

Rocko's magic capitalism: Commodity fetishism in the magical realism of *Rocko's Modern Life*.

Abstract

This paper presents a textual analysis of the Nickelodeon animated series *Rocko's Modern Life*. Drawing from the theories of Guy Debord and Imamura Taihei, the series is posited as a revelatory lens into the spiritual crisis of late capitalism. It is then argued that the series employs magical realism to depict an animist capitalism in which the fetishisation of commodities literally brings them to life. The show's characters experience the alienation of labour as the draining of their spirit, haunting their workplaces as dead labour reanimated through the necromancy of commodity fetishism. As consumers, the characters attempt to recapture the enervated agency of their alienated selves by populating their lives with commodities. Ultimately, they are unable to find meaningful agency and spiritual fulfilment amidst the distributed agency of animated commodities. Despite its often problematic engagement with both indigeneity and animism, the close analysis of *Rocko's Modern Life* supports Imamura's theory that Western animation appropriates elements of indigenous animism to bring dead labour back to life in the form of fetishised commodities. It also suggests further research into the interconnection and contestation between capitalist animism and indigenous animism within animation.

Keywords

Rocko's Modern Life, Nickelodeon, animation, anthropomorphism, animism, commodity fetishism

Introduction

Rocko's Modern Life is an animated television series that aired on Nickelodeon between 1993 and 1996, and is being revived as a film slated to premiere in 2018. It stars Rocko the mild-mannered wallaby, his gluttonous bovine friend Heffer, and their mentally unstable turtle companion Filburt. The series employs hyperbole and an irreverent sense of humour to satirise the soul-sucking nature of work in capitalist society. Although it frequently wades into dark sociopolitical currents, it is presented with a vibrant aesthetic that eschews parallel lines (Murray, 1997). The dreariness of its capitalist dystopia is juxtaposed by the playful and often humorous animation of consumer goods, which in Rocko's world are alive and behave in human-like ways. The show is animated with a fast-moving, non-sequential wackiness that frequently employs visual hyperbole to set an irreverent tone. Accordingly, this paper traces its social commentary by linking textually diffuse and numerous vignettes, micro-situations, and background gags.

Rocko's Modern Life is worthy of scholarly attention for a number of reasons. The series aired in the aftermath of the Cold War, when faith in global capitalism was perhaps at its peak. Historically, it stands alongside other adult-oriented cartoons that satirised the inanity of everyday life in 1990s suburban US such as *The Simpsons* and *Beavis and Butt-Head*. Scholars have noted both series as reflective of US capitalist culture, granting them a canonical status within animation's transition from children's entertainment to an important space of postmodern cultural critique during the late 20th

century (Chow, 2004; Knox, 2006; Morrow, 1999; Nash, 1999; Wallace, 2001). *Rocko's Modern Life* distinguishes itself from its contemporaries not just by the fact that it was broadcast on a cable network for children, but also by its consistently critical take on the cultural nuances of US capitalism. Unlike the protagonists of *Beavis and Butt-Head*, who gain sovereignty over their own cultural space through their ongoing critique of the media they consume (Kellner, 1998: 88-89), Rocko's agency is overwhelmed by the pernicious forces of capitalist culture.

Like *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *The Simpsons*, *Rocko's Modern Life* is set in middle-class US suburbia, representing part of Nickelodeon's efforts to portray 'real life in animation, rather than action and fantasy' during the 1990s (Sandler, 2004: 50). It is more consistently critical of capitalist culture than *The Simpsons*, which Sharzer (2017: 148) observes was somewhat complicit with neoliberal discourse even as it 'stopped conforming to the laws of physics... [and] ended up reflecting and even anticipating a new reality: the upside-down world of late capitalism.' *Rocko's Modern Life* was perhaps even more prescient of this upside-down capitalism because since its inception in 1993, it had avoided the normalising tendencies of social realism in favour of a magical realism in which the alienation of labour and the fetishisation of commodities operate within the spirits that populate everyday life. By depicting consumer goods as sociopolitical actors, *Rocko's Modern Life* explores the notion of 'consumer citizenship' that Nickelodeon had adopted, in which viewers participate in political culture through everyday consumption (Banet-Weiser, 2004). However, rather than finding agency through consumption, the characters of *Rocko's Modern Life* lose their agency amidst a whirlwind of living consumer goods. The social commentary in *Rocko's Modern Life* thus emerges as a

politics of everyday life, which Guy Debord (1962: 1) understands as the incursion of capital's power into human habits and relationships, eroding the population's generative agency and reducing their lives 'to the pure triviality of the repetitive combined with the obligatory consumption of an equally repetitive spectacle.' Despite its explicit and nuanced exploration of capitalist culture, *Rocko's Modern Life* has not yet been recognised as a significant text within this transitional period of animation history.

Rocko's Modern Life as a magical realist text that brings commodity fetishism to life. Although Wechsler (1985: 293) defines magical realism as 'an art of the implausible, not the impossible... imaginative, not imaginary,' literary worlds that are commonly classified as magical realist operate under partially fantastic metaphysical laws. Perhaps a more accurate working definition of magical realism is the 'naturalization of the supernatural' (Warnes, 2005). For example, the characters of *100 Years of Solitude* uncritically accept the existence of a flying carpet by overlooking its metaphysical implications and comparing its practical merits alongside other forms of transport (García Márquez, 1970: 21). Rocko regards the animation of commodities that he witnesses with a similar naïve pragmatism.

Rocko's Modern Life is also magical realist in its naturalisation of animism, a worldview in which manifest phenomena are determined by the interactions of spirits within people, animals, plants, and other entities. Magical realism often features 'objects endowed with magical powers... that allow the reader to fetishize, to fixate on them as objects of narrative power emanating from a hidden source' (Faris, 2004: 60-61). In this sense, magical realism operates from the animist ontology that spirits can exist within things. Narrative agency is not simply located in human forms, but in the energies of

perception and volition that course through everything. Without explicitly drawing a connection to magical realism, Herhuth (2016) sees animation as a colonial refutation of indigenous animist fetishism. He builds from Latour's actor-network theory (1999; 2005), in which Latour suggests that puppetry is 'anti-fetishist' because it reveals nonhuman agency to be an illusory trick mastered by humankind. Herhuth argues that animation theory can provide space for a plurality of ontologies by acknowledging the actor-network in which human agency negotiates and contests power relationships with the 'distributed agency' of nonhuman subjects. Along these lines, *Rocko's Modern Life* opposes the colonial notion that humankind has mastered the spiritual world. It depicts modernity as populated by an abundance of nonhuman spirits within a magical realist and animist universe. Rocko's actions push and pull against the distributed agency of his possessions, which are often more narratively influential and assertive than Rocko himself.

Rocko's Modern Life uses magical realism to establish an *animist capitalism* in which the materialist conception of commodity fetishism is reconnected with its animist origin, resulting in the *literal* alienation of human agency through the labour process and the *literal* animation of commodities produced by that labour. As indicated by Karl Marx (2007: 83), commodity fetishism stems from the tendency for human creations to 'appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race.' Guy Debord (2009: 12) understands commodities as rich with 'metaphysical subtleties' that operate autonomously within 'the religious mists into which beings had projected their own alienated powers.' *Rocko's Modern Life* depicts a late capitalism in which the dialectics of human agency and commodity agency have

been stretched to such limits that its experiential qualities are only expressible through a magical form of realism, extending from the origin of magical realism as a genre to explore colonialism's profound spiritual injustices (Slemon, 1995). Debord's fundamentally spiritual conception of capitalist culture renders his theories particularly useful in exploring the themes of animism and magical realism because they examine the contestation of agency between human beings and commodities.

Imamura Taihei writes that 'in animation, the porcelain sings, the table dances, and the telephone flies through the air... it is animation that gave birth to the greatest myth of the society of commodity fetishism: the dead *can* be re-animated' (as quoted in Driscoll, 2002: 283). Imamura (2014) emphasises the ability of animation to give animals and objects the appearance of being driven by their own motivations and inner purpose. He understands Western animation as a capitalist appropriation of deeper animist desires, namely the desire to give life to creations of human imagination. This appropriation may be seen as culturally colonising in that it dispossesses and repurposes animism in the interests of Western capitalism. Although magical realism was not identified as a literary device during Imamura's time, his location of animation within animist desires is prescient of magical realism's efforts 'to reconcile the modern, rational, 'disenchanted' subject of the West with forgotten but recoverable spiritual realities' (Warnes, 2005: 1). In *Rocko's Modern Life*, the animation of commodities as expressed through magical realism represents an effort to reconcile the consumer self with the spiritual self in Western culture.

Imamura critiqued Western animation as capitalist in its assembly-line mode of production and in its embedded cultural messages (Driscoll, 2002: 279). *Rocko's Modern*

Life exemplifies assembly-line animation, its titular character having been designed to be 'volume friendly' so he could be easily drawn by "over 200 people in Korea and 50 in the US" (Murray, 1997). *Rocko's Modern Life* alludes to its own existence as alienated art through its character Ralph Bighead, creator of a fictional television cartoon titled 'The Fatheads.' In 'I have no son!' (25 September 1994) Ralph does not draw the cartoons himself, but rather they are produced by animators 'drawing thousands of teeny tiny pictures over and over again.' Ralph concludes 'The Fatheads' after overseeing the production of 893 episodes and murmurs, 'finally, it's over... now I can finally create something of real meaning and importance.' Imamura theorised that Western animation has historically addressed the type of alienation that Ralph experiences by articulating animist spirituality into consumer culture. Imamura argued that since animation techniques 'sublate the animating logic of industrial capital and the animistic desires activated by commodity fetishism, animation was becoming widespread in advertising' in the early 20th century (Driscoll, 2002: 291). Ralph feels alienated from 'The Fatheads' because his artistic vision is subordinated to its function as advertising for Fatheads toys, which according to the tour guide of his studios is 'the cornerstone of the animation industry [and] the lifeblood of its very existence.' This self-reflexive critique of capitalist production demonstrates the show's critical awareness of its own cultural situatedness. *Rocko's Modern Life* therefore offers valuable insight on US cultural approaches to reconciling the consumer self with the spiritual self.

By analysing *Rocko's Modern Life* as a magical realist depiction of an animist capitalism, this paper intends to contribute to scholarship on animism and magical realism in animation. Little research has explored the function of magical realism in

animated works. A notable exception is Crawford's (2009) study of the use of magical realism in *Family Guy* to deconstruct a fragmented and hypermediated postmodernity. The absence of magical realist theory in animation studies is particularly notable given Mishra and Mishra's (2014: 304) argument that animation inherently lends itself to magical realism, since the illustration of the world eliminates the boundary between the animate and the inanimate. This also suggests the need for further research on the relationship between animism and animation. Despite the insight into this relationship provided by Imamura's theory of animation, 'Imamura's work has yet to receive extensive recognition outside Japan' (Furuhata, 2011: 29). Almost no scholarly attention has been given to the presence of animism in Western films like *The Old Mill* (1937), *Fantasia* (1940), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). Animation theory would benefit from such scholarship due to the continual influence of animism in Western animation, as evidenced in *Rocko's Modern Life*.

If the culture of capitalism is visible in what Debord called the "religious mists" of commodity spectacles, then *Rocko's Modern Life* is itself a cultural artefact that reflects the projection of capitalist values into the realm of mythology. As Imamura noted, animation is a crucial medium through which Western capitalism imbues commodities with life in an effort to populate consumer culture with the very spirits that have been marginalised by Western secularism and materialism. The animist capitalism of *Rocko's Modern Life* is perhaps more pertinent than ever as everyday life is territorialised by the 'internet of things,' which Marenko (2014: 231) sees as neo-animist because it presents an 'ubicompscape... a field of distributed agencies in which emergent animation and responsiveness questions the distinction between the animate

and inanimate.' Contemporary animated series do not typically address the animism of commodities as distinctly as in *Rocko's Modern Life*, but some similarly employ magical realism and anthropomorphism to depict the search for self-realisation within an ontologically animist yet spiritually hollow consumer culture, such as *Ugly Americans* and *BoJack Horseman*. Within Western animation, *Rocko's Modern Life* remains the most explicit manifestation of what Imamura calls 'the greatest myth of the society of commodity fetishism' (as quoted in Driscoll, 2002: 283). The textual analysis of *Rocko's Modern Life* thus constitutes an exegesis of this capitalist mythology, which locates the spirit not in the human body but in the objects of its labour through the simultaneous alienation of human agency and fetishisation of commodity agency.

The animist capitalism of *Rocko's Modern Life*

Like many cartoon universes, the world of *Rocko's Modern Life* bends the possibilities of physics. In the style of M. C. Escher, characters walk directly up the face of buildings, sideways along walls, and exit on one side of the visual frame to instantly reappear on the other. The show consistently favours vitality over reality, indicated in a self-referential manner when Heffer erases the realistic cheese block Filburt has drawn for their fictional animated series and replaces it with a simplified, anthropomorphic version. As is typical with magical realism, 'time and space obey the laws of desire rather than physics' (Wexler, 2002: 139). Sometimes these desires are sentimental, such as when Bev Bighead's sorrowful tears floods her house so that her husband must traverse its rooms by dinghy. The series even pokes fun at its own preponderance of emotion over physics when Heffer narrates Rocko's anger: 'His eyes bugged out, his veins popped, and he made all these weird supernatural noises, completely breaking reality' ('Speaking

Terms', 31 December 1995). More frequently, however, the desires that exert magic onto Rocko's material world stem from the alienation of labour and the desperation of consumption, life and work in an animist capitalism.

Rocko's magical capitalism is underpinned by an animist cosmology in which agency is diffusely distributed. All major characters are depicted as animals; there are no humans as such. In place of 'humankind,' the series employs the phrase 'Earth's anthropomorphic creatures.' Some animals are fully anthropomorphic and marked by distinctly human forms of capitalist social participation: they speak English, own homes, and accumulate possessions. These animals often work jobs suitable for their species, as when a simian mail carrier swings from vine to vine with his courier bag over his shoulder, a vulture works as a coroner, warthogs drive in a demolition derby, and a literal grease monkey works as a car mechanic. Instead of changing skin pigments, two chameleons change service industry professions throughout the series to meet the rapidly shifting and multiplicitous labour demands of neoliberal capitalism (Friedman, 2014), appearing as spa technicians, hairstylists, and baristas. Other animals are semi-anthropomorphic, featuring somewhat human forms of behaviour, bodily movement, and facial features, yet are not capable of verbal communication or complex socioeconomic participation. Semi-anthropomorphic animals are usually featured as pets, such as Rocko's dog Spunky, and as wildlife.

Objects are often anthropomorphic to a similar degree as animals. Animal characters can temporarily transform into objects, as when a light bulb salesman becomes a light bulb, Ed Bighead becomes a bowling ball, Filburt becomes a Magic 8-Ball, and Rocko becomes a package. Parts of the body can also take on a life of their

own: A talking foot teaches oral hygiene, Rocko's heart and the brain box in an arena full of spectators, and organs afflicted by disease such as a heart or tooth can grow into giants and wreak havoc on the city like kaijū monsters ('Rinse & Spit', 14 November 1993; 'Short Story', 2 March 1995). In these examples, the indigenous animist location of fetishistic power within parts of the human body, and the identification of physical ailments as spiritual dissonance, is appropriated and reworked into the commodity spectacles of film and sports event (Harvey, 2014; MacGaffey, 1977). Similarly, consumer goods are often semi-anthropomorphic with human-like limbs, emotions, and behaviours while lacking names or faces. Some consumer goods, however, feature fully-integrated social selves, as with the mop that dates a psychologist at an Italian restaurant, a food processor that becomes wealthy by opening and owning a casino, and his car who is incarcerated in an impound lot. Even abstract ideas can take on a material form, such as Heffer's imaginary friend gaining a bizarre corporeality, justice appearing as seven talking cow udders, and addiction recovery manifesting as twelve anthropomorphic avatars.

Occasionally, *Rocko's Modern Life* plays at its own indistinct boundary between anthropomorphic and semi-anthropomorphic animals, such as when Heffer visits a cattle ranch with Rocko and befriends the herd of steers, who see the ranchers as their 'oppressors' ('The Good, the Bad, and the Wallaby', 17 October 1993). Heffer ends up in the back of a livestock truck and is unable to fathom that he is no longer a human-like consumer but rather a commodified animal, excitedly announcing to Rocko from the behind the truck's slats that he's 'going to market' with a shopping list. Rocko's anthropomorphic status is challenged when Filburt reads the eagle's diet from a book,

which includes 'salmon, trout, rabbit, moose, duck, but mostly prefers wallaby.' In 'Hypno-Puppy Luv,' (8 October 1996) Rocko is hypnotised into behaving like a dog and adopted by his mistaken neighbour. His pet dog Spunky also breaks the barrier of anthropomorphism when a news anchor asks him about Rocko's species and he responds, 'you're asking me?' The fluidity of anthropomorphism blurs the boundary between consumer and product, meaning that any character could have their social role redefined as pet, prey, or commodity.

Spirit behaviour is also depicted in ways that more closely resemble traditional forms of animism. Food is commonly anthropomorphic, echoing the animist belief that food is the origin of sentience (Arhem, 1996; Reid and Rout, 2016). Natural forms such as the sun, trees, clouds, and ocean also speak and act. Animal characters usually interact with natural spirits directly, like when Filburt brings flowers back to life by singing to them, inspiring the flowers to sing harmony. At one point, however, an elf acts as a medium to channel the spirit of Christmas from Rocko to an anthropomorphic cloud, finally convincing it to release snow ('Rocko's Modern Christmas!', 1 December 1994). When various objects in Rocko's house become possessed by an ancestral spirit, Rocko and his friends apply Spirit-Away Anti-Possession Cream, a commodity fetishised in the shamanistic sense of interacting with spirits. At one point, shifts in the planetary alignment give Filburt an overwhelming desire to revisit his island birthplace, which he explains is connected to his heritage as a turtle. Another pilgrimage site is located in Spunky's intestines, where parasites worship a half-digested Fatheads vitamin tablet, a parody of the real-world Flintstones Chewable Vitamin ('Down the Hatch', 23 October 1994). Just as Rocko was initially marketed the tablet by Fatheads television

advertisements, two entrepreneurial parasites seek profit by convincing other parasites that the tablet holds the secret to eternal youth, inspiring them to hold their infants out against its surface. *Rocko's Modern Life* appropriates diverse elements of animist beliefs to build a world in which spirit and agency are diffused throughout capitalist culture.

Despite the abundance of spirits that give life to Rocko's world, its animist capitalism is fundamentally disharmonious and brutal. Giggling faeries dwell among the plants, but they are obliterated by the disproportionate power of a high-tech vacuum cleaner. Other tiny beings eke out an existence in the fault lines of animist capitalism, such as the beanie-wearing fly who lives in Rocko's empty fridge and holds a cardboard sign that reads 'will work for food.' Incarcerated parasites laze around playing cards and harmonica, exploiting the stereotype of prisoners as social parasites. Bloaty the tick lives a middle-class life in Spunky's fur but laments that his whole existence is 'work, home, TV, bed.' One faerie, a floating rat wearing a sludge-green tanktop under his pink tutu and speaking in a voice hoarse from smoking, is a caricature of the urban poor. Rats derogatorily represent the working class throughout the series, appearing as professional movers and striking waste disposal workers. One of the starkest depictions of class division appears when Rocko and Heffer fly on DeReg Airlines, whose first-class section is replete with a buffet, baby grand piano, and bowling alley ('Jet Scream', 26 September 1993). Its coach-class section is marked by images of rural poverty and/or the Global South, such as wooden latrines, barbed wire, and chickens pecking at the ground. The two classes are separated by a high-voltage doorway that zaps unauthorised trespassers. Forced labour is common, as when a pizza company threatens Rocko with debt slavery, Heffer is sentenced to agricultural labour as a punishment for eating the wrong type of

fast food, and Rocko and Heffer are imprisoned on a ship and set to work as deckhands. Rocko often struggles with basic survival, scrounging his pockets to feed the parking-style meters in his kitchen that read 'water,' 'phone,' 'electricity,' and 'oxygen,' evoking the dystopian trope that neoliberal privatisation will soon commodify the very air we breathe. *Rocko's Modern Life* employs magical realism as a hyperbolic device to reveal the absurdity of capitalism's inequalities. The simultaneous diffusion of spirits throughout capitalism serves to expand its injustices into the spiritual realm.

Rocko's animist capitalism is so permeated by spirits as to diminish individual agency. The absence of human beings and the presence of human-like consumer goods signifies the triumph of the latter. Insects live like people and people are no more important than things. This ontological upheaval means that for the simple act of swatting a fly from his hamburger, Rocko is tried in court with an anthropomorphic sock as judge and sentenced to live for thirty days as a fly himself ('Fly Burgers', 17 July 1996). *Rocko's Modern Life* explores the dialectical limits of Marx's notion that the fetishised commodity positions itself as the principal medium of interaction through which human relationships develop. Commodity agency has attained such social power that human beings have lost their privileged cosmological position and are valued no more than objects. Whereas capitalism orders human relationships by commodifying them, Rocko's animist capitalism orders the relationships between *spirits*: spirits inhabiting animals and spirits inhabiting commodities.

Rocko's haunted workplace and the alienation of human agency

Marx (2007: 87) wrote that the alienation of labour imbues commodities with a 'magic and necromancy' that in *Rocko's Modern Life* manifest literally. The alienation of labour

'subsumes human life, and in the process transforms it into living death,' channelling the human spirit into 'the commodity as an object of fetishistic identification' (Thorpe, 2016: 21). The result is a capitalist necromancy in which 'dead labor continues to dominate living labor' and the will of capital overwhelms the will of people (Debord, 2009: 57). *Rocko's Modern Life* depicts the workplace as the site in which workers struggle to retain their humanity amidst the animation of things. Thus, 'history itself haunts modern society like a spectre' (Debord, 2009: 70) and the necromancy of animist capitalism haunts the workplace in *Rocko's Modern Life*.

Rocko experiences work as the subordination of his agency to the supremacy of commodities. His boss at the comic book store lectures him about working harder to ensure profitability. Rocko is forced to work unpaid overtime, adding a single whisker to hundreds of issues of 'Bunnyman vs. The Fly.' The stacks of comic books cackle and command him to continue despite his exhaustion. Rocko cowers behind the cash register, humiliated by his poor treatment at the hands of customers. This prompts his employer to dock his pay. The abusiveness of Rocko's boss stems from his literal seat as manager. The chair behind the desk of his palatial office is so powerful that by sitting in it and activating its massage feature, Rocko magically transforms into a red-eyed boss who screams at his underling ('Power Trip', 10 October 1993). Similarly, the subordination of the worker to fetishised commodities is demonstrated when the intercom at his cash register forms lips to shout and cough spittle all over him. Rock is ultimately fired to 'eliminate counter-productivity' when his boss pulls a lever to flush Rocko down into his chair like a toilet. As Rocko sells his labour for a wage, his agency is sapped by the violent spirits of reified labour contained within capital.

As human agency becomes increasingly alienated from the labourer, it dissipates through 'the abstractifying of all individual labor and the general abstractness of what is produced' (Debord, 2009: 15). *Rocko's Modern Life* depicts labour at its most alienated and abstractified with the Conglom-O Corporation. Conglom-O seems to produce everything and nothing, from goods as inane as Mad Giraffe Repellent to producing political power through its hegemonic control over O-Town's city hall. Atop the Conglom-O headquarters sits its logo, a Martini glass with Earth as its olive, and its corporate slogan, 'We Own You.' The employees are servile lizards scurrying on tiptoes down endless conduits of hallways, elevators, and offices. The absence of any visible product of labour is juxtaposed with the ubiquity of technologies for the control of labour. Employees are surveilled from a panoptic security room with over one-hundred CCTV monitors. Manager Ed Bighead appears on a giant television overlooking the employees, emerging from the screen to flatten one with a flyswatter ('Canned', 31 October 1993). Conglom-O executives summon employees by operating an overhead conveyor system of robotic claws from which middle-managers dangle. Promotions are doled out by throwing a dart at a list. Offices are equipped with trapdoor floors for immediate demotions. Paperwork drops in from the ceiling tiles without warning. At Conglom-O, the purpose of labour has been alienated to such an extent that it is no longer discernible to human logic, instead reanimating itself as capital operating for capital's sake in a frenetic 'autonomous movement of the nonliving' (Debord, 2009: 9).

The employees of Conglom-O are haunted by its inhumanity. Patrolling its nocturnal halls as a security guard, Heffer encounters twin beavers in business attire who appear and disappear like ghosts ('Uniform Behavior', 22 January 1995). They say in

unison, 'we work here, we've always worked here,' suggesting the temporal transcendence of materialised labour. Shaken, Heffer takes a seat at the empty Cafe Conglom-O and orders a soda on credit. The barman is revealed to be a demon who has traded the drink for Heffer's soul. Ed Bighead, a manager at Conglom-O, is haunted by his boss, who manifests as a translucent apparition floating by his head ('Magic Meatball', 15 July 1996). The spectral boss roars, 'keep up or get out,' its mouth unleashing a torrent of paperwork all over Ed's office. The paperwork is a series of obtuse questions written in corporate jargon. Unable to comprehend his own abstractified labour, Ed seeks guidance from his Magic Meatball. The Meatball is an anthropomorphic version of the real-world Mattel Magic 8-Ball, a divinatory toy inspired by the animist practice of spirit writing. Whereas a traditional animist fetish is shaped from natural materials and thus interacts with nature spirits, the Magic Meatball is shaped by commodities and thus acts as a medium between Ed and the commodity spirits that haunt Conglom-O. With the Magic Meatball, Ed can interpret their capitalist necromancy enough to undertake his lifeless labour.

Labour is also alienated in the domestic spheres of Rocko's world. Rocko and Filburt marry, one of multiple instances in which Rocko's relationships are queered (Dennis, 2003). However, their marriage is presented in a way that reproduces heteronormativity by simultaneously switching Filburt's behaviour to a female-coded performativity ('Kiss me I'm Foreign', 4 December 1994). Filburt dons an apron while performing domestic labour such as ironing and cooking. When Rocko does not appreciate his efforts, Filburt takes on a hypermasculine role by sporting beard stubble and a tank top from which his belly protrudes, flipping through television channels while

demanding to be fed. Dissatisfied with the dinner Rocko has prepared for him, he overturns the table. Rocko, who now wears the apron, suddenly feels the discontent generated through the patriarchal feminisation of domestic labour. The idea that housework is inherently feminine is similarly reinforced when Bev Bighead, who typically performs the domestic labour in her marriage with Ed, assumes an executive position at Conglom-O Corporation ('She's the Toad', 9 October 1994). Her formal employment ends with her resignation. She concludes 'this isn't where I belong,' and insists that her husband will take her place because 'he's the toad for the job,' a male-coded reference to corporate patriarchy. Despite the failure of *Rocko's Modern Life* to problematise the gendered division of labour, it succeeds in portraying the alienation of the domestic sphere as a site of production and the commodification of the domestic sphere as a site of consumption.

The spiritual promise of enchanted commodities

The characters of *Rocko's Modern Life* pursue their lost agency through the consumption of commodities, which are often anthropomorphised to suture the wounds of social isolation (Epley et al., 2007: 866; Avis 2014, 61). Commodities promise spiritual empowerment because of their ability to serve as instruments of human volition. The 'animation of the object is dependent on institutional beliefs by humans in the efficacy of the focal thing,' and derives from 'anthropomorphism, animism, [and] fetishism' (Belk and Humayun, 2015: 21). Rocko's commodities, however, are so technologically advanced and spiritually powerful that their own volition takes prominence over efficacy, exemplifying 'the augmented survival in which everyday experience is cut off from decisionmaking and subjected no longer to the natural order, but to the pseudo-nature

created by alienated labor' (Debord, 2009: 55). Rocko's struggles for self-realisation are completely submerged within the pseudo-nature of the commodified order, which manifests as the *real* cosmological order. This is symbolised when fast food logos shift into alignment like planets, the celestial syzygy of commodity spectacles exerting a mystical effect upon Heffer. The cosmological privileging of commodities allows them to imitate the autonomous life of the natural order. The commodified order renders futile Rocko's efforts for spiritual fulfillment. This indicates a key contradiction in the interplay between alienation and consumption, which is that 'none of the activity stolen by work can be regained by submitting to what that work has produced' (Debord, 2009: 14). Rocko seeks agency through consumption, which ironically subjects his will to the agency of animated commodities. Just as Rocko is disempowered in the public sphere by the commodities that haunt his workplace, he becomes disempowered in the private sphere by the commodities that haunt his home.

Rocko's sense of identity is commodified through advertising. By watching television, Rocko is bombarded with advertisements for 'pseudogoods to be coveted' in an 'incessant fabrication of pseudoneeds' (Debord, 2009: 20). Commodities marketed to fulfil Rocko's pseudoneeds include the Fatheads Chewable Vitamin Cheese tablets and the Leak Elite dog bowl that cooks sausages. The aggregate of pseudoneeds constitutes a culture of 'augmented survival' that promises self-realisation through consumption, such as when a celebrity on Filburt's television markets a confidence-building cassette by calling the viewer a 'big fraidy-cat' and a 'wimp,' when an advertisement for a food processor inspires Rocko to envision himself as a gourmet chef, and when The Home

Channel assures that 'your living room expresses your personality... Just take a whiff of the delightful lemon-fresh aroma... That's the real you' ('Canned', 31 October 1993).

Since the commodities of animist capitalism are alive, they reciprocate consumer desire. Advertising gives the illusion that consumer desire is requited, and that goods 'speak to' us and want to be ours (Belk et al., 2003). Accordingly, an armchair gallops after Rocko while yelling sit on me,' a pine tree at the Christmas stand wags and barks like a dog eager to be selected, and appliances vie for the attention of shoppers at the department store. Rocko sympathises with a lonely food processor, but upon taking it home its constant misbehaviour ends up dominating Rocko's life ('Fatal Contraption', 21 April 1996). In 'Boob Tubed' (6 November 1994), the talking computer at an automated checkout counter forcefully sells him a Hibachi Big Screen TV and numerous peripherals. When Heffer watches the television throughout the night, it inverts the relationship between consumer and product by consuming his brain. To retrieve it, Rocko and Filburt press a button on the remote that opens the television screen like a garage door and venture into a tundra of static and snow. Thus, commodities subsume the consumer into their reality rather than vice versa.

A striking example of the inversion of agency between consumer and commodity is the episode 'A Sucker for Suck-O-Matic' (31 October 1993). The Lobot-O-Shop Network advertises the Suck-O-Matic vacuum cleaner as fulfilling a number of pseudoneeds by functioning as 'boil-lancer, pizza oven, strategic defense bunker... and bidet, as well as a very crude liposuction machine.' The television sprouts arms, unhinges the scalps of Rocko and Heffer, and scrubs their brains with Lobot-O-Soap. Their eyes spiral as they chant, 'must buy Suck-O-Matic.' When they purchase the vacuum cleaner,

it takes on a maddened visage, eyes furrowed, careening down the street while inhaling everything in its path. Rocko screams, 'it's got a mind of its own!' The Suck-O-Matic consumes the entire house and sucks the souls of Rocko, Heffer, and Spunky from their throats. The episode concludes with them watching the Lobot-O-Shop Network. The camera zooms out to reveal that they have resigned themselves to a life within the steel enclosure of the Suck-O-Matic. The outward zoom continues to show their entire neighborhood destroyed, a Suck-O-Matic atop the rubble of each home. This apocalyptic scene is the phenomenological conclusion of Rocko's animist capitalism: the lives of alienated workers are entirely consumed within the monstrous commodities animated by their own enervated agency.

The domination of capital over the urban landscape is a recurring theme in *Rocko's Modern Life*. Debord (2009: 61) sees urban planning as the encroachment of human environments, which are shaped by the needs of people, by commodified environments, which are shaped by the needs of capital. *Rocko's Modern Life* uses magical realist hyperbole to depict mass-manufactured landscapes so vast and alien that individual volition is irrelevant. For example, Rocko and Heffer visit Googa Plex Cinemas with hundreds of screens, all of which are playing 'Lethal Odor IX.' The multiplex embodies the spatial commodification that replaces genuine human agency with 'the freedom to choose from an unlimited range of spectacular pseudoalternatives' (Debord, 2009: 41). Debord says that the epitome of spatial commodification are the 'giant shopping centers built in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by acres of parking lots' (2009: 62). Rocko and Heffer drive to O-Town National Forest, which is dominated by the O-Town Mall, its sprawling parking lots, and a parking garage that

stretches into the stratosphere ('Who Gives a Buck', 18 September 1993). They stand before a massive labyrinthine map of the mall equipped with voice recognition. Rocko visually scans the extensive directory while muttering to himself, 'dog bowls, dog bowls...' The machine registers Rocko's words, inadvertently activating a conveyor belt beneath his feet that sends him speeding to 'Area 2, Section 3, Level 1, Sector 24, Aisle 19.' As soon as he is finished purchasing a Leak Elite deluxe bowl, the salesperson presses a button, reactivating the conveyor belt and tossing him out of the store. The built environment in Rocko's world is not designed to serve the human will, but rather to impose its own will on a consumer that is objectified by the agency of commodified space. It operates on a scale and according to values that are fundamentally inhuman. Nevertheless, these values are infused with an animism that retains their connection to humanity by their very inversion of subject and object, consumer and commodity.

The human vitality of animated commodities induces physical and emotional vulnerability. Commodities are often anthropomorphised when they transgress consumer expectations by malfunctioning (Avis, 2014: 64-65). In *Rocko's Modern Life*, a washing machine grows teeth and a tongue to cough out clothing, a food processor vomits fruit pulp from its feed tube, and paramedics whisk away a jackhammer on a stretcher. Characters experience the loss of a commodity as the loss of a loved one, like when Filburt mourns the shattering of a tomato sauce jar that he treated as a pet or when Rocko pleads 'I need you... old friend' to his vacuum cleaner as it coughs its final words. Commodities are also prone to experiencing psychological trauma, as when Rocko's mop visits a psychologist. Similarly, Rocko's car trembles and cries at the impound lot after surviving violence from a semi truck, which by repeated implication includes rape

(‘Skid Marks’, 3 October 1993). The minimisation and exploitation of prison rape is symptomatic of the show’s frequent derision of historically oppressed groups for the sake of comedy.

Characters shift easily between cultural codes and exploit otherised cultures as commodities to be consumed. Rocko sits at a virtual rowing machine that includes in its list of options ‘African Queen.’ He selects reggae music on an in-flight entertainment system, which darkens his skin, dreads his hair, adorns him with a hat in the colours of the Ethiopian flag, and droops his eyelids to suggest that he is under the influence of marijuana (‘Jet Scream’, 26 September 1993). The darkening of Rocko’s skin suggests that he is normally white-coded. The depiction of Rastafarianism as a drug culture that can be engaged through the imaginary and invisible neutrality of white privilege aligns *Rocko’s Modern Life* with aesthetics that were emergent in animation at the time of broadcast. Elkins (2014: 602) observes that Adult Swim, a Cartoon Network programming block that is influential in adult-oriented animation, promotes the racialisation of ‘recreational drug use [that] often articulates with renditions of whiteness that engage with ethnic minorities in appropriative ways... [and the] potentials for cultural tourism and promises of rebellion so presumably appealing to the affluent... white audience.’ *Rocko’s Modern Life* casts a white male gaze upon human diversity and fetishises ‘other’ cultures as commodities available for consumption. This calls into question the frequent claim that Nickelodeon succeeds in its efforts at racial diversity by including people of colour as characters on its programs (Hendershot, 2004: 2-3; Sandler, 2004: 49; Seiter and Mayer, 2004: 133). In *Rocko’s Modern Life*, cultures of the Global

South are both included and ridiculed. Racial inclusion signals the commodification of stereotypes rather than the decentring of whiteness.

Rocko's Modern Life exploits racial stereotypes to portray non-Western cultures as backwards antitheses of modernity. In 'Hypno-Puppy Luv' (8 October 1996), Heffer receives a mail-order hypnotism kit with a feng gong and a dangling pocket watch. Filburt refuses to be hypnotised, saying 'I want nothing to do with your voodoo.' Heffer wears a turban with a sarpech and tries to hypnotise Rocko while crudely imitating an East-Asian accent. The racist and disparaging conflation of Chinese music, West African religion, and Hindu-Islamic attire exemplifies orientalism (Said, 1978). The orientalisation of non-Western religion continues with the depiction of a chimpanzee-like djinni who wears a toilet paper roll on his head instead of a turban. In 'Pipe Dreams' (2 October 1994), Heffer holds a magically glowing product called 'Tropical Plumber' to the camera in the style of a television commercial. He sprays the mist at the toilet, which summons three anthropomorphic fruits that sing in stereotypical Caribbean accents, dance around the toilet bowl in a conga line, and shake maracas. The aerosol can acts as a fetish with the power to conjure spirits that are colonised by the advertising industry. In another problematic depiction of animism, Filburt attempts to reanimate Rocko's car while wearing what he calls a 'silly headdress,' a purple peacock that fits over his face ('Manic Mechanic', 3 December 1995). He waves a live chicken over the exposed engine while incanting, 'boom shwanti oosh.' The scene is an open mockery of indigenous shamanism, its use of a mantra similar to "om shanti om" possibly indicating orientalist amalgamation with Hinduism. Despite using animism as the cosmological basis for its magical capitalism, *Rocko's Modern Life* frequently ridicules its indigenous

forms. Such critiques of commodity fetishism often reinforce coloniality by depicting 'the masses in Western Europe as creatures who bear the repulsive trace of the African savage... [which] aligns the primitive with the negro, the negro with pagan animism, animism with delusion and passivity, and passivity with commodity culture' (Bennett, 2001). Although Rocko is usually coded with a deracialised whiteness, he is sometimes partially racialised with a darker skin tone or even through the species-based slurs that Heffer's father hurls at Rocko for being a wallaby. Rocko, colonised by the commodities that usurp his power, lives within 'a sort of reservation for the good natives who keep modern society running without understanding it' (Debord, 1962: 1). The critique of commodity fetishism presented in *Rocko's Modern Life* is limited by its racialisation and ridicule of its characters' animist inclinations.

Although *Rocko's Modern Life* generally mocks commodity fetishism, it occasionally embraces commodities as magical objects that give access to spiritual realisation. In these instances, it reflects the consumerist conception of identity-building commodities as magical objects for the mystical realisation once accessed through religious fetishism (Debord, 2009: 25). In 'Cruisin'" (1 January 1995), Rocko and a wiseman discuss old age and death on the bow of a cruise ship. Their conversation causes mortality to materialise as wreaths bobbing in the sea. The ship diverts to the Bermuda Triangle, where it whirls through an astral plane of suns, moons, eight balls, and skulls. A wrathful clock with arms and legs runs amok, overturning the progression of time and transforming the young into old and the old into young. Heffer's grandfather, with his now-youthful body, jumps into the ocean to save an elderly Rocko. Believing his grandfather has drowned, Heffer must reconcile with his death. The depiction of a cruise

as a spiritual experience contrasts with Debord's exemplification of cruise holidays as 'touristic pseudotravel' and temporal commodification, since it is a 'fully equipped block of time' containing a multitude of commodified goods and experiences (Debord, 2009: 56). In this episode, however, the total departure that the cruise ship represents is not superficial but rather supernatural, acting as a vessel into an otherworldly realm where truths about time and death are revealed.

Rocko has another mystical experience with a commodity when he is visited by Mr. Onion Head, his childhood toy ('Junk Junkies', 12 February 1995). Mr. Onion Head is a spoof on the real-world toy Mr. Potato Head, which itself originated as Mr. Vegetable Head, a set of pieces that could be inserted into any vegetable. This enabled children to act upon the animist impulse to recognise plants as the source of life by anthropomorphising them (Reid and Rout, 2016). Hasbro began to include a plastic potato in the set, replacing the living vegetable with dead labour, gave him a plastic pipe, and renamed him 'Mr. Potato Head' (Ruby, 2016: 10). It became the first toy advertised on network television, and further increased in popularity when it was re-enchanted with life in the animated film *Toy Story* (1995). Rocko's Mr. Onion Head toy smokes a pipe while reprimanding him for selling a piece of his childhood in the form of his pogo stick. Rocko bursts into tears, mourning the loss of childhood magic and love commodified and personified by mass-manufactured toys. In this moment, Rocko's commodity animism overlaps the indigenous animist sense of one's interconnectedness and 'responsibility for their relationship with animals, plants, places, things, and people' (Sillar, 2009: 376). Mr. Onion Head communicates across the ethereal boundary that

separates commodities from their consumers and reminds Rocko to respect their interdependence.

In the same episode, a buyer at Rocko's garage sale sees a melted G.I. Jimbo action figure as a brilliant work of art and buys it for \$500. G.I. Jimbo is based on real-world G.I. Joe, which is notable as a pioneer of action figures that are fully-articulated and thus able to be animated. The G.I. Joe toy franchise is also remembered for its animated television series *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*, which fused toy marketing with serial programming to ascribe life to toys using extensive narratives (Bainbridge, 2010: 831-834). *Rocko's Modern Life* itself was presented alongside other 1990s 'Nicktoons' as alternatives to such toy-marketing cartoons, which had been the predominant form of animation broadcast in the US until that point (Simensky, 2004: 88). By decoupling toy marketing and animation, *Rocko's Modern Life* was able use the lens of animation for a more critical analysis of the commodities that populated US childhood during the 1990s, recognising their flawed yet spiritually significant roles in children's lives. The fact that both Mr. Onion Head and G. I. Jimbo are featured in this episode indicates that *Rocko's Modern Life* exists in a milieu rich with commodities whose mystical presence as living, moving beings is fetishised.

Rocko finds spiritual agency by relating to commodities through the animist values of love and respect for one's position within a community of things. This supports the theory of technoanimism, which posits that the advent of augmented reality and the internet of things generates a 'field of distributed agencies in which emergent animation and responsiveness questions the distinction between the animate and inanimate' (Marenko, 2014: 231). However, by relating to commodities spiritually, Rocko reifies the

fetishisation of commodities and the commodification of his own spirit. Commodity agency engenders a technoanimism that regards these technologies with spiritual reverence, which in indigenous animism is reserved for nature (Aupers, 2002). The position of nature as the origin of humanity is now supplanted by the commodities in which the consumer locates their alienated self. Rocko and his friends are repulsed by nature and instead choose Nature-O-Rama, a glass-domed arcology in which a conveyor belt cuts through plastic rocks and artificial trees bear vending machines instead of fruit. A deepening of the spiritual relationship between self and commodity coincides with the social abandonment of nature, as when Conglom-O dumps hazardous waste into the ecosystem, harming Earth's anthropomorphic flowers, worms, fish, and birds. Heffer demonstrates a religious awe for commodities by joining a fast-food cult called Schnitzel Hut whose members operate a commune to mass manufacture a variety of sausage products, market them through children's television programming, read scripture from the Book of Bratwurst, and worship a winged sausage deity ('Schnit-heads', 29 October 1995). The animist capitalism of *Rocko's Modern Life* is a spiritual dystopia in which humanity no longer reveres nature as its origin. Instead, its characters are entranced by a spectacle of life external to themselves, an inversion of the natural order. They fail to recognise that vivacity as once having belonged to themselves, as their own alienated agency that animates commodities in 'a complete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving' (Debord, 2009: 9).

Conclusion

Rocko's Modern Life employs magical realism to depict the quest for spiritual fulfilment in a late capitalist society that worships the spirits of fetishised commodities instead of

nature spirits. Debord's (2009: 24) critique of capitalist culture is even more resonant in animist capitalism: *Rocko's Modern Life* 'does not sing of men and their arms, but of commodities and their passions. In this blind struggle each commodity, by pursuing its own passion, unconsciously generates something beyond itself.' Rocko is enamoured by commodity passions because they give him a sense of hope and belonging within a community of things. His pursuit of self-realisation is ultimately futile, since this community derives life not from nature but from the necromancy of alienated labour. The series may therefore be seen as an effort at demystification and disenchantment that Bennett (2001) calls for to subvert the enchantment of commodities in consumer culture.

The lens into US capitalist culture offered by the series, and particularly that culture's inclination to fetishise and anthropomorphise commodities, remains highly relevant in the context of the internet of things, which realises a form of technoanimism through commodities that digitally communicate their experiences, intentions, and commands. The digital commodification of space is further heightened by the proliferation of augmented reality, which enables 'the animation of reality' to an extent that even Imamura likely did not foresee (Driscoll, 2002). Japanese anime has already begun to explore the social implications of augmented reality, which Roquet (2016) understands as a continuation of the historical desire to animate the world around us. The intersection of animation, capitalism, and animism has therefore gained even more significance than when Imamura first theorised their relationship in the early 20th century.

Despite its important cultural critique, *Rocko's Modern Life* is too often uncritical of commodity fetishism, as when it undermines human agency by problematically

depicting women as domestic workers and people of colour as commodities. Its othering approach to race and culture constitutes a colonisation of indigenous animism, supporting Imamura's theory that Western animation appropriates animist desires into capitalist designs. Therefore, further research into animation as an animist medium could contextualise contemporary capitalism within a broader colonial history. The contradictory approach to animism seen in *Rocko's Modern Life*, in which animism is both respected as a social reality within capitalism and disparaged as racially other, indicates that animation as a medium is a nexus in which colonial relationships are negotiated. The theories of Imamura represent a promising starting point for the postcolonial study of animism and animation, since he contextualised hegemonic forms of animation within Western capitalism. Herhuth (2016) traces even more nuanced connections between animism, animation, and colonialism by locating animation within the relationship between the coloniser and colonised and suggesting that animation be considered from a plurality of ontologies, in a sense marking an entry point into the decolonisation of animation theory. The depiction of animism in *Rocko's Modern Life* highlights the need further critical scholarship into how animism is interpreted and contested in a diversity animated works.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

No declaration

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- 'Fly Burgers' (season 4, episode 8b, 17 July 1996)
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- 'I Have No Son!' (season 2, episode 1, 25 September 1994)
- 'Jet Scream' (season 1, episode 3a, 26 September 1993)
- 'Junk Junkies' (season 2, episode 11a, 12 February 1995)
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