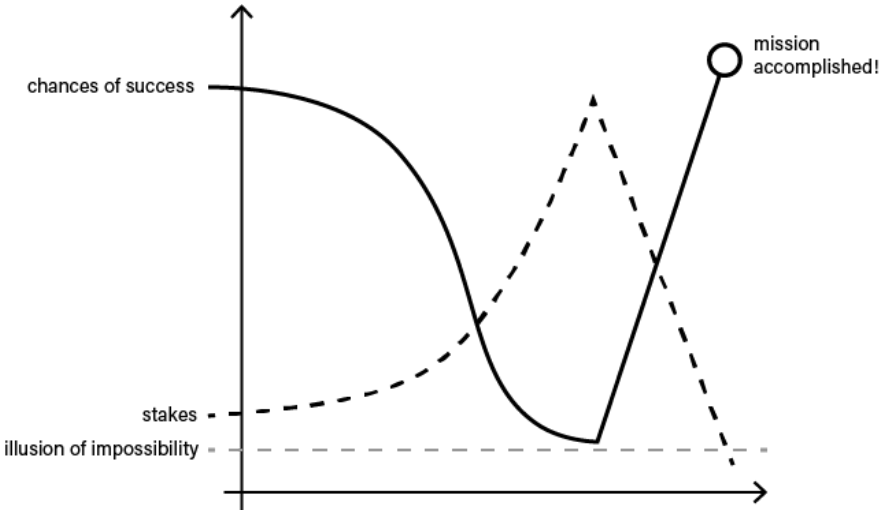
An Ending of Innocence

The unusual depth of a children's cartoon



There are few other shows that have done a better job to question the separation of American animation between the two camps of children's entertainment and adult comedy than Adventure Time. It is, of course, a show targeted at children—one only has to look at the programming during commercial breaks—and indeed, it was as children that my cousin and I discovered the show. Close to a decade later, as the show had been nearing its final run, the same cousin sent me a link to a news article announcing its termination followed by a teardrop emote. We were sad of course, but not enough time had passed to feel properly nostalgic. The show was still young in my mind. Or perhaps people my age only feel nostalgia for things from before their birthdate. How strange then that Adventure Time, often hailed as the front-runner to Cartoon Network's renaissance, seems to preclude nostalgia at a time when it has seeped into every other pore of our cultural imagination, yet at the same time feels so full of longing and loss.

On the scene in *The Defiant Ones* when Sidney Poitier's character jumps off of a train, sacrificing his ticket to freedom in order to remain with his co-escapee, the blatantly racist Joker Jackson, played by Tony Curtis, James Baldwin commented, "the white liberal people downtown were much relieved and joyful...The black man jumps of the train to reassure white people, to make them know they are not hated." Sixty years later, now it's Tom Cruise, reprising his role as Ethan Hunt in the latest Mission Impossible, who jeopardizes his mission–and presumably the fate of the world–in order to save the life of his trusty and technologically gifted sidekick Luther Stickell, played by Irving Rhames.

His decision echoes a line spoken from another blockbuster earlier in the summer by Steve Rogers, the moral center of Marvel's Cinematic Universe: "we don't trade lives." Both of America's finest boys act according to the moral of Adam Smith's Chinese earthquake parable: real lives take precedence over imaginary ones, regardless of number. But despite the rising,

and, seemingly, arbitrary stakes, (why not two thirds of the cosmos?) the threat, imminent always, never feels real. We know that Hunt will save Luther *and* the world. He does the first to show that he does not deserve to be hated. For that we are more relieved than when he manages the second.

As much as the modern film franchise seeks to establish a continuity through their projects, their works also suffer from a kind of timelessness, that is to say, a dissociation from the rules of time. No longer subject merely to storytelling conventions nor the single-minded will of the auteur, time finds its ultimate master in the studio agenda, which manifests itself in a haze of amnesia that envelopes the entire plot of the film. "Haven't I done this all before?" Ethan Hunt must wonder. At times he even seems to break into an awareness that what's impossible is not the mission itself but refusing it.

As time propels our hero into sequential and causally related, but otherwise isolated episodes of action, neither does the margin of time between annihilation and salvation really exist. As the plot churns forward, demanding greater dramatic tension, this margin continues towards its irreducible limit. If we know Tom Cruise will save the day and we believe that the stakes are real, then we must continue to create for him a chance, even as the odds stack up insurmountably against him, up until that point at which success seems impossible. Only through an act of film-magic is this illusion of impossibility created, then lifted, before our very eyes. The hero receives his $(n+1)^{th}$ try to set it all straight again. And to think all the while we really would have believed that he had faced some mortal danger. It is nothing short of a miracle of cinema.

On the surface, the Missions and Adventures are structured similarly. A small band of heroes sets out with clear objectives. Along the way complications arise. Damsels are in danger, foes are not who they appear to be, moral quandaries offer no clear way out. There are the acquisition of new arms, the changing of costumes and switching between identities. But the viewer's investment in watching an episode of Adventure Time is of a different sort than when viewing Mission Impossible.

It takes a remarkably innocent outlook as the one AT holds to remove the drama from the action of the plot and transfer it instead to the treatment of its characters in a historical sense, that is the uncovering of lost time, secret trauma, and unstable memories. Early in the show's timeline, the hero-villain dichotomy is done away with, opening the space for more ambiguous and, yes, dramatic dilemmas for the characters to be placed into. In a leap beyond Chekhov's dictum, AT shows that it is never really about the gun. The bomb has already dropped. That cataclysm to which every popular action film is aimed at denying is taken as the initial point of departure for a show about, above anything else, never-ending fun.

In one sense, we already know where the road ends. Glimpses into the future are peppered throughout the show. The conclusion of the two-part episode “Lemonhope,” for example, sees the ruins of the Candy Kingdom set against a desolate landscape one thousand years from now. After a millennium of traveling, the eponymous protagonist takes his final rest in the skeleton of his mother-civilization. But isn't this where we started from? What exactly are we longing for then: an irrevocable past or a lost future?

Of AT's many admirable qualities, its most may be its embrace of ambivalence, entrusting its audience with the privilege of imagining for themselves what the show leaves

unresolved. It is perhaps a necessity of a universe as expansive and richly inhabited as the one imagined by AT, far more fantastic in scope than anything the film franchises have offered–and somehow truer to life as well. Maybe what we are after is not so much displaced time but a lost vision of innocence, one which sees the prodigal son Lemonhope returning home, his contentment to be at the end of things as the inevitable outcome of events stretched across the broad course of time.

From season one to five, it seems that our hero, Finn, may very well be the last human on Ooo, and for the most part, the show treats him as such. Things decidedly take a turn at the beginning of season six, when Finn learns of the existence of his biological father. As he grows to know Martin, whose moral code, if it exists at all, falls well short of Finn's, excitement gives way to disappointment. This feeling of a difference between your expectations of how someone might be and how they actually are reaches its highest poignancy when Finn meets his mother though, an event covered by the eight-episode miniseries "Islands."

The usual band of adventurers journey to an archipelago in the Sea of Ooo on a lead that human populations may still be inhabiting it. Finn isn't a last man it turns out. Far from it. The matter-of-fact delivery of this revelation upon the character's arrival to the main island makes it feel almost circumstantial. Conspicuously absent is the fulfillment that comes from a sense of finality, whose promise seems to have been hinted at from the outset and has clung to the prospects of this particular expedition like an unwelcome spectre. Away from the familiar characters of Ooo, who in some ways act more human than the stiff and colorfully decorated bodies floating around him, Finn, among his own species, looks more out of place than ever before.

The uncanny atmosphere of the island only grows with Finn's first encounter with his mother, Minerva, who is not really his mother, but one of hundreds of android replicas of her. Facing an outbreak of a biological plague which threatened to wipe out the upstart human population, she explains, the original Minerva, the last surviving member of the island's medical team, decided to have her brain-patterns encoded then transferred to a fleet of "helper-bots" in order to expand her efforts to restore safety to the colony. If death is a transmutation of life rather than its end, then Minerva has died and become a ghost, that is, a human consciousness in a non-human form. Finn's interactions with her are mediated exclusively through screens, with the occasional physical interactions involving the helper-bots as a surrogate body, a more lighthearted representation of the eeriness in the sex scene from Spike Jonze's *Her*.

"Islands" can feel difficult to grasp conceptually because it speculates on the consequences of technologies yet to be widely used, let alone critically understood. It takes a certain imaginative leap to empathize with a character whose circumstance, the exact details of which have yet to be replicated in our time, remains outside the realm of possible experiences. With pathos, in the form of the theme of losing a loved one incompletely, Adventure Time bridges this gap. Beneath this foray into a brave new world lies an old question: what essential, eternal elements, if any, constitute a self?

Minerva, in the totality of her neurological processes, is there, and yet even she is not quite sure of this fact. Finn, wearing a VR headset, asks her whether she's the same person, the one who uploaded her mind to the cloud. "I don't know for sure," she replies, "but I feel like it's me. I hope that's enough." The technology responsible for her preservation and which allows

for the eventual encounter with her son is also what prevents a complete interaction with him. As the Finn's ship sails away from the island, out of the range of its signals, her apparition turns to static, and the panels of the simulated room fade to black. Finn has once again been abandoned, not by his parents this time, but by his hope of finding belonging, which have been upended in a most unpredictable way.

Contracts expire. Interests wane. Newer projects demand attention. The end of a television series, for some, feels like losing a loved one, or at least something you've loved. But this is an incongruent comparison. A show is not a person. Preserved on DVD or online, it will always be there in its complete totality. What is lost is the openness to possibility realized through the episodic nature of television, which Adventure Time so embodied. It is somewhat fitting then that at the show's conclusion, I should also find myself saying goodbye to childhood. A cartoon in the original meaning of the word, Adventure Time presents a sketch of something far grander than itself.