4/19/24 / Feeling Bluey

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

KATHRYN VanARENDONK (Vulture critic): Bluey – the character – is an animated dog. She's Australian. She is seven years old. *Bluey* – the show – has taken over the world.

SCORING IN – BLUEY THEME

KATHRYN: I think a week in January where it was like 1.5 billion minutes of *Bluey* were viewed around the world. It was not ever imagined that this was going to become the most sort of defining children's show of this generation. Kids love watching it. And so they, you know, are happy to sit there and watch all million-dy episodes of *Bluey*. But parents deeply, deeply, deeply love this show. It is, frankly, a kind of a masterpiece. And I, I feel so happy that it is the show that my kids have.

*BLUEY THEME: Bluey!*

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): The best kids show on TV might be ending, and we’re gonna ask why on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: Sean Rameswaram, here with Kathryn VanArendonk from *Vulture*. She’s here to tell us why *Bluey* fans young and old are fretting about their favorite show this week.

SEAN:Sean Rameswaram. I’ve seen some *Bluey*. But Kathryn Van Arendonk from *Vulture* has seen all *Bluey*, so we asked her why fans young and old are fretting about their favorite show this week.

KATHRYN VanARENDONK (Vulture critic): This week, there was a special episode of Bluey. It's never happened before. Bluey episodes are usually seven minutes long. But this week, for the first time, there was a big episode. It was 28 minutes long and a lot of stuff happened.

*<CLIP> BLUEY:*

*Bluey: Why do we have to sell our house?*

*Chilli: We’ve been through this, Bluey. Dad’s got a new job in another city*

*Bluey. But what’s wrong with this city?*

*Chilli: Nothing.*

KATHRYN: It has raised a lot of questions about whether what's happening in this episode is that they are signaling some kind of end or some kind of transition for Bluey as a TV show.

*<TAPE> Grant Chamberlin: I don’t want Bluey to end, I like Bluey.*

SEAN: Tell us what a typical episode of Bluey looks like Kathryn?

KATHRYN: A Bluey episode generally is about some game that Bluey and her younger sister Bingo are playing. Sometimes that game is really simple where it's just like we threw a sticky gecko to the ceiling and we're waiting to see whether, when it's going to fall down.

*<CLIP> BLUEY:*

*Bingo: I just need to deliver this…*

*Chilli: Deliver what??*

*Bingo: STICKY GECKO*

*Chilli: <<groans>>*

*<<gecko sticks to ceiling>>*

*Bluey and Bingo: Hooray!*

KAthryn: Sometimes the game is a lot more elaborate. It's like some big fantasy world that they've created.

*BLUEY: This can be the shop!*

*BINGO: And this can be the till*

*BLUEY: And this is the bit where it goes boop boop*

*BINGO: This can be the door to the shop and it has a bell when you walk through it and I can be the customer! Da ding!*

KATHRYN: Sometimes it's in their home. Sometimes it's at their school. There are all these different settings where a *Bluey* episode can take place. But the thing that really differentiates *Bluey* from most other children's programming is those games then become a thematic through line for a lot of other things that are happening in the family's life and are usually a way of working through not just one and often not even two, but like two or three, sometimes even four different levels of emotional processing, a children's point of view, a parent's point of view, or an adult point of view, and then play and regular household events, and the incredible complexity and density of all of that gets crammed into like seven minutes. And so you're just looking at this. Like you watch these little seven minute things and you think, how did they do that? Like, they still feel sort of like magic acts to me.

SEAN: And I watched an episode last night that was in a subtle way, very much about infertility.

KATHRYN: Oh, yeah.

SEAN: And it didn't feel heavy handed. And I think that's maybe what's so exceptional here.

KATHRYN: Yeah, that's absolutely one of the things. So there are a few standout *Bluey* episodes that are very clearly about adult themes. The episode I think you're probably talking about is ‘Onesies’.

*<CLIP> BLUEY*

*Bluey: Mom, why did aunty Brandi want to leave? Is she sad? And Why have we only seen her once in our lives?*

*Chili: <<Sighs>> You know how you really want Bingo’s cheetah onesie?*

*Bluey: Yea, more than anything.*

*Chili: but it doesn’t fit you so you can't have it and there's not really anyone can do to make it fit.*

*Bluey: Yeah.*

*Chili: Well, there’s something aunty Brandi wants more than anything as well. But she can’t have it, and there’s not really anything anyone can do.*

KATHRYN: There are episodes about grief and about aging.

*Chilli: He has to accept that he's getting older and needs to look after himself. He should take care of himself for me because I still need him.*

KATHRYN: Big serious adult feelings, but the thing about them is they don't have the pat comforting simplicity that tends to come with moral lessons in a lot of children's fiction and they are almost always depicted both from a children's point of view and from the parents point of view and so the kids who are watching Onesies are probably not taking away the kind of deep deep grief that a sense of, uh, like infertility and loss might be playing for parents. But what that also means is the episode can kind of hint at that, can clearly be gesturing toward that, and parents can take that away without needing to have those big, obvious kinds of messages. And instead for the kids, that's an episode about how sometimes you just don't know Just can't have the things that you want, which is itself equally profound.

SEAN: You mentioned grief, Kathryn, and a thing I hear adults say about what makes this show so special is that it'll make you cry.   
  
KATHRYN: <chortles>

SEAN: This isn't just some kid's show. It'll make you, a grown person, cry.

KATHRYN: Yes.

SEAN:I know you've written about this. What are some of the episodes that will make a grown person cry, and why?

KATHRYN: Well, look, the episodes that, that will absolutely destroy you are a little bit based on your own personal experiences, right? So if you are a person who has, uh, experienced a lot of anxiety about children and child development and you have ever worried about whether your kid is meeting milestones, that episode is called ‘Baby Race’ and you're not prepared.

*<CLIP> BLUEY:*

*Bluey: Were you upset with me that I lost the Baby race?*

*Chili: No sweetie, Look we were all learning how to do things for the first time I just felt like I was doing everything wrong…*

KATHRYN: My personal favorites, though, are, um, ‘Sleepy Time’.

SEAN: Same!

<<HOLST PLANETS>>

KATHRYN: And, and ‘Camping’. Those are my big, absolute weep fests. I, every time ‘Sleepy Time’ gets me …   
  
SEAN: Mmm.   
  
KATHRYN: Some of it's just because Holst's ‘The Planets’ is a, is a real banger. But also, like, that is a very, very simple episode about Bingo just trying to learn how to sleep in her bed by herself.

*BINGO: I have to go… I’m a big girl now.*

*CHILLI: Remember I’ll always be here for you. Even if you can’t see me. Because I love you.*

KATHRYN: And I tell you every single time, I know it's coming.  
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
KATHRYN: And I'm just like, I was at a dentist's appointment and they were playing it.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
KATHRYN: I couldn't even hear the music. And I was like, how could you just do this to people sitting in this waiting room? It was awful.

SEAN: <<chortles>> It's funny. I asked a grownup what the episode ‘Camping’ was about this week. And he told me and I said, did you cry? And he said no. But then while he was recounting what happens in the episode, he, like, had an emotional swallow and maybe almost started crying. So sometimes the emotion of this show can hit you a little later, I guess. Like when you're at the dentist, even.

KATHRYN: Oh yeah! Yes!

SEAN: What does this show represent, you think, if anything, in terms of the evolution of children's TV?

KATHRYN: There's a lot to unpack there, but the kind of general arc is that children's television has evolved in concert with our understanding of childhood and parenting over the last several decades, and that sort of the earliest versions of children's television were largely designed to entertain and distract kids. It's the sort of TV as babysitter idea. And then with the advent of shows like *Sesame Street* and Mr. Rogers, there is this investment in children's television as a form of educational opportunity, where there's this recognition that what you're, when you're sitting your kid down in front of a screen, you can be using that time to give them some understanding of the world, whether that is math and alphabet and all of the kind of great Sesame Street learning blocks.

*<CLIP> PBS, SESAME STREET:*

*Ernie: I’ve got 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 jelly beans, and you’ve got…*

KATHRYN: Or more of a Mr. Rogers kind of, um, taking children's feelings seriously, taking kids anxieties seriously, and helping them work through all of the, the minor and major dramas of childhood.

*<CLIP> PBS, MR ROGERS NEIGHBORHOOD: But you know the toughest thing is to love somebody who has done something mean to you. Especially when that somebody has been yourself.*

KATHRYN: So those are these huge, iconic, important shows. And what *Bluey* does is to then take the legacy of both of those things and re-center that narrative in a family experience.

I think one of the notable things about both Mr. Rogers and *Sesame Street* is that although they talk a lot about families, They are not largely depicting children playing with their parents, or even parents doing a lot of parenting. And so *Bluey* says, what if this is a show that is about children having this opportunity to learn, and we're teaching through play, but we're also, generally centering those ideas in parents playing with their kids and in kids playing with their friends at school. And so the unit of learning here is not this sort of authority figure top down to kids, or I guess Muppet down to kids in the case of *Sesame Street*, but is instead this kind of circle of give and take between parents and kids, kids and their friends, kids and teachers. And so the people who are taking lessons away from this show and who are – not lessons in like a weird, bad pedantic way, but like a really, a really lovely kind of gut check reminder about what it means to be a person way – are both the parents and the kids. That's really the huge innovation of a show like *Bluey*.

SEAN: Hm. Okay, so it's smart. It's funny. It's emotional. It's transcendent. It’s Innovative and now it's maybe ending?

KATHRYN: Yeah, so this is a really interesting question and the first thing that I need to say is that Disney, the only thing Disney has said about this, and the only thing that any *Bluey* producer has said about this is that there will be more *Bluey*.

SCORING IN – Bio tech, APM

KATHRYN: Maybe it will take a break, and when it comes back, it will be a time jump or something. I'm not sure, but I do think there is a reason to wonder if there is a, some kind of change happening for this show, because this episode is doing so much work to, signal, I think, to *Bluey* viewers that something is shifting, and I don't think it's wrong to be reading into and like asking questions about what that means for the future of the show.

*KID 1: My name is Hudson. I am almost 9 years old, and my favorite thing about Bluey is that they’re funny and they teach you life lessons. Like change is ok. I’ve used that a lot in my life.*

*KID 2: My name is Denver. I like Bluey because they do the most funniest things.*

*KID3: My favorite character is Bluey. She’s just so funny. And yea, they do such sweet things and some naughty things as well.*

*KID4: Bluey is funny and Bingo is funny and TK is funny and mom and dad are funny and..*

*KID5: I like TK because I build pillow forts with my brother and it’s about building pillow forts*

*KID6: BISCUIIIIIIIIIIIITS*

*<<Hooray!>>*

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> Unicorse: Aaannnnd why should I care???*

*Bluey: Because stories are nice!*

*Unicorse: My story was nicer, it had a unicorn this one has zero unicorns.*

SEAN: *Today Explained* is back. Sean Rameswaram here with Kathryn VanArendonk. Kathryn, we're doing, we're going to do it right now. We're going to do spoilers…

KATHRYN: Yes.

SEAN: …for the latest episode of *Bluey*, which is called ‘The Sign’. We don't usually do spoilers, but I think to understand what's going on with the show, we have to talk about the show and we have to talk about what happened. So if you haven't seen it yet and you really want to go watch it, then come back and listen to the rest of this conversation. What happens in this episode? What makes it so exceptional? What has so many people scratching their heads about the future of this show?

KATHRYN: So ‘The Sign’ is sort of uncharacteristically picking up on a little bit of serialized storytelling that has been happening in the ending several episodes of season three of *Bluey*. Usually, this is a show where you can kind of watch the episodes in any order, but instead they have been doing some hinting that changes might be on the way for the Heeler family. I did rewatch like the last 15 episodes, and now I have like an elaborate, like, you know, imagine that crazy string board behind me theory about like…

SEAN: <<laughs>>

KATHRYN: …how various scenes connect and like what they were hinting at and when. But the general premise of ‘The Sign’ is that the Heeler family is going to be moving. They're going to be moving not just from their house, but to a completely different city, which is a big deal. This show is very rooted in the community of Brisbane, Australia, where it takes place. They're all of the minor characters, all of Bluey and Bingo's friends are a huge part of this show. Their teachers, the settings are a big part of it, and so the idea that they would just be in a new place would itself be this massive shift for what this show means. And obviously for the kids, it's a huge deal. *Bluey* in particular is incredibly upset.

*<CLIP> BLUEY:*

*Bluey: My dad is moving us to another city and I’ll never see any of you again.*

*Kids: WHAT?? <<howling>>*

KATHRYN: And then in the very last moments of the episode, Bandit, the dad decides that they are not going to move. He rips the moving sign out of the front of their yard, and they, they're going to stay in this home. And thus the controversies about this episode. <<chuckles>>

SEAN: Yes. Before we get to what this episode might signal for the future of the show, I want to talk about how it became controversial, how we're, I'm guessing mostly adults, reacting to the morality or to the sort of message or perceived message of this episode, ‘The Sign’.

KATHRYN: Often when we're talking about the messages of Bluey, what we're talking about is adults. But I think in this case, the real concern is what that is signaling to kids who are watching it, and particularly kids who do have to move and whose parents are not able to just call off the move at the last minute because of feelings, right?

SEAN: Because we should, we should note here that the whole episode appears to be preparing, especially kids…

KATHRYN: Yeah.

SEAN: …for, you know, understanding that life doesn't always have happy endings. And then the episode turns around and gives you a happy ending, and it feels like people maybe don't think it was earned?

KATHRYN: The thing that becomes a happy ending, is that they don't have to move. And for lots of families, for most families, I think, moving is not a happy vs. sad ending situation.

*<CLIP> BLUEY:*

*BLUEY: Is this a happy ending or a sad ending?*

*CALYPSO: It’s both.   
BLUEY: I don’t understand!   
CALYPSO: Everything will work out the way it’s supposed to, Bluey.*

*KID: Let’s play Army!*

*KID2: Yeah!*

KATHRYN: This does not need to be framed as a sad ending, but it really is in the way that the show does it. I do think there is a completely different way of trying to read that ending for adult viewers, which is that it is trying to be about understanding the life that you currently have as enough and like, instead of perpetually trying to seek some kind of ambitious, bigger, more money, more opportunities, way of living your life…

SEAN: hmm!!

KATHRYN: …you, you see your community, you see where you are as, for as good and beautiful and sustaining as it is. Right? And I get that and I love it. I think it's beautiful, and I don't think that it really works for the kids who don't get to make those choices or have that kind of power over their lives.

SEAN: Can we talk about the machinery for a second behind a show like this? Because it's Disney Plus, it's the BBC. It's some Australian things that people probably haven't heard of. How hard is it to end a show that is this successful, this popular, this beloved in its prime? We don't have a lot of examples of that, like *Seinfeld* comes to mind.

SEAN: Can we talk about the machinery for a second behind a show like this? Because it's Disney Plus, it's the BBC. It’s the ABC (Australia’s Version). How hard is it to end a show that is this successful, this popular, this beloved in its prime? We don't have a lot of examples of that, like *Seinfeld* comes to mind.

<CLIP> SEINFELD BASS

KATHRYN: No, we don't have a lot of examples of that. And the difference between Bluey and Seinfeld is that nobody's out here, strolling the Target aisles for their *Seinfeld* fourth, four year old birthday presents. Right? Like it's not just the show. It is this now enormous merchandising arm. It is in an age of streaming where there is so little certainty about what shows do well. You have to imagine that everyone is looking at *Bluey* and like, like, I cannot imagine what Bob Iger would do to guarantee the existence of more *Bluey*. I think it would probably include illegal things, you know what I'm saying.

SEAN: <<laughs>>

KATHRYN: And, there is not really a ton of production industry in Brisbane, Australia, but there is this company and this company makes Bluey. That is what they do. And at the same time, it's also kind of just one guy. Like, Joe Brumm created this show. And, and I know, having spoken to him several years ago, it is an incredibly personal show for him. His brother's voice, Bandit's brother’s. His mom voices one of the grandmas. There is no public information about who voices Bluey and Bingo, but there are a lot of rumors that they are kids who are close to the production. And the stories are about the things that happen in his family. And he is a perfectionist, like, he is one of those people who, the idea of making this show, if he felt like it was done, I think it would really, it, it would mess him up.

SEAN: I'm glad you brought up how intimate the production of the show is, because sometimes when I'm around small children and I see what they're watching, be it on YouTube or on Disney+ or just on TV, I'm just horrified by how lowest common denominator and like AI generated and just, like, hastily made the stuff they're watching seems compared to, say, what I got to watch, you know, 30 years ago, 35 years ago. Do you think the success of *Bluey*, even if it might be ending this week, might suggest to the animators and creators out there that it's worth taking this more bespoke approach, and maybe that can be *Bluey*'s ultimate gift to us and our children?

KATHRYN: God, that would be so lovely, wouldn't it? And I would love if that is the takeaway here. I mean, we can only hope. I do think it is such a hard moment for all kinds of television and kids TV is part of that. Because if you could be sure, if you're Bob Iger or whoever, if you could be sure that investing that way in every individual show that was somebody’s deep personal project was going to turn out *Bluey*s every time, I imagine you would happily pull that lever. But the margins on that terribly, shoddily made AI stuff …   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
KATHRYN: … have got to be pretty enticing also, right? Like they they make them so fast they are so, I can only imagine, cheap comparatively. They're easy to port around the world. And you don't have one creator who, I think, is very particular about what his show is. I think probably if you are one of the distributors of these other shows, you can be like ‘Eh, that episode seems a little risky.’ Like, ‘Shelve it!’ And they go like, ‘All right, boss!’ And that is not how those conversations go in *Bluey* world, from what I understand. And it is a much, it is a much riskier, I think, project. If you are on the executive side now, don't listen to anything I've just said. Any executives listening to this right now and only invest only invest in the beautiful personal projects. Please, please, please.

SCORING IN – KEEPY UPPY

SEAN: Kathrn VanArendonk! Vulture dot com.   
  
People say there might be a new *Bluey* episode this weekend.   
  
Maybe it’ll further explain.  
  
Grant, let’s roll the credits, bud.

GRANT: Victoria! Avishay! Amina! Sean! Noel! Haleema! Hady! Jesse! Miles! Amanda! Miranda! Patrick! David! Mr. Robb. Matt. Laura checks the facts.

My name is …. <unintelligible kid stuff>   
  
You’re listening to *Today, Explained*.

SCORING UP AND OUT

ZADIE: My name is Zadie and I’m three years old.   
JOE: Why do you like *Bluey*?

ZADIE: Because …

JOE: It makes you feel …

ZADIE: … happy.   
JOE: Yeah!

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**