (smart) phones, online games, interactive television, advertisements- to name a few- and it is important that children are well equipped to be able to self-report issues, in addition to being protected and guided by regulatory frameworks on media literacy outreach (Buckingham, 2005). Young media users are assessed to be literate enough upon showcasing abilities of critical analyses, whereby they should be able to reflect their attitudinal dispositions on ideas of media literacy, and be able to evaluate the content and format of the media, among other elements (Hobbs, 2017).

In the contextual structure of media literacy for pre-school children, it was observed that children derived varying levels of 'knowledge' from educational films and hypermedia environment, depending on their own levels of media literacy- the latter being direct in proportion to the knowledge acquired (Diergarten et al., 2017). More interesting are the underlying tendencies of children to appropriate media literacy and its meanings after having engaged in media literacy functions in a controlled environment - it was found in a study that after having been conditioned in media literacy etiquettes with adults, children appropriated the norms for media literacy participation with their peers as well (Aarsand & Melander, 2016). This insight

can be studied for inferences on re-appropriation of the meaning of media itself by the children, after having participated across layers of communication around a specific media text and form with multiple stakeholders. This is imperative to help them understand the commercial aspects of messaging, and prevent negative influences of the same on them, especially when their cognitive abilities are only developing with the natural progression of age (Sramova, 2014). This lays the foundation for understanding the subjects of this study- the young consumers- to be able to examine their consumption of surreal content across formats later in the study.

### **Children as Consumers**

The evolution of children's markets up until the twenty first century has happened through the spatial acknowledgement given to children's products in supermarkets, and the media spaces accorded to kids as a part of the grand and overarching marketing plans of many brands in the marketplace (Cook, 2009). In fact, a pre-existing desire forms the basis for examining the child as consumer, who is individualistic and driven, and therefore creates another realm of consumption by the young consumers that must be articulated in marketing scholarship (Cook, 2000). Children have been known to form relationships with brands- just as they would with every other entity in their sphere of interaction- and label brands as good or bad, thus setting the premise for engaging with or 'breaking-up' with brands (Lopez & Rodriguez, 2018).

Children have been understood to re-appropriate meanings of products and promotions around them as 'play', thereby establishing a fundamental and instinctive association with products as unassuming consumers (Ironico, 2012). Advertising to children has acquired creative outlooks, wherein the appeal is channelized through not just the advertisement itself, but via product integration in children's films, programmes and online video games- which has definite inadvertent effects on children's preferences (Calvert, 2008).

Younger children, because of their developing cognitive skills, are always more vulnerable as consumers as compared to adults, especially in an online context- indeed, marketing influence

affects understanding of the self-image, especially for the young minds (Kennedy et al., 2019).

An interesting research framework that contextualizes children as consumers, and yet treats them humanly enough, is the CCT (consumer culture theory), which itself draws from the works of revered philosophers and sociologists, to understand the social arrangements within which acts of consumption could take place, affecting the identity of the child-consumer (Nairn et al., 2008).

### **Animation as a Mode for Children's Media**

*'What is perhaps less often emphasized or elucidated is animation's particularly privileged relationship to computational information - its position as one of the primary or default modes of visually representing digital data'* (Leslie & McKim, 2017). This situation of animation as a mode, and a visual one at that, will inspire the treatment of animation in this research study as well.

Interestingly, the exploration of this 'hybrid' format manifested in the earlier days of Walt Disney's endeavours, where under financial constraints, they depicted a live-action Alice up until the point she enters the cartoon world of her dreamland. Ironically, in the actual world, upon achieving financial stability at Disney, the hybrid exploration of art faded away into the single mode of animation (Madej & Lee, 2020).

Additionally, what animation is able to afford is its ability to represent 'unreality' without it being indigestible or unacceptable to its viewers- for its very premise is fantasy. Creativity knows no bounds in the world of animation, and whatever the human mind is capable of imagining, animation, for the sheer expanse of landscape it provides to the creator and the viewer alike, is able to replicate it unabashedly. This is evident in translation of story-texts as visual animation in their filmic representations, such as in film adaptations of *Beauty and the Beast* (Lee & Park, 2013).

The underlying philosophy of media convergence has been also intertwined with the idea of transmedia storytelling, and it is interesting to note in this landscape that the phenomenon of toys (action-figures or other

figurines) transcending to the world on the screen via animation films happened for a reason (Bainbridge, 2010). This reason is the ability of animation as a mode to transition across worlds, real and unreal, through its power of creation, thus limiting itself to no bounds of representation of the world, as we know it.

### Methodology

In order to understand the surreal explorations made possible through adoption of multiple modes of filmmaking, especially those of live-action and animation, the philosophy of surrealism becomes the ontological premise for this study. This position has been adopted for the purpose of contextualising the nature of reality in this study, which is surreal. Creative undertakings, such as the art of Salvador Dali, have often been studied for the representation of ontological foundations projected through their surrealist artwork (Weir & Dibbs, 2019). Dali's writings as well have been reflective of the ontological references to 'surreality', where the direct experience of the object being looked at through the lens of surrealism is not necessary for the observer to possess, and that surrealism allows imaginative combinations for things that may never have interacted with the observer (Rothman, 2016).

In view of this ontological framework, two children's programmes available on Netflix have been studied for their versatile use of animation and their hybridity of mode, which is brought about with interspersed live-action in the story plots of these episodic programmes. The rationale behind selection of the said programmes on a popular streaming platform comes from the methodological interventions posited primarily by visual grounded theory (Mey & Dietrich, 2017) and the derived framework of visual-verbal video analysis method (Fazeli et al., 2023). The latter, specifically created for social sciences research, also details the elements of sampling design, such as the unit of analysis.

As applied to this study, the units of analyses (sample) have been considered as all the episodes of the last two *completed* seasons of the two chosen programmes (22 episodes of *StoryBots: Answer Time* and 33 episodes of *Gabby's Dollhouse*). This timeline has been chosen to include the integration of the most

recent animation technology and storytelling styles in the said programmes, therefore spanning from the year 2022 to the year 2023.

The phrases 'film making mode' and 'hybrid-mode' have been interchangeably operationalized for this research study as the various modes within the domain of animation, sometimes in combination with the live-action mode, that have been adopted as combinations for storytelling (also defined earlier in Leslie & McKim, 2017).

The two television programmes that make for the sampling framework of this study, from which sample episodes are chosen, are *Gabby's Dollhouse*, and *StoryBots: Answer Time*. These programmes have been identified as multi-formatted by way of at least two integrated modes of filmmaking, as apparent in their storytelling design.

*Gabby's Dollhouse* was made available on Netflix in 2021, as a children's animation programme directed at pre-school kids. *StoryBots: Answer Time* premiered on Netflix in 2021, as a part of the StoryBots franchise (original programme *Ask The StoryBots* premiered on Netflix in 2016).

### Analysis and Interpretation

In order to study the aforementioned video content, the ontological framework supported by the philosophy of surrealism was referred to, with its key constructs guiding deconstruction of multiple filmmaking styles, including animation and live-action styles. These include propositions of surrealist ontology such as *non-rationality in creative interpretations, subconscious manifestations of the mind, and the convergence of dream-state and awake-state* (Ortolano et al., 2016). Additional to the aforementioned constructs, the episodes were observed for exhibition of some of the salient features of Surrealism, as employed by Surrealist artists in their artwork, namely *juxtaposition* and *metamorphosis* (Gustlin & Gustlin, 2021).

Furthermore, the academic treatment of children as young consumers in this research is guided by the constructs of *consumer identity* and *media re-appropriation* under consumer culture theory framework (Arnould et al., 2019), to understand children's interpretation and adaptation of multi-mode content representing the surreal. These two research

parameters in CCT are the most closely aligned in their operational definition to the constructs of surrealism as mentioned earlier, since both of them allow for independence of the self in realising one's interpretative freedom as a consumer.

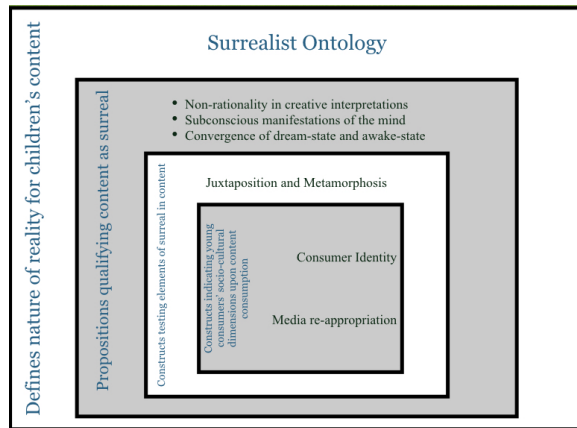


Figure 1: Theoretical framework formulated to guide the exploration of hybrid-mode content as surreal for young consumers

References: *Surrealism* (Gustlin & Gustlin, 2021; Ortolano et al., 2016) and *Consumer Culture Theory* (Arnould et al., 2019)

The following three themes emerged from the analysis of episodes as contextualized earlier:

### ***I. Navigating across modes: Facilitation of the surreal, and acknowledging children's agentic and intellectual consumer identities***

A significant and interesting observation which emerged for the chosen sample is the diversity of mode combinations used per episode, and the easy and seamless transitions across those formats. There is an implicit confidence reposed by the makers and producers in the intelligence of young children in comprehending the various formats, as in their agency of willingness to engage with various film-making styles as they transcend a single method of storytelling. For instance, all chosen episodes of *StoryBots: Answer Time* employed puppets, live-action, 2D animation, 3D animation, and stop-motion animation in various combinations in each episode. In episode one of season one, "Multiplication", the StoryBots take it upon themselves to help chef Giuseppe in estimating how many pizza pies to bake for a group of grizzly bears. The continuous narration moves seamlessly between a live action chef with real life

ingredients, showcased on a screen, much akin to an online call platform, being telecast into a 2D animated office of the StoryBots. The scene cuts to a filler scene where another child in live-action asks a question about the functioning of fans. The answer is given in a 3D animated scene by a new character, who demonstrates the answer. Approximately, in the first five minutes of the episode, six different kinds of modes are already employed in a 22 minute episode. It is clear that the young children are expected to be cognitively intelligent audiences, who would be able to accommodate with ease this transition of formats- all the while, conveying a journey into the surreal. Consider, for instance, the hybrid modes used in episode six, "Laser" of the same season, where a secret agent is shown to be held captive while a laser beam slowly moves up to 'split' her. Again, the narration keeps going back and forth between the 2D animated StoryBots and a real life secret agent. As is characteristic of StoryBots, interspersed with a lot of filler scenes in other modes, the storyline comes to a point in an animated cave with play-dough like bots in a stop motion animation style, discussing why bears hibernate, followed by a 3D animated rap song about photon light beams, all in the pursuit to eventually understand how lasers work. As the episode traverses across multiple modes, one does not feel overwhelmed or threatened- rather, the combinations allow for traversing across an imaginative fantasy world where film-making formats no longer restrict a plot to one landscape or tonality. Because of multiple formats used, there is explicit juxtaposition of objects onto the other, as in the case of the puppets, 'Story Storyberg and Bot Botson', mapped onto a newsroom for *StoryBots News* on channel 22 and 2/3rds in episode 10 "GPS". In the same episode, a 3D rock juxtaposed onto a real life seashore towering onto the background of real blue skies suddenly metamorphoses into a talking rock, along with 3D StoryBots. The critical elements of the surreal are available throughout, as demonstrated via two elements earlier, which make the multiple modes a facilitative site for incorporating surreal elements for children's content.

Similarly, in *Gabby's Dollhouse*, two primary modes make for the hybrid mode - live-action, and 3D animation. In each episode, Gabby, the host character of the show invites the

audiences into the dollhouse, while in a live-action mode- and then transports magically inside the dollhouse which is animated (a real-life version of the same dollhouse is shown at the beginning and end of each episode). Thus, the hybridity is expected to be appealing and unique to the young audiences, as is this multiplicity of modes assumed to be understood and accepted by the children watching the show.

Additionally, the 'surreality' factor is aided by the pre-defined constructs. For instance, in episode four of season five, "*CupCake Tree*", Gabby transports into the animated dollhouse with a miniature cupcake plant that magically grows up to be a huge tree- thus demonstrating metamorphosis on surreal scale. In episode five of season six, "*Dollhouse Dress-Up Chest*", Gabby, along with her partner cat, Pandi, enter the Cat-o-Sphere to meet DJ Catnip, by first flying from within one of the (art-and-craft) rooms of the animated dollhouse, as astronauts, into the real-life Gabby's bedroom, where a live-action shot of Floyd, Gabby's real cat, is the background, and where the animated Gabby and Pandi, dressed as astronauts, circle a real-life Floyd sitting next to a model of the dollhouse in the real world. This transition between modes of filming allows the manifestations of both surreal propositions of *subconscious manifestations of the mind*, and *the convergence of dream-state and awake-state*.

## ***II. Realities within Modes: Re-appropriating demarcation of truth by traversing between real, augmented real, and 'sur-real' worlds***

It is noteworthy that the hybridity of modes allows for re-appropriation of two truths for the young consumer- the nature of media itself, and the interpretation of media content. It is easy to demarcate the multiple truths that a child lives while viewing such content - she goes back and forth between the real world (portrayed by live-action scenes and narratives thereof), the surreally juxtaposed animated world onto the real world, or the real world onto the animated world (called augmented real, portrayed by live-action and/or animation contrasted and mapped onto each other in a scene), and the surreal world (portrayed by the predominant animated world showcasing otherwise impossible actions). This triad of realities is easily demonstrated in children's content though the

reality-augmented reality-'surreality' combination. For instance, in *Gabby's Dollhouse*, Gabby demonstrates that while a real person can live in a real world with make-believe models (like of the dollhouse), they can also *augment* their realities by imagining (seeing on screen) their animated selves moving around in their real-life bedroom, and also in their make-believe-come-true animated dollhouse with talking animated characters. Over and above these real and augmented real worlds, Gabby also demonstrates, through the very premise of the programme, that a real person can completely merge into the surreal (animation only), and come out of it back into the real, by mere 'pinching' of the catband on Gabby's head. Thus, hybridity of modes allows for transitioning into these three worlds.

The two kinds of re-appropriations happen in such a way that the child is able to not only see the nature of medium itself changing (modes transitioning into each other), but also the meaning of the content changing by virtue of the unique novelties afforded by each mode and each mode-combination. In episode two of season seven, "*True Fairy Friends*", As Gabby and Pandi transport into the fairy tale garden, not only do they travel from the real mode to the surreal, their qualifications in terms of what they can do in the real world, and in the surreal world, changes. Gabby carries an actual lantern from her bedroom (delivered as a doll-house delivery for the episode), which transitions into a magical, animated lantern with secrets in the animated world. Pandi, like in each episode, transitions from a stuffed soft toy into an interactive partner for Gabby. The meaning of 'garden terrace' in the dollhouse model changes into a surreal landscape, where Kitty Fairy changes from a toy-figure into a magically powerful, yet helpful, friend to Gabby, who reveals to her that they were looking for fairy-flies, and that the lantern would come in handy for the pursuit.

In episode eight, season two of *StoryBots: Answer Time* (titled "*Refrigerator*"), a real-life 'cafeteria worker lady' (referred to thus by Bing, one of the five StoryBots) comes into their 2D animated office on a screen, and presents a real-life problem of her refrigerator not working. Since she's in-charge of the school cafeteria, she seeks urgent help from the Bots to understand how refrigerators

work. The augmented-real presentation of the lady and refrigerator transforming into an animated storyline depicting an animated fridge changes the meaning of the machine for the child-audience. As the StoryBots travel inside the refrigerator, and within its coils, experiencing evaporation and condensation, the mode transition allows for a re-appropriation of not only the reality of a fridge, but also the meaning of how one could experience the technological functioning of it in a completely surreal world, by literally travelling inside the machinery of a refrigerator. Once again, the *juxtaposition* of the real world via a screen onto the animated world is highlighted, along with manifestation of *non-rationality in creative interpretations*, through the absurd yet appealing narrative of travelling inside an animated refrigerator to help a real person with a real refrigerator, where this otherwise wouldn't be possible. In episode six of the same season, StoryBots encounter a cow, who tells them his sob story of encountering a tornado, which was a traumatic experience. He seeks their help in understanding how tornadoes form, so that he could be better prepared to run to safety the next time. A real-life tornado suddenly transforms in both meaning and media, by becoming an animated rendition of itself for the StoryBots, where unlike the severity of meaning associated with a real tornado, the meaning of animated tornado becomes a personification of a storm who is misunderstood, and needs to be understood better to be tackled better in real life.

### ***III. The people within modes: Children experiencing the self across multiple realities through identities of real people***

A significant aspect of hybrid formats is the integration of real-life people, portraying various characters as suited to the storyline, while their existent actor/celebrity personas are apparent for the audiences to note. In the case of *Gabby's Dollhouse*, the character of Gabby is also the live-action host of the show, where she interacts directly with the audiences. The audiences, in turn, are assumed to be interacting with the animated Gabby in the opening song of the show, when a chorus of children sings in the background, "Hey Gabby, what's the big surprise? (a characteristic of the show, where each episode has a dollhouse surprise delivered in the beginning)". Gabby's interactions are both

generic to the show, and specific to the episodes. For instance, at the beginning of each episode, Gabby welcomes the audience by looking at the camera and sharing her greetings. At the end of each episode, she talks to the audience and bids them farewell until the next episode by using the same lines, "Thanks for all your help (in whatever was the specific pursuit of the day). Come back next time, and we'll open another dollhouse surprise. Bye!" Specifically, she has interactions with audiences throughout an episode. For instance, in episode five of season eight, Gabby welcomes the audience in her real-life bedroom, as she says, "Hi! I am so glad you are here. I am making all kinds of things out of pom-poms and pipe cleaners". This direct interaction by a real-life person in the live-action mode sets the stage for children to believe that they will be taken into the dollhouse, and out of it, by Gabby, who is a friend and guide to them. Additionally, in all episodes, as in this episode too, real-life Gabby always sits next to the soft-toy Pandy, who acquires a life of his own as soon as Gabby transports inside the animated dollhouse along with her soft-toy Pandy. Again, this coupling legitimizes the reality and 'surreality' of all known characters of a programme, since they have been steered by the real-life Gabby. It is thus easy for the child audiences to engage with all mode transitions and character realities because of the 'person', Gabby. Gabby also validates the dollhouse by pointing and referring to its model in the real-life, in her bedroom, as if the dollhouse is alive, as in the surreal world of animation.

In the episode mentioned earlier, real-life Gabby receives a physical copy of a treasure map, which becomes animated as she travels within the dollhouse. Pandy, now no-longer a soft toy, talks to the audiences at one point, saying, "So we need to find a blue and pink sandcastle...let's get looking...tell me when you see a blue and pink sandcastle". Similar to this are multiple instances across all episodes when the characters, including Gabby, speak to the audience, allowing them a few seconds, before answering & applauding the audiences. This direct interaction format is facilitated by the actual Gabby establishing herself as a connect between the real and surreal, and between live-action and animation. It is fascinating to see Gabby *metamorphosing* from real to animated in each episode, tying



together a construct of surrealism to its propositions such as *subconscious manifestations of the mind* and *the convergence of dream-state and awake-state* (assuming child's imaginative play at work).

In the case of *StoryBots: Answer Time*, the real-life people aspect is heightened by the actual employment of a unique celebrity for each episode. Additionally, every episode also accommodates children from around the world, who ask innocent questions to the StoryBots. The celebrities as well as the children feature on a screen in the animated office of StoryBots in their real-life versions. However, while the children from across the world portray themselves on the screen, the celebrities have a specific role in each episode - that of providing the problem in the arc of the story. It is made easier in a way for the young audiences watching these episodes to transition across modes and realities. They watch real-life children like themselves in live-action, asking questions to the animated StoryBots, which makes for a possibility of better audience engagement via the children asking questions on the screen. The audiences also get to watch well-known celebrities playing a part in the live-action and animation melodrama, as the celebrities lend their real-life authenticities as real people, as well as credible actors, who must portray believable interpretations of the surreal world, even in real life. Some noteworthy celebrities who have participated across the two seasons (which are the sample of this study) are Zooey Deschanel, Sophie Turner, Kevin Smith, Chrissy Teigen, Anne Hathaway, Jessica Alba, Julie Bowen and Trevor Noah. In an episode starring Scarlett Johansson (season two, episode four), one of the StoryBots called Bo undertakes a mission to help the astronaut (played by the celebrity) to land on the moon - by exploring if the half-appearing moon would disallow or allow a safe landing to her. Once again, the validation lent by the actor in the beginning of the episode by sharing her problem with the StoryBots helps the audiences navigate the animated terrain of moon and the space. The juxtaposition of the celebrities and the children as the real connections to the real world probably help the audiences navigate the different modes and realities better. The metamorphosis of a small bot into a surreally big character to match the size of the earth is again palatable

for many reasons, including the validation lent to this surreal construct by involvement of real-life people. What is apparent is that these people within the modes are significant in lending believability to the reality depicted via various film making styles. Also the evident *non-rationality in creative interpretations* is made delightful in its appeal by the absurdity of an astronaut, ready to launch in space, being unaware of the phases of the moon, among other instances.

### Conclusion

While the surreal seems like an exaggeration of one's imagination as artistic abstraction, it still has concrete ramifications in terms of its persuasive effect on young audiences. This exploration attempted to position the hybrid modes of filmmaking for children's content as best suited for exploring the surreal dimension, which is first nature (of reality) for a child. Additionally, media as a product has the potential to look at children as active consumers as compared to other goods and services, since in media, the act of consuming the product - content itself here - is long drawn and engaging, providing opportunities of playful interventions to the young consumers. This is the premise of this exploration, from which emerged three dimensions of socio-cultural implications for the young audiences- children's dominant identities in terms of their agency & intelligence while engaging with hybrid content, children's re-appropriation of the media itself and its meaning, and children's positioning of the self via real-life actors in hybrid mode content. These derivations form the basis for multiple possibilities of inferences for representing children's content via diverse filmmaking modes, and their inherent implications for treating children as agentic and intelligent young consumers, who are capable of accommodating, as well as deconstructing, transitions between realities in hybrid mode content. Surreal is a universal position of 'reality' to approach children's content from, as is also demonstrated in other popular hybrid mode programmes. Some examples include *Diana and Roma* with its special cartoon series integration with live-action content, *Waffles and Mochi*, where a real-life Michelle Obama interacts with puppet-chefs learning the art of cooking from real-life chefs, *Blippy*, where real-life characters become animated versions for songs and expeditions,

*Masha and the Bear* in which a 3D animated Masha further becomes a 2D version of the self in stories told by the former about the latter, to the television audiences. The content space is replete with such examples, as they make for a rich site for the interaction of surreal constructs, hybridity, and young consumer identities and their re-appropriations of such media. What must be consequently pursued, perhaps, is a critical probe on the implications of hybrid mode content on the cognitive and emotional faculties of children, and whether there is something such as 'too much', as our little ones go down the rabbit hole to enter the surreal world.

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