

The background of the entire page is a collage of various scenes from Aardman Animations, including characters from Wallace & Gromit, Shaun the Sheep, and Chicken Run. The collage is overlaid with a white grid of diagonal lines forming a diamond pattern. The text is centered in a white rectangular area in the upper-middle part of the page.

# **AARDMAN IN ARCHIVE**

Exploring Digital Archival Research through  
a History of Aardman Animations

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**REBECCA ADRIAN**



Aardman in Archive | Exploring Digital Archival Research through  
a History of Aardman Animations

Rebecca Adrian



Aardman in Archive: Exploring Digital Archival Research through a History of Aardman Animations

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Cover image: BTS19\_rgb - TM & 2005 DreamWorks Animation SKG and TM Aardman Animations Ltd.

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>vii</i>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 // Stop-Motion Animation and Aardman</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1   Lack of Histories of Stop-Motion Animation and Aardman	4
1.2   Marketing, Glocalisation and the Success of Aardman	7
1.3   The Influence of the British Television Landscape	10
<b>2 // Digital Archival Research</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1   Digital Surrogates in Archival Research	12
2.2   Authenticity versus Accessibility	13
2.3   Expanded Excavation and Search Limitations	14
2.4   Prestige of Substance or Form	14
2.5   Critical Engagement	15
<b>3 // A History of Aardman in the British Television Landscape</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1   Aardman's Origins and Children's TV in the 1970s	18
3.1.1   A Changing Attitude towards Television	19
3.2   Animated Shorts and Channel 4 in the 1980s	20
3.2.1   Broadcasting Act 1980	20
3.2.2   Aardman and Channel 4: A Mutually Beneficial Arrangement	22
3.2.3   Animation on Television	23
3.2.4   Commercial Television: Music Videos and Advertising	24
3.3   Nick Park and the Wallace & Gromit Franchise in the 1990s	26
3.3.1   At the Academy Awards: "Creature Comforts" and "A Grand Day Out"	27
3.3.2   Animation Initiatives and Wallace & Gromit Sequels	28
3.3.3   Channel 4 Commissions and the Broadcasting Act 1990	31
3.3.4   "Stage Fright," "Hum Drum" and the Deregulation of Channel 4	32
3.3.5   Comedy TV for Adults and the Digital Switch-Over	34
3.4   Feature-Length Films and Spin-Off Series in 2000-2005	38
3.4.1   Funding Foundation: A Deal with DreamWorks	39
3.4.2   Funding Continues: DreamWorks' Second Deal	40

3.4.3   Broadcasting: Spin-Offs and Series in 2000-2005	42
3.4.4   Wallace & Gromit Hit the Big Screen	44
3.5   Funding Fails, Films and Spin-Offs 2005 – Onwards	46
3.5.1   Broadcasting: Spin-Offs and Series	47
3.5.2   CBBC's Shaun the Sheep and Aardman's In-House Distribution	48
3.5.3   Timmy Time and Other Spin-Offs in the Wallace & Gromit Universe	50
3.5.4   Aardman's Feature Future	51
History   In Conclusion	52
<b>4 // Reflection on Aardman in Digital Archive</b>	<b>53</b>
4.1   Proximity to Sources	53
4.2   Excavation and Search Limitations	54
Reflection   In Conclusion	55
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>57</b>
<i>List of References</i>	60
<i>List of Primary Sources</i>	62
<i>List of Media References</i>	67

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## Abstract

'Aardman in Archive' aims to explore digital archival research through a history of Aardman Animations. This research aims to present a comprehensive history of Aardman in which it seeks to examine the studio's position within the British television landscape and the influence of British broadcasters on the success of a studio that began as a two-person cottage-industry outfit and grew into an internationally lauded media production company. The need for this history arose from a deficit of academically reliable secondary sources and a general lack of scholarly attention to animation and stop-motion animation in particular. While it was found in the history that the British broadcasting industry played a vital role in developing Aardman into a renowned studio that attracted attention from international feature-film financiers, it was not the influence of Channel 4 but the BBC that proved to be fundamental. The history also shows that the continued support of British broadcasters remained crucial in the later years as it enabled an exploration of the feature-film market by providing a constant stream of revenue. While this exhaustive history forms a solid foundation for future analyses of Aardman, the use of primary sources obtained via digital archival research in order to construct this history of Aardman has its own limitations that affect the authenticity of this account. To by-pass these limitations in future research, this study suggests combining both traditional and digital archival research to create well-rounded histories.

*Keywords:* Aardman, animation, British broadcasting, digital archives, primary sources, stop-motion animation, television industry



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# Introduction

In 2016, the Bristol-based stop-motion animation studio Aardman Animations, as founded by David Sproxton and Peter Lord in 1976, celebrated its forty-year anniversary.<sup>1</sup> While it is not the first studio to focus on animation, Aardman is the oldest animation studio that is currently active in the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Known for their stop-motion animated shorts and feature films that make up the Wallace & Gromit franchise and television series like *Shaun the Sheep*, the studio has built up a vast body of work over the years that has made Aardman a leader in its field. Considering that the studio produces a niche product within a television and film landscape that favours live-action production over stop-motion animation and relegates animation to the realm of children's entertainment, Aardman's achievements to date are remarkable, if not unprecedented.<sup>3</sup> However, despite their impressive track record, few media scholars have paid attention to the studio in academic research.

This appears to be indicative of a greater lack of interest in animation, as Alan Cholodenko observes as editor of *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation*, where he argues that “[i]n terms of scholarship, animation is the least theorized area of film. In neglecting animation, film theorists—when they have thought about it at all— have regarded animation as either the ‘step-child’ of cinema or as not belonging to the cinema at all, belonging rather to the graphic arts.”<sup>4</sup> While the study of animation has progressed since the publication of Cholodenko's anthology in 1991, stop-motion animation as a specific mode of animation remains an overlooked area in research, as Rachel Moseley observes in her book *Hand-made Television: Stop-Frame Animation for Children in Britain*, where she notes that “there is something about stop-frame animation, and perhaps animated television more generally, which places it out of reach for scholars of both television and, as we shall see, animation.”<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, scholars and historians that do write about animation often overlook the studio or only mention Aardman in passing, whereas media scholars that choose to focus on the studio write about company aspects such as management, marketing and strategy.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the few works that describe the studio's history in more detail lack an overview of

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<sup>1</sup> Macnab, Geoffrey. “Aardman Animations at 40.” *The Independent*, June 22, 2016, n.p.

<sup>2</sup> The studio Smallfilms, known for stop-motion animated television shows like the *Clangers*, is technically the oldest although the studio ceased production in the 1980s. The studio was revived in 2014 with the commission of CBeebies for a new series of *Clangers*, which involved Smallfilms founder Peter Firm and Daniel Postgate, son of the studio's co-founder Oliver Postgate. See also “Clangers Revived by CBeebies,” *Broadcast*, Oct. 15, 2013, n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Moseley, *Hand-Made Television: Stop-Frame Animation for Children in Britain, 1961-1974* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Cholodenko, ed. *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation* (Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1991), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Moseley, *Hand-made Television*, 11.

<sup>6</sup>For examples, see Nichola Dobson, *The A to Z of Animation and Cartoons* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009); Van Norris, *British Television Animation 1997-2010: Drawing Comic Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Marian Quigley, “Glocalisation vs. Globalization: The Work of Nick Park and Peter Lord,” in *Animation: Art and Industry*, ed. Maureen Furniss, (Bloomington, IN: John Libbey Publishing, 2012), and Andrew Spicer, “It's Our Property and Our Passion’: Managing Creativity in A Successful Company – Aardman Animations,” in *Building Successful and Sustainable Film and Television Businesses*, ed. Eva Bakø, Roel Puijk and Andrew Spicer (Bristol: Intellect, 2017), 295.

the sources that have been consulted, making it difficult for the reader to ascertain where the information has come from. For instance, in his book *Who's Who in Animated Cartoons: An International Guide to Film & Television's Award-Winning and Legendary Animators*, Jeff Lenburg describes the studio and its founders, but does not provide any references that account for the information presented in the book.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the only comprehensive overviews of Aardman's work are books like *Cracking Animation: The Aardman Book of 3-D Animation* by Brian Sibley and Aardman co-founder Peter Lord, which forms a great source of information for fans but is academically problematic as it lacks an objective analysis and reflection on the studio's position within the media landscape.<sup>8</sup>

Thankfully, matters are improving. This lack of academic literature on Aardman has been singled out by animation scholar Anabelle Honess Roe, who is the editor of the forthcoming anthology *Beyond Stop-Motion Film: Production, Style and Representation in Aardman Animations*.<sup>9</sup> However, while studies presented in anthologies like this are vital in evolving our understanding of media productions, they rarely focus on creating a comprehensive history of the companies behind them. Yet in order to gain a better understanding of the British animation industry, Aardman's extensive history would be an excellent place to start as it forms a vital part of the development of the industry from the late 1970s onwards. For this reason, this research will map the history of Aardman from inception to most recent productions.

In order to understand how a studio like Aardman managed to grow from a two-person outfit to an internationally recognised company, this overview will pay particular attention to events that shaped the television industry, including governmental acts and other regulations. Throughout this history, these developments will be compared and contrasted with Aardman's history, which will highlight the critical role that broadcasters like the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV played in stimulating a company like Aardman. Ultimately, by looking at Aardman through the lens of television, this research will highlight how the studio came into existence in the 1970s and has managed to evolve over a period of forty years with the help from British broadcasters.

This history will be constructed with primary sources that have been obtained via digital archival research in order to provide a foundation of references that is lacking in secondary sources like Lenburg's book. Also, the use of primary sources in assembling this history may lead to new or other insights about Aardman and the British television landscape that were previously underexposed or undiscovered. Moreover, this primary-source based overview aims to contribute to the field of media research by performing and reflecting on the process of archival research through digital means.

As technology develops, more archives are presenting their collections and materials online, which means that media scholars are no longer required to attend physical archives in person. However, while online archives open up a range of possibilities, the digital nature of these archives brings with it its own set of implications for research. Most available literature on the impact of digital archival research was published around 2000 and only describes how the digital

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<sup>7</sup> Jeff Lenburg, *Who's Who in Animated Cartoons: An International Guide to Film & Television's Award-Winning and Legendary Animators* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), 212.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Lord and Brian Sibley, *Cracking Animation: The Aardman Book of 3-D Animation*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 3.

<sup>9</sup> This forthcoming book has been cited in Spicer, "Property," 319, and lists forthcoming articles such as "Aardman: Animating Bristol" by Andrew Spicer and Steve Presence, and "Aardman Becomes European: The Search for Film Distribution Partners" by Christopher Meir.

tools accessible at that time showed early signs of impact.<sup>10</sup> By using and reflecting on contemporary online archives, this research aims to update the literature and create a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages that affect historical media research.

In order to do so, this study consists of four chapters. It will start out with an examination of the current state of research in the field of animation, which will include an overview of the existing analyses of Aardman. This chapter will not only further outline the gap in animation literature as identified by Cholodenko and Moseley, it will also demonstrate the need for a primary-source based historical account of the studio.

The following chapter will focus on the implications regarding digital archival research by reviewing both advantages and disadvantages of using digital sources for research. This chapter aims to bring to light the ways in which online archives aid as well as affect research, which will subsequently act as a guide for the assembly of Aardman's history. While digital archival research may impact the creation of this history, this chapter will provide a useful overview of potential issues that may arise in order to identify these pitfalls, which will, in turn, help scholars reflect critically on future research using digital archives.

The third chapter will present the history of Aardman as has been assembled using primary sources obtained from online archives. This history will be presented through the lens of the British television landscape in order to shed light on Aardman's growth as a stop-motion animation studio in a media landscape that generally favours live-action production.

The final fourth chapter will briefly outline and reflect on the process of digital archival research as used in this study to create the history of Aardman. This chapter will identify pitfalls that arose from using online archives and suggest possible solutions to resolve these issues in future research.

Ultimately, this research aims to create a history of Aardman that can be used to supplement existing academic analyses of Aardman as well as provide a foundation for future studies of the Bristol-based studio and the British animation industry. The overview of and reflection on the use of primary sources obtained from online archives will place this history in a critical light and can be used by scholars in the future to create and reflect critically on histories that have been constructed through digital archival research.

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<sup>10</sup> See also Luciana Duranti, "The Impact of Digital Technology on Archival Science," *Archival Science* 1, no. 1 (2001): 39, and Ronald Schuchard, "Excavating the Imagination: Archival Research and the Digital Revolution," *Libraries & Culture* 37, no. 1 (2002): 57.

# 1 // Stop-Motion Animation and Aardman

Although animation has permeated popular culture for decades, with its roots in dramatic performance and with many examples to be found on television, in cinemas, online and in advertising, animation as its own field of research has been neglected for many years. While the situation is not as dire anymore as Alan Cholodenko sketched in 1991, scholars mostly focus on traditional cel-animation studios like Disney or Studio Ghibli.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, particular areas within animation studies, like television or stop-motion animation, remain underexposed, and those studies and histories that do focus on animation either tend to present a generic overview or offer a more practical approach to the field.<sup>12</sup>

More recently, however, scholars have started to identify the lack of academic recognition for areas like television and stop-motion animation. This has led to studies like Van Norris' *British Television Animation 1997-2010*, which explores the intersection between mainstream British television animation and contemporary scheduling culture.<sup>13</sup> Although this study focuses on the mainstream animated comedy *The Simpsons*, Norris' work does help to fill a gap regarding television animation in the United Kingdom, with Norris describing his research as focused on "a missing history, [that is] as much about a forgotten aspect of British network television comedy as it is about a neglected, un-quantified aspect of UK TV animation."<sup>14</sup>

To understand where this lack of scholarly attention to animation, and in particular stop-motion animation stems from, the first section of this chapter will explore the attitude to animation that determines whether a topic is deemed of academic importance. The last two sections will outline literature that examines aspects of Aardman as an internationally operating company as well as a production studio within the media landscape. Ultimately, this chapter will highlight how a history of Aardman created through archival research forms a valuable contribution to the field of animation studies.

## 1.1 | Lack of Histories of Stop-Motion Animation and Aardman

In her book *Hand-made Television*, Rachel Moseley observes that there has been little scholarly attention to stop-motion animation from different academic fields, including film, television and animation studies.<sup>15</sup> This gap concerning stop-motion animation stems from a more general deficit of research on animation, as first recognised by Cholodenko, who argues that if animation

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Helen McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation: Films, Themes, Artistry* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Angela Thomas and Nicole Tufano, "Stop Motion Animation," in *DIY Media: Creating Sharing and Learning with New Technologies*, eds. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), as well as Kenneth A. Priebe, *The Advanced Art of Stop-Motion Animation* (Boston, MA: Course Technology, 2011) and Barry Purves, *Basics Animation: Stop-motion* (Lausanne: AVA Publishing, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Norris, *British*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Moseley, *Hand-made Television*, 11.

was addressed by film scholars at all, it was considered a by-product or “step-child” of cinema.<sup>16</sup> Following the publication of Cholodenko’s anthology in 1991, however, several scholars have attempted to address animation as a subcategory of film or as a research topic in its own right, which led to a number of practical guides, encyclopaedic overviews and analyses that focus on animation icons as listed above. In addition, scholars like Jayne Pilling and Paul Wells have produced more exhaustive overviews of animation that act as introductions to animation studies, and include discussions of theory, narrative strategies and issues in representation.<sup>17</sup> However, both Pilling’s *A Reader in Animation Studies* and Wells’ *Understanding Animation* only briefly touch upon stop-motion animation, which suggests that if animation is cinema’s step-child, stop-motion animation is the step-child’s long-lost cousin.

In an attempt to rectify the forlorn position of stop-motion animation in academic literature, Moseley’s book *Hand-made Television* presents stop-motion animation not as a minor character but as the main protagonist, and she uses her analysis of stop-motion animated children’s television programmes in the 1960s and 1970s to create a framework that helps to identify the aesthetics of stop-motion animation for media studies.<sup>18</sup> Her book forms a valuable contribution to both animation and television studies as it both discusses a range of early stop-motion children’s television series like *Clangers* and *The Pingwings* and places these programs within their overarching histories in the British television landscape.<sup>19</sup> In addition, her book looks critically at the lack of scholarly attention towards stop-motion animation and children’s programmes on television, noting that “[t]here has been little scholarly attention to this body of programmes, or to stop-frame television animation more widely, despite its ongoing impact on the British children’s television which has followed it.”<sup>20</sup>

While Moseley not only identifies the gap in the literature, but also aims to stop it, she is not the first to attempt to do so. One of the scholars that has focused her work on stop-motion animation is Suzanne Buchan, whose published work includes articles and books on stop-motion animation by the Brothers Quay. In her article “Animation, in Theory,” Buchan addresses issues surrounding the theorisation of animation. Like Cholodenko and Moseley, Buchan discusses the lack of scholarly attention to animation by pointing out that “[w]hat is largely missing in this debate is an approach to animation films that elaborates on the solid work that has been achieved regarding history, techniques, and aesthetics. Animation is, after all, a cinematic form that can be analyzed through almost all formal and stylistic cinematic parameters and theorized using many film studies approaches.”<sup>21</sup> She continues her article by observing that most of the existing work on animation focuses on repetitive, generic topics, but that while film theory can be used as theory for animation studies, “many chapters and articles on animation film lack specificity, and they tend to use idiosyncratic or tired, self-perpetuating canons to prove or disprove an element of cinema theory.”<sup>22</sup>

With her monograph *The Quay Brothers: Into a Metaphysical Playroom*, Buchan aims to contribute meaningfully to the field of animation by the standards set by her above. She does so by creating methodologies and approaches to the work of the Brothers Quay that combine film

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<sup>16</sup> Cholodenko, *Illusion*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998), vi.

<sup>18</sup> Moseley, *Hand-made Television*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Suzanne Buchan, “Animation, In Theory,” in *Animating Film Theory*, ed. Karen Beckman (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014), 115.

<sup>22</sup> *Idem*, 116.

theory and analysis with other disciplines such as linguistics, architecture and narratology.<sup>23</sup> However, Buchan's work on the Brothers Quay is limited in its impact as it falls prey to the same set of criteria that governs most scholarly reflection on stop-motion animation. As Moseley points out, in most available analyses, stop-motion animation is deemed worthy of academic attention if it is: 1) exclusively intended or suitable for adults; 2) perceived as either international, avant-garde or art; and 3) distributed as film.<sup>24</sup> By the same token, if stop-motion animation is specifically targeted at children, was produced nationally or locally, or is intended for television broadcast, it becomes a less attractive object of study for animation scholars.<sup>25</sup> Although Buchan is critical of work on animation that repeatedly bolsters the same canon, her work on the Brothers Quay does the same as it helps to perpetuate the focus on adult-oriented, avant-garde animated film, as she notes that "like many independent animation films, the Quay Brothers' films are not for children: they are adult-oriented, complex and experimental, and the experience of watching one of their works differs significantly from what is usually understood by the term 'puppet animation film.'"<sup>26</sup> As a result, while attempting to combat the 'tired, self-perpetuating canon' she describes in "Animation, in Theory," Buchan only helps to preserve a narrow scholarly understanding of animation.

With her focus on artistic animation for adult audiences, Buchan follows a longer line of scholars whose writing seems governed by this precise set of criteria. For example, Jayne Pilling begins her introduction to *A Reader in Animation Studies* by observing an increase in attention towards animation. According to Pilling, animation previously held a marginalised position, which has improved with the influx of an adult audience and an increase in academic recognition.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, she argues that this development has helped improve the recognition of animation as a medium that is not reserved for or relegated to the realm of children's entertainment.<sup>28</sup> While Pilling rightfully argues that animation does not necessarily need to be targeted at children, she also seems to suggest that animation was marginalised because of its popularity with a younger audience.

These examples showcase the weight given to factors like an adult audience, which suggests that animation for children is somehow less interesting or of little consequence for academic research. However, while children's animation has been marginalised, this has little to do with children as a study object. Works like *Children and Television: Fifty Years of Research* show that scholars have shown interest in child television audiences for over fifty years.<sup>29</sup> Instead, it seems likely that adult-oriented animation is simply considered to be more complex, while children's television animation is seen as uncomplicated and self-explanatory, which does not require further scrutiny or analysis.<sup>30</sup>

This is further reinforced in Wells' *Understanding Animation*, where he examines several case studies in developmental animation as part of his chapter on a theory of animation. Here, he discusses the influence of puppet theatre on puppet animation, which includes a brief overview of the work of the Czechoslovakian puppet-maker and animator Jiří Trnka. While discussing the

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<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Buchan, *The Quay Brothers: Into a Metaphysical Playroom* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxvi.

<sup>24</sup> Moseley, *Hand-made Television*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Buchan, *Quay*, xii-xiii.

<sup>27</sup> Jayne Pilling, ed., *A Reader in Animation Studies* (Bloomington, IN: John Libbey Publishing, 1997), 16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Norma Pecora, John P. Murray, and Ellen Ann Wartella, eds., *Children and Television: Fifty Years of Research* (Mahwah, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), xii.

<sup>30</sup> Moseley, *Hand-made Television*, 9.

impact of his work, Wells argues that “[i]t was in raising the technical and aesthetic status of the puppet-animated film that Trnka made his most valuable contribution, however, because this enabled the sub-genre of puppet animation to move away from being merely a quaint medium of children’s entertainment to become a medium which could support significant social and political meaning” (Wells 64). With his description of stop-motion animation for younger audiences, Wells displays the same pitfall as Buchan and Pilling; in their attempt to fill the lack of theorization surrounding animation, they reinforce the idea that animation as targeted at younger or national audiences is less worthy of scholarly attention.

This brief overview of the work conducted by scholars like Buchan, Pilling and Wells suggests that Moseley’s statement as presented in the introduction needs to be revised. It seems that it is not stop-motion animation that is out of reach for scholars, but that the terms pertaining to the perceived academic relevance of stop-motion animation limits the scholarly reach. Nonetheless, there are scholars who write about Aardman, despite the studio’s oeuvre consisting mostly of televised stop-motion animation that is suitable for children. The following will look more closely at how the scholars who do write about Aardman address the company.

## 1.2 | Marketing, Glocalisation and the Success of Aardman

In his book *Understanding Animation*, Wells devotes a sub-section of his chapter on animation theory to Aardman and their 1990 short film *Creature Comforts*. Before discussing their stop-motion animations, however, Wells spends a large portion of this sub-section on the history of clay animation by tracing stop-motion animation back to William Harbutt’s invention of Plasticine in 1897 and by listing several animators who produced early clay animations, including J. Stuart Blackton, Helena Smith Dayton and the Fleischer brothers. However, according to Wells, “it was not until Will Vinton’s Oscar-winning *Closed Mondays* (1974) and the trademarking of ‘Claymation’ in 1981 that clay animation was a fully consolidated, semi-industrialised, wholly recognised, sub-genre of animation.”<sup>31</sup>

In this extensive overview of clay animation, Wells eventually introduces Aardman by discussing the impact of their 1989 animated short film *Creature Comforts*. According to Wells, “Aardman developed the clay animation with documentary tendency,” meaning that the studio relied on real-life dialogue that formed the foundation for the stop-motion clay animated characters.<sup>32</sup> While *Creature Comforts* was one of Aardman’s first critically acclaimed animation films, Wells’ chapter glosses over their earlier work for children’s television programmes while simultaneously presenting this short film as indicative of their entire style and approach. This chapter also fails to discuss much of Aardman’s later work, with the exception of the reference to the Wallace & Gromit franchise when talking about visual jokes and style in *Creature Comforts*. Here, he argues that “[t]he ‘dynamics of dialogue’ that characterize orthodox animation are here substituted with the dynamics of monologue, carefully editing voices together for juxtapositional tonal and thematic effects. The result is an intrinsic ‘Englishness’ which, like his later Oscar winner, *The Wrong Trousers* (1993), featuring Wallace and Gromit, is gentle in tone, but ironic in style.”<sup>33</sup> While it is understandable that Wells does not present a thorough history of Aardman in this chapter, his almost sole focus on the critically acclaimed, Oscar-winning *Creature Comforts*

<sup>31</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Idem, 60.



and its unique style suggests that Wells prefers to stay within the academically safe realm of artistic, internationally lauded animation.

While Wells does attempt to engage with the actual animation by discussing its unique tone and style, other scholars focus on more peripheral matters including the company and its marketing strategies. One of these scholars is Maureen Furniss, who discusses audiences' identification with the characters as important for possible marketing opportunities. According to Furniss in her chapter on image design in the book *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, audiences identify more strongly with characters that are well-rounded and feature distinct, interesting personalities.<sup>34</sup> Viewers become more comfortable and feel stronger loyalty to characters that they identify with, which means that they will come back for new episodes and are likely to buy into corresponding merchandising.<sup>35</sup>

Furniss also applies her focus on character identification to the Wallace & Gromit franchise, by describing Wallace as "a self-assured but blundering inventor with an almost imperviously upbeat voice quality and somewhat restrained body movement. His words and actions reveal the character's obliviousness to the chaos around him and help to make him endearing."<sup>36</sup> She continues with a description of Gromit, a smart, capable and silent dog who uses a broad range of facial and physical movements to react to and solve various situations, leading her to conclude that viewers are more likely to identify with the dog, despite having no voice of his own.<sup>37</sup>

Like Wells, Furniss also focuses on *Creature Comforts*. However, unlike Wells, who focuses on the unique blend of a documentary-style monologue and clay animation technique, Furniss discusses the creation of characters and their personalities. She argues that *Creature Comforts* is a great example of how body movement and voice help to construct specific, unique personalities, like the example of the polar bear family who each have a distinct personality despite looking similar.<sup>38</sup>

Towards the end of *Art in Motion*, Furniss returns to Aardman in a chapter on the company's merchandising strategies. Instead of targeting children as companies like Disney do, Aardman targets a wider audience that includes adults, as the adult market is not as crowded.<sup>39</sup> Furniss also notes that short films that were produced in collaboration with British broadcasters like the BBC have been positioned internationally as theatrical releases instead of broadcast productions in order to raise the profile of the studio.<sup>40</sup> These marketing decisions about target audience and format help to transform the audiences' perception of the studio from a traditional outfit targeted at children to an international film studio that produces products that are suitable for adults.

As this marketing strategy overview suggests, Aardman would be a great candidate for scholarly reviews. As it targets an adult audience with animations that are released as film productions in international markets, it would seem likely that scholars would deem the studio's work appropriate and relevant for academic research. However, as this section continues to show, scholarly work on Aardman is sparse and limited in its scope. One possible explanation for this is that while Aardman intends to market their releases as films for an international, adult market, their predominant source of commissions is the British broadcasting industry. Because of this, the

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<sup>34</sup> Maureen Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics* (Bloomington, IN: John Libbey Publishing, 2007), 68.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Idem*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Idem*, 220.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

studio needs to broadcast their productions on television nationally before being able to release the animations in cinemas abroad.

This dichotomy between Aardman's local and global characteristics has been explored by Marian Quigley in her article "Glocalisation vs. Globalization: The Work of Nick Park and Peter Lord," where she outlines factors that contribute to the success of Aardman. Her article begins with a description of glocalisation, a concept that describes a global process or factor that simultaneously co-exists, contrasts and amalgamates with individual, local aspects to form a new heterogeneous phenomenon.<sup>41</sup> While glocalisation is rooted in the concept of globalisation, "a phenomenon involving cultural homogenization, whereby one societal or regional culture (notably America) dominates all others," globalisation interprets global and local factors as binary opposites in which the former dominates the latter. In contrast, glocalisation brings the global and local together to create a compound version.<sup>42</sup>

When examining Aardman through the lens of glocalisation, Quigley is able to point out several global and local processes and factors that make Aardman's approach to animation unique. For instance, the studio produces its animations locally in Bristol, not only outside the dominant sphere of Hollywood but also away from England's dominant media centre London.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Aardman has relied on collaborations and alliances with international financiers and distributors that enabled the production of feature-length projects and distribution on a global scale, as discussed further in section 3.4 of Aardman's history.<sup>44</sup> However, throughout this process, Aardman has made a distinct effort to retain its own style, language, humour and even stop-motion animated sensibility in order to prevent complete assimilation with its global allies.<sup>45</sup> As Chapter 3, and in particular section 3.4 will show, this process of glocalisation, where local production meets global funding and distribution, is not without its struggles for a company like Aardman that identifies itself through its own, often regional sensibilities, including its use of local accents and its reliance on understated British humour, as well as its distinct hand-made stop-motion aesthetic.

Despite mentioning multiple examples of glocalised practices, Quigley is careful to attribute the entire success of Aardman to glocalisation. Instead, she argues that its inclusion of both global and local factors has successfully helped familiarize audiences with Aardman's animations:

The success of the Aardman studio – and, in particular, the animated films of Nick Park and Peter Lord – reveals that the processes of glocalisation involve the generation of wider audiences for previously marginalized and/or localized media forms and that association of local and global media cultures may enable the growth rather than the destruction of diversity. Aardman Animations exemplify the contemporary media-cultural phenomenon that posits the global in the local and the local in the global.<sup>46</sup>

While Quigley mirrors Buchan, Pilling and Wells in describing animation as a media form that is marginalized, she does not consider this a reason to abandon her analysis. Instead of deeming animation unworthy of scholarly attention, Quigley acknowledges the growing popularity of animated films and uses glocalisation as a concept to understand this increase. At the same time,

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<sup>41</sup> Quigley, "Glocalisation," 61.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Idem, 62.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Idem, 64.

however, she points out that Aardman's success is rooted in a bigger movement, as it "reflects on a larger trend in the development of innovative animation in Britain, aided by the significant growth in college animation courses as well as funding from advertising agencies and television channels such as the BBC and Channel 4."<sup>47</sup> This funding provided by Channel 4 forms the main focus of the following two articles that aim to understand the impact of television on the animation industry, which will be addressed briefly in the following section.

### 1.3 | The Influence of the British Television Landscape

As the sections above have shown, literature on animation is sparse, especially regarding stop-motion and television animation, although recent analyses like Norris' 2014 overview of mainstream British television animation and Moseley's 2016 illustration of stop-motion children's television hopefully indicate a turning tide within animation studies. This shifting attitude towards the niche areas of animation studies is also promising for histories of Aardman. There are, in fact, already two analyses that bring Aardman and the British television landscape together, as the history presented in Chapter 3 of this research also aims to do. These works by Clare Kitson and Irene Kotlarz both discuss the impact of the British broadcaster Channel 4 on the British animation industry, in which they address Aardman as a company that has benefited from the channel's commissions. However, Kitson and Kotlarz's analyses present a number of issues that make them problematic for academic use. This section will briefly outline their arguments in order to illustrate the dominant discourse regarding Aardman's place within the British television landscape as well as discuss the problematic nature of Kitson and Kotlarz's research.

Kitson, who was Channel 4's Commissioning Editor of Animation from 1989-1999, presents an insider's perspective in her article "British Animation and Channel 4: The Role of Broadcasting in Nurturing New Talent and Creativity in the Animation Industry." This article discusses a brief history of the channel and outlines how Channel 4 has contributed to the animation industry by commissioning a range of projects from studios like Aardman. Unfortunately, Kitson is unable to provide a fully objective analysis due to her position at Channel 4, but the article still forms a useful starting point for understanding how the histories of Channel 4 and Aardman are interwoven.

For instance, Kitson points towards the inception of Channel 4. The creation of this new channel in 1982 was regulated by the British government, who determined that the channel needed to adhere to a specific remit that stipulated that the channel should provide varied, innovative content.<sup>48</sup> According to Kitson, this remit led to a support for short animated films by the then Chief Executive Officer Michael Grade, as "festivals in those days were entirely based on shorts. And Michael Grade, especially, was extremely keen on festival prizes, for these were considered evidence that we were fulfilling our remit."<sup>49</sup>

Kotlarz's article for the Animation World Network also focuses on Channel 4's support of the animation industry, although she uses her overview to outline a possible future of animation on Channel 4 following the departure of Clare Kitson as commissioning editor. Her overview is incredibly detailed and maps Channel 4's entire history in relation to animation from inception to the departure of Kitson. She even includes an overview of the climate that led to the creation of

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<sup>47</sup> Idem, 62.

<sup>48</sup> Clare Kitson, "British Animation and Channel 4: The Role of Broadcasting in Nurturing New Talent and Creativity in the Animation Industry," *Creative Industries Journal* 3, no. 3 (2010): 210.

<sup>49</sup> Idem, 211.

the channel and describes in detail which government officials and regulations were involved in the process leading up to the creation of Channel 4. The article concludes with a brief account of the future plans for animation on Channel 4 by Kitson's replacement Camilla Deakin.<sup>50</sup>

While similar in scope, there are some significant differences between the articles by Kitson and Kotlarz. Firstly, Kotlarz manages to reflect on Kitson's position at Channel 4 more objectively than Kitson herself is able to do. Furthermore, the articles differ in their inclusion of Aardman in the presented histories of Channel 4. Kitson only briefly mentions Aardman in relation to commissioned projects for the channel that led to innovative animation which helped Channel 4 fulfil its innovation-driven remit.<sup>51</sup> In comparison, Kotlarz devotes a larger part of her article to Aardman in a section on Channel 4's early commissions, in which she traces the earliest connection between Channel 4 and Aardman.<sup>52</sup> She even provides a detailed account of a meeting between Channel 4's founding chief executive Jeremy Isaacs and Aardman's founders David Sproxton and Peter Lord, who met at a reception hosted by entrepreneur and inventor Clive Sinclair.<sup>53</sup> This chance meeting led to an invitation to meet with the channel's original commissioning editor Paul Madden, after which Channel 4 commissioned works from the Bristol-based studio.<sup>54</sup>

Unfortunately, despite offering vivid accounts like these, the articles by Kitson and Kotlarz are not grounded in extensive research. While Kitson bases most of her article on her own experiences, and only sporadically refers to other sources, Kotlarz does not provide any references for her account at all, making descriptions like Sproxton and Lord's meeting with Isaacs merely hearsay. Although many parts do coincide with Kitson's account, which suggest that Kotlarz's overview holds at least some truth, there is no way of replicating her analysis or verifying her sources, which is the main issue with her account.

Ultimately, despite lacking sources, their work provides a helpful overview of some key intersections between Channel 4 and Aardman. It also suggests that a history of Aardman through the lens of the British television landscape would provide a valuable contribution to scholarly work on Aardman as well as to the fields of animation and stop-motion animation in general.

In order to avoid the pitfalls presented by Kitson and Kotlarz, a study on Aardman's history needs to be based on primary archival sources instead of word-of-mouth accounts or subjective, personal memories. To perform this research, it is necessary to acknowledge that despite its global strategies, Aardman is, first and foremost, a British company. Academic work in the form of archival research is therefore also bound to geographical limitations, as most sources will be gathered by British film archives. Fortunately, thanks to the development of online archives, it is possible to conduct archival research digitally. While the process of excavation in online archives seems the same as in traditional archives, the following section will examine some of the advantages and drawbacks of performing digital archival research and outline how a history like the one presented further on in this study may be affected by this use of contemporary archives.

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<sup>50</sup> Irene Kotlarz, "The History of Channel 4 and The Future of British Animation," *Animation World Network*, Sept. 1 1999, <https://www.awn.com/animationworld/history-channel-4-and-future-british-animation> (accessed July 8, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> Kitson, "British Animation," 213.

<sup>52</sup> Kotlarz, "History."

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

## 2 // Digital Archival Research

While online archives may appear to be a new phenomenon that is part of a contemporary digital research culture, computerised database systems in libraries have been in use for many years. Especially in the last two decades, researchers have become accustomed to systems like online public access catalogues (OPACs) and other locally-accessible online databases as replacements of card catalogues.<sup>55</sup> Over the years, these systems have grown from local networks within libraries to internationally accessible archives that connect libraries to researchers all over the world. This increase of mass digitization has led to what Janine Solberg describes in her 2012 article “Googling the Archive: Digital Tools and the Practice of History” as “an unprecedented scale” of digital research.<sup>56</sup>

While now a seemingly inevitable development that is rooted in pre-existing research practices like OPACs, this rise was both lauded and critiqued by several scholars who focused on digital libraries, online archives and electronic databases. This debate, which first started around 2000, illustrates the many advantages of digital systems for scholars as well as the disadvantages of creating, preserving and using digital surrogates or copies of original artefacts. The following will highlight the most prevalent parts of this debate and will conclude with a recommended course of action for this research in relation to the digital archives and databases used.

### 2.1 | Digital Surrogates in Archival Research

One of the recurrent arguments against the use of digital copies is the fear that the copy, as replacement of the original, is not authentic and thus may contain errors or mistakes that can affect research. Literature professor Ronald Schuchard argues that while a digital file may represent a source, it should never be replaced, as “replacement invites error, the primary enemy. The process of scholarly excavation is slow; faster is not better. He who uses digitization as a ready substitution rather than as a temporary tool accommodates error in his work.”<sup>57</sup> Schuchard’s view is echoed by other scholars, including historian Alexander Maxwell, who argues that while “images of the original document are essential[, p]aper originals keep their precedence, since digital images may be manipulated.”<sup>58</sup> While this is not necessarily done with malicious intent, the creation of digital copies does undoubtedly leave room for error. Without comparison with the original artefact or source, it is difficult to determine whether a copy is free from errors and manipulation, leaving scholars to either trust digital archivists’ good intentions and attention to detail or revert to traditional, physical archives.

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<sup>55</sup> Helen R. Tibbo, “Primarily History in America: How U.S. Historians Search for Primary Materials at the Dawn of the Digital Age,” *The American Archivist* 66, no. 1 (2003): 21.

<sup>56</sup> Janine Solberg, “Googling the Archive: Digital Tools and the Practice of History,” *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 15, no. 1 (2012): 72n4.

<sup>57</sup> Schuchard, “Excavating,” 59.

<sup>58</sup> Alexander Maxwell, “Digital Archives and History Research: Feedback from an End-User,” *Library Review* 59, no. 1 (2010): 28.

Albeit an important matter to consider when performing research using digital archives, this downside to digital copies has not halted the rise of these online systems, and even scholars like Schuchard acknowledge that there is a “need to find ways of wisely integrating the use of digital and physical forms.”<sup>59</sup> In order to do so, the following examines the accessibility and convenience of digital surrogates in contrast to the preservation and authenticity of original artefacts.

## 2.2 | Authenticity versus Accessibility

Perhaps the most pervasive argument in favour of electronic sources is the convenience of access. Thanks to the digitization of sources, scholars can explore different archives without worrying about practical issues like time, distance and money.<sup>60</sup> This is particularly the case when scholars are not close to the physical archives and libraries that are relevant for their research, which forces them to research topics that are literally close to home instead of conducting research that crosses borders. This improved practical access also allows scholars to engage differently with the online materials, as Rimmer et al. observe in their study on the physical and digital qualities of humanities research. There, they argue that digital resources “offer us convenient, fast access to a far wider selection of materials than we might expect in a physical library, often with additional facilities that enhance our interaction with the materials and allow us to engage with artefacts in more advanced ways (e.g. full text search).”<sup>61</sup>

While this improved accessibility offers scholars the opportunity to work through large volumes of sources, online archives can only contribute meaningfully to research if they are up to date. This makes preservation of electronic records one of the biggest issues regarding digital archives and databases. The rapid aging of technologies and media also make it more difficult and expensive to maintain digital archives, while faulty or dated systems “can damage the trust a scholar has in electronic resources.”<sup>62</sup> At the same time, digitization helps to preserve sources that may deteriorate over time, such as aging manuscripts and nitrate film reels. Because libraries and media archives exist to preserve these materials, the question is not whether we should digitize sources but how we should approach the preservation of both the original artefact and the digital surrogate, and how these digital copies should be used when conducting research.

This is echoed by Luciana Duranti in her article “The Impact of Digital Technology on Archival Science,” where she explores the connection between preservation and authenticity. She observes that the authenticity of original artefacts is guaranteed through preservation, the act of maintaining the object in its original format or medium, while the authenticity of electronic records is warranted through continuous refreshing of the medium. Here, Duranti observes that “digital information gets lost in a self-perpetuating and expensive cycle of obsolescence and incompatibility. As a result of media fragility and technological obsolescence, the term preservation as applied to electronic records no longer refers to the protection of the medium of the records, but to that of their meaning and trustworthiness as records.”<sup>63</sup> This suggests that in order to preserve artefacts, librarians and archivists must both maintain and digitize original sources. The maintained, preserved original is authentic precisely because it has not been

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<sup>59</sup> Schuchard, “Excavating,” 62.

<sup>60</sup> Jon Rimmer, et al., “An Examination of the Physical and the Digital Qualities of Humanities Research,” *Information Processing and Management* 44, no. 3 (2008): 1375.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Idem, 1390.

<sup>63</sup> Duranti, “Impact,” 46.

tampered with. The digitized copy of the original must then be refreshed constantly, both to maintain access and authenticity. Even though original sources may become obsolete over time, they retain value as the authentic source, which is why duplication is preferred over replacement. This improves access and helps to increase the shelf life of objects without eradicating the original, authentic source as long as the digital duplicate is refreshed and updated regularly.

## 2.3 | Expanded Excavation and Search Limitations

Digitization performed correctly can offer scholars global access to digitally preserved artefacts that have the potential to enhance research with new features, as already briefly addressed in the previous section by Rimmer et al. While Schuchard argues above that faster excavation is not better, Solberg finds in her research that speed positively affects research as it “creates an environment conducive to experimentation by lowering the stakes of trying out a risky idea, or testing a hunch, or pursuing a seemingly intractable question or subject.”<sup>64</sup> As online archives produce faster results and enable quicker search, scholars can examine and abandon research topics more quickly without wasting time, effort and money. According to Solberg, “this creates new habits, new ways of interacting with information, and new opportunities for serendipity as we move through texts.”<sup>65</sup>

Aside from speed, digital archives offer search methods that make it possible to process higher volumes of sources through methods like full text and keyword search. Although these methods are no longer considered innovative, as they are available to us in most everyday online activities, Michael Hancher points out that they have been game-changing for academic research.<sup>66</sup> In a more critical note, David Deacon warns that keyword searches work best for finding tangible topics, as opposed to abstract themes, as “there are certain topics that may be readily analysed via manual content searches, but which can never be captured through exclusive dependence on keywords. Furthermore, a failure to appreciate this limitation can potentially lead to erroneous conclusions.”<sup>67</sup> A similar but broader issue is highlighted by Helen Tibbo, who examines the use of repository websites as places to locate sources. In her article, Tibbo suggests that while online repositories, archives and finding aids may be efficient in use, they do not promote serendipity in happening upon materials from smaller collections.<sup>68</sup>

Deacon and Tibbo’s cautionary observations about keyword search and repositories help to see digital archives as a tool or an efficient means to an end with its own limitations in terms of scope of topics. Therefore, scholars should be aware of the additional options available and care must be taken to select the method that suits the aim of the research, instead of opting for familiar or more cutting-edge methods by default.

## 2.4 | Prestige of Substance or Form

Although it seems inconsequential, there is a prestige to printed materials amongst scholars that “is deeply embedded in the scholarly culture of the humanities, to the extent that scholars still

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<sup>64</sup> Solberg, “Googling,” 68.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Hancher, “Re: Search and Close Reading,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 118.

<sup>67</sup> Deacon, David. “Yesterday’s Papers and Today’s Technology: Digital Newspaper Archives and ‘Push Button’ Content Analysis.” *European Journal of Communication* 22, no. 1 (2007), 7.

<sup>68</sup> Tibbo, “Primarily History,” 23.

appear to rate printed items more highly than digital ones as objects of study.”<sup>69</sup> This deeply embedded prestige of print is not merely an innocent idiosyncrasy of scholarly culture, as it affects how digital sources are valued. Although the study by Rimmer et al. is not clear about the prestige attributed to traditional archives over their digital counterparts, it seems likely that alongside critical notes about speed and search methods, critics of online archives simply consider them to be second-rate.

Furthermore, the type of research that is conducted dictates whether form is more important than content. Many scholars simply require the information that the page contains, as opposed to the page itself, as Marilyn Deegan and Simon Tanner observe in their book *Digital Futures: Strategies for the Information Age*. According to Deegan and Tanner,

[f]ormat is only relevant when it impedes retrieval: if a book is available on a shelf nearby, then that would be as useful as an electronic text, but if the book is unique and is only available in physical form many thousands of miles away, then an electronic text will serve the purpose. The main goal of the . . . library is to find the shortest path between expression of an information need and its satisfaction, and also to provide the unexpected to the user.<sup>70</sup>

Especially when a scholarly examination focuses on specific topics instead of more general themes, format does not necessarily contribute value to the study. A research focusing on the life and writing process of an author may find interesting information hidden in the margins of their handwritten manuscripts, but a study on the style, genre or topic used by the author is merely concerned with the actual information in the manuscript, which may as well be accessed digitally.

Ultimately, the scope and aim of a study will determine whether digital copies will suffice or whether the original artefact is required, which echoes the recommendation given in the previous section on search limitations. In both cases, it is necessary to determine the most suitable approach for the study at hand. This flexibility required by the researcher suggests that neither digital nor physical materials or approaches are the only answer to a study. Instead, there is a fundamental complementarity to the digital and physical form and it is vital to academic research in the humanities that we find ways of integrating both.

## 2.5 | Critical Engagement

In order to facilitate this integration, online archives need to become integral parts of research, as accepted points of departure and as valid resources for materials, whilst taking in account the limitations of digital surrogates for research. This process is already taking place thanks to the ubiquity of digital sources and search methods for current graduate students. According to Tibbo, “[b]ecause today’s graduate students are the first cohort of historical researchers who have a significant corpus of electronic finding aids available to them as well as ubiquitous Web access on university campuses, we expect to see them embracing digital resources to a greater extent than their predecessors.”<sup>71</sup> Even if students are dissuaded from using digital materials by professors who prefer print sources, the digital practices that students have become accustomed to in their personal lives will inevitably flow over into their research habits.

<sup>69</sup> Rimmer et al., “Examination,” 1387.

<sup>70</sup> Marilyn Deegan and Simon Tanner, *Digital Futures: Strategies for the Information Age* (New York: Library Association Publishing, 2002), 62-3.

<sup>71</sup> Tibbo, “Primarily History,” 14.



Aside from stimulating the integration of online practices in research, it is important to establish a mode of critical engagement, in which scholars are able to reflect on the use of digital resources. In order to do so, Solberg offers ‘proximity’ as a lens through which to reflect critically on a research process.<sup>72</sup> According to Solberg,

This principle draws from the idea that researchers tend to choose research subjects that are in one way or another “close” to them. This closeness is threaded through existing scholarship—from the observation that we may be more drawn to research subjects we like, admire, or identify with; to the idea that our research questions emerge from present-day teaching practices; to the fact that the burdens of travel to distant archives may make some subjects or lines of inquiry more appealing while discouraging or curtailing others.<sup>73</sup>

In her work, Solberg discerns three types of proximity: geographical, affective and virtual. Geographical proximity is described as a lens that reflects on the physical distance between a scholar and the sources used for the research, and the possible influence of location and geography on this research. Issues surrounding geography can be practical limitations that may influence researchers to alter their research questions in order to suit their geographical location, although, as pointed out above, these issues can be remedied by the use of online archives. Solberg points out that examinations of geographical issues act as a reminder that “research is an “embodied activity, whether online or off. And . . . even online searches can be affected by the physical location of that embodied activity.”<sup>74</sup>

The following type of proximity identified by Solberg is affective proximity, which she describes as motivations that fuel a researcher, whether intellectually or emotionally, and affect the approach that the researcher adopts. With this lens, Solberg aims to observe and critically reflect upon researchers’ personal values, interests, identifications and experiences that influence topic selection, setup and execution of research.<sup>75</sup>

The final type of proximity is virtual proximity, which describes the virtual nearness of sources through finding aids and other search technologies. According to Solberg, “[t]he more visible or discoverable the source, we might say, the more “proximate” it is. Proximity in this sense could be a measure of the searchability of a digital object, an indication of the density of metadata connected to that object, or a function of how the Google search algorithm ranks the object in its results (based on the searches of other users, for example).<sup>76</sup>

These three types of proximity each help to understand and critically reflect on research in general, and on digital archival research in particular. By asking how geographical, affective and virtual proximity influence researchers and their research, it is possible to unearth the implications of using digital sources as well as uncover motives to do so. With this tool, it is possible to move beyond the question of what digital archives are, and instead focus on how to engage with them in a meaningful way.

The following chapter will present a history of the British animation studio Aardman that has been constructed through online archives. Following Solberg’s plea for critical engagement, the section after the study will reflect on the process of digital archival research. This part will be used to examine how the advantages and limitations of digital sources as listed above have affected the history of Aardman. Furthermore, the three types of proximity as outlined above will

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<sup>72</sup> Solberg, “Googling,” 67.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Idem, 68.

be used to examine the aspects that have shaped this research. Finally, this chapter will offer an update of the overview presented in this section through current examples of online archive usage. Ultimately, the aim of this reflection is to further expand the acceptance of digital sources in the humanities, as well as promote critical awareness regarding the implications of digital sources.

## 3 // A History of Aardman in the British Television Landscape

This history will look at Aardman Animations through four decades of stop-motion animation production, from the earliest collaborations in the 1970s to their most recent productions, in order to outline its growth as a company and determine how developments in the British television landscape contributed to the longevity of the studio.

### 3.1 | Aardman's Origins and Children's TV in the 1970s

Aardman Animations was founded by Peter Lord and David Sproxton, who met each other at Woking Boys' Grammar School in Surrey at the age of 12.<sup>77</sup> They bonded over a mutual passion for cartoons like Hanna-Barbera's *Top Cat*, which soon led to their own kitchen-table endeavours.<sup>78</sup> Their first film was called "Trash" and was shot using a 16mm cine-camera that belonged to Sproxton's family.<sup>79</sup> Sproxton's father showed the film to one of his colleagues, a producer for the BBC, who encouraged the boys to produce more film with the promise of a potential purchase if they liked the work.<sup>80</sup> This resulted in the character animation Aardman, which was made using a traditional hand-drawn animation technique called cel animation.<sup>81</sup> This Superman-style character originated from a cartoon drawn by Lord, who was known at school for his prolific output of cartoons and stories,<sup>82</sup> and the resulting animation was eventually bought by BBC producer Patrick Dowling.<sup>83</sup> Although it was not created with stop-motion clay animation, which would later become their signature style, this Aardman sequence was an important first step for Sproxton and Lord as it would lend its name to the studio and kickstart the earliest traces of Sproxton and Lord's careers.

After this first commission, Sproxton and Lord registered the name Aardman Animations in 1972.<sup>84</sup> However, despite often being cited as the founding year of the studio, it was not until 1976 that the animators officially launched the studio, which celebrated its forty-year anniversary in 2016.<sup>85</sup> During the period between 1972 and 1976, Sproxton and Lord completed university studies in different cities, although they remained in contact and produced animations in the summer to give them some spending money.<sup>86</sup> During this period, they continued to create work together for the BBC in the form of animated short films for BBC's children's programme *Vision*

<sup>77</sup> Geoffrey Macnab, "Aardman Animations at 40," *The Independent*, June 22, 2016, n.p.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Rachele Thackray, "Me and My Partner: David Sproxton and Peter Lord," *The Independent*, Dec. 6, 2000, 8.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Bridget Byrne, "Sneak Preview: On the 'Run,'" *Boxoffice*, Apr. 1, 2000, 46.

<sup>82</sup> Macnab, "Aardman Animations," n.p.

<sup>83</sup> Thackray, "Me and My Partner," 8.

<sup>84</sup> Macnab, "Aardman Animations," n.p.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Thackray, "Me and My Partner," 8.

*On*, which was presented by Pat Keysell and her co-presenter Tony Hart.<sup>87</sup> When the programme was cancelled in 1977, it was succeeded by the BBC children's art programme *Take Hart*, featuring Hart as the main presenter.<sup>88</sup> Following their animated shorts for *Vision On*, Sproxtton and Lord were also offered a contract for *Take Hart*, which inspired a move to Bristol where the programme was recorded.<sup>89</sup> According to Sproxtton, "Bristol seemed a good place to go. We said, 'we're going to see if this works for a year and if it doesn't, we'll go back to stacking shelves.'" <sup>90</sup> The contract for *Take Hart* allowed them to continue producing animations and when Dowling asked the duo to come up with a little desktop character that would add interest to the show, Morph was born.<sup>91</sup> Although this animated plasticine character was Sproxtton and Lord's first professional stop-motion clay animated production, Morph turned out to be relentlessly popular with audiences, and the amorphous orange character that accompanied Hart on *Take Hart* was soon given a spin-off series by the BBC called *The Amazing Adventures of Morph* in 1980, followed by many other appearances and series, often alongside Hart.<sup>92</sup>

### 3.1.1 | A Changing Attitude towards Television

Although Sproxtton and Lord's start in children's television programming seems fortuitous, it appears less arbitrary in light of a larger development in the British television landscape that arose during the 1970s. Aardman was founded in a period in which the attitude towards television culture and the approach to television production was in transition. Throughout the 1970s, television increasingly became the subject of political debate and regulation, which created a more reflective attitude towards television amongst viewers, the government and within the television industry itself.<sup>93</sup> As a result, the industry became more aware of the power that the medium harnessed as a communicative tool to bridge the gap between society and the individual, which led to more varied television programming. The expansion of genres and the advancements in televisual technologies, in particular, helped broadcasters address and provide for individuals and niche groups.<sup>94</sup>

To some extent, these developments permeated all areas of British television programming, including television geared towards children. For instance, with *Vision On*, the BBC aimed to cater to both hearing and deaf children by relying strongly on dialogue-free visuals and animation in order to make the programs more accessible.<sup>95</sup> In 1977, *Take Hart* continued this trend with its focus on art and the inclusion of segments featuring Aardman's non-speaking Morph, which used visual gags to entertain the audience.<sup>96</sup> This diversification of the content and focus of the television landscape and the applicability and versatility of animation meant that Sproxtton and Lord's early animations came at a great time and in the right place.

This shifting televisual culture and the early commissions from the BBC would have a great impact on Aardman's formative years. As Lord points out, "[w]e made contact with BBC Television

<sup>87</sup> Anthony Hayward, "Tony Hart: Inspirational Artist and Television Presenter," *The Independent*, Jan. 20, 2009, 40.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Macnab, "Aardman Animations," n.p.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Thackray, "Me and My Partner," 8.

<sup>92</sup> Hayward, "Tony Hart," 40.

<sup>93</sup> Laurel Forster, "1970s Television: A Self-conscious Decade," in *British Film Culture in the 1970s: The Boundaries of Pleasure*, ed. Sue Harper and Justin Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 86.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Hayward, "Tony Hart," 40.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

very early on and it has been an important relationship. It has seldom been intimate, but without it we would never have got to first base.”<sup>97</sup> BBC’s initial interest in Sproxton and Lord would also have a knock-on effect for the animation industry in Bristol according to Andy Leighton, a producer at the Bristol-based animation studio bolexbrothers. In 2005, Leighton reflected on the history of Bristol’s animation industry by arguing that “[w]ithout Morph and the BBC I doubt if there would have been an Aardman or a bolexbrothers or a Bristol animation industry.”<sup>98</sup>

While these developments in themselves may not, perhaps, have brought Aardman to where they are more than forty years later, the BBC’s commissions for *Vision On* and *Take Hart* came at a time in which the attitude towards television was in transition, creating momentum that would lead to additional commissions from the BBC and other British broadcasters.

Over the course of the 1970s, the transitioning attitude towards television intensified and eventually culminated in governmental regulation that paved the way for the creation of a new British television channel that would provide diversity through the transmission of independent television programmes.<sup>99</sup> As a direct result of the debates that characterised the 1970s, this new channel called Channel 4 would not only stimulate the production of non-commercial public-interest television in general, but also provide a further boost for the British animation industry and help Aardman diversify its body of work, which forms the next part of Aardman’s history.

## 3.2 | Animated Shorts and Channel 4 in the 1980s

After their productions for *Vision On* and *Take Hart*, Sproxton and Lord produced two animated short films for the adult-oriented BBC series *Animated Conversations*, which were called “Down and Out” and “Confessions of a Foyer Girl.”<sup>100</sup> Both films, which were respectively broadcast by BBC Two in 1979 and 1980, featured stop-motion clay animated characters that lip-synched to overheard real-life conversation.<sup>101</sup> While seemingly original, Lord points out that Aardman did not invent this combination of interview soundtrack and animation, which he instead attributes to animator John Hubley.<sup>102</sup> Even so, Aardman’s first venture into animated short films for adults proved to be a success for the duo and “Down and Out,” in particular, was well-received at international film festivals and garnered Aardman’s first critical acclaim, winning the Animation Award at the 1981 Melbourne Film Festival and being voted 10<sup>th</sup> Best Short at the Sydney Film Festival in 1981.<sup>103</sup>

### 3.2.1 | Broadcasting Act 1980

During this time, the British television landscape was undergoing fundamental change with the addition of Channel 4. The increase in debate and regulation in the 1970s had now reached a

<sup>97</sup> Stuart Kemp, “20 Years of Aardman Animation: Supermodellers,” *Screen International*, May 24, 1996, 17.

<sup>98</sup> Michael Burns, “Bristol Gets a Grip on Animation,” *Broadcast*, May 19, 2005, n.p.

<sup>99</sup> Forster, “1970s Television,” 86.

<sup>100</sup> There is little information about *Down and Out* and *Confessions of a Foyer Girl*, and on the commission of Sproxton and Lord for these films by BBC Bristol. The British Film Institute archive lists them as two animated short films that were produced by Aardman and BBC Bristol, and categorises them as part of BBC’s *Animated Conversations* series.

<sup>101</sup> “Television/Radio.” *The Guardian*, Mar. 13, 1979, 28, and “Television/Radio.” *The Guardian*, Feb. 12, 1980, 24.

<sup>102</sup> Kevin Jackson, “Interview / Animated Speakers,” *The Independent*, Oct. 15, 1990, 13.

<sup>103</sup> “Sydney Festgoer’s Top Choice: East Germany’s ‘Die Verlobte,’” *Variety*, June 1, 1981, 7, and “‘N.Y. Story’ Gets Jury Nod, Audience Pan at Melbourne,” *Variety*, June 15, 1981, 29.

tangible legislative point when the Broadcasting Act 1980 passed under guidance of Margaret Thatcher's newly instated Conservative leadership.<sup>104</sup> As a result of this bill, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) was given permission to provide a second commercial television service, which would exist alongside the public-service channels BBC One and Two and the commercial ITV network. Eventually, two years after the bill had been passed by the British government, this fourth channel aired for the first time on November 2, 1982 under the name Channel 4.<sup>105</sup>

It was not the first time that governmental legislation had been created to add a terrestrial channel to the British television landscape. The commercially funded ITV network aired for the first time in 1955, following the passing of the Television Act 1954.<sup>106</sup> Like Channel 4, this service had been set up under guidance of a national body that organised commercial television in Britain, in this case IBA's predecessor, the Independent Transmission Authority (ITA).<sup>107</sup> In theory, this meant that programmes for ITV were required to be informative, educative and entertaining as determined by the ITA.<sup>108</sup> In practice, however, ITV's programming was limited by how popular a programme was amongst viewers, as this determined ratings, which, in turn, affected the advertising opportunities that formed the financial foundation of the network.<sup>109</sup>

Instead of precisely following in the footsteps of ITV's commercial funding strategy, it was determined through the 1980 bill that Channel 4 would become a hybrid model that was funded commercially whilst offering a public service to diverse audiences through its programming at the same time.<sup>110</sup> Financially, this meant that Channel 4 would not be funded by its own advertising but would instead be supported by regional ITV contractors. In return for their funding, the contractors would make money using Channel 4 to sell advertising in their respective regions.<sup>111</sup>

Alongside the funding structure, the programming of the channel was also covered by the 1980 bill, which determined that Channel 4 would not produce its own programmes but would instead commission them from production companies. As Channel 4 was to embody public service television, the nature of the commissions was also set out by the bill, which meant that Channel 4 was to adhere to a specific remit.<sup>112</sup> In order to fulfil their remit, Channel 4 was to serve special interests that were not covered by ITV's programming, and the programming itself needed to be "innovative in content and form."<sup>113</sup> Roughly speaking, this meant that Channel 4 catered to three general groups of viewers: cultural viewers who enjoy classic arts, high-brow media and in-depth discussions; special interest viewers who enjoy niche sports and hobbies not covered by the other channels; and ethnic viewers, including Afro-Caribbean and Asian viewers, who became a more prominent part of society from the 1950s onward.<sup>114</sup>

At this point, the true impact of this remit on the animation industry could not yet be fully determined, but speculation arose nevertheless with *Variety* observing in 1982 that "[d]espite the economic gloom that clouds much of Britain's film industry, animation in the U.K. is enjoying a boom. Most London studios report they have never been busier and with the advent of the new

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<sup>104</sup> Georgina Born, "Strategy, Positioning and Projection in Digital Television: Channel Four and the Commercialization of Public Service Broadcasting in the UK," *Media, Culture & Society* 25, no. 6 (2003): 778.

<sup>105</sup> Andrew Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 206.

<sup>106</sup> *Idem*, 90.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Idem*, 206.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Idem*, 208.

<sup>113</sup> Dorothy Hobson, *Channel 4: The Early Years and the Jeremy Isaacs Legacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008) 133.

<sup>114</sup> Crisell, *Introductory History*, 270.

independent television network, Channel 4, and the prospect of cable and video outlets, more pilots are in the pipeline than ever before.”<sup>115</sup>

### 3.2.2 | Aardman and Channel 4: A Mutually Beneficial Arrangement

For Aardman, the conception of Channel 4 would prove to be more than vital, as Lord himself points out in 2000, where he argues that “[c]rucial to us later on, after we'd formed Aardman, was the advent of Channel 4 in the early 1980s. We'd done the Morph series by then, and yet curiously everything stopped after that, so much so that we were thinking of giving it up. Then David introduced himself to the head of the channel, Jeremy Isaacs, at a party. Eventually C4 commissioned us to do five short films.”<sup>116</sup> This meeting between Sproxtton and Isaacs led Aardman to Paul Madden, Channel 4's first commissioning editor for animation, which would become the start of a mutually beneficial working relationship between Aardman and Channel 4.

With hopes of conforming to the remit, Madden was appointed the commissioning editor who would be responsible for Channel 4's animation programming with the aim of catering to the group of viewers that preferred artistic, high-brow media.<sup>117</sup> Madden's first commission was for Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman*, now considered a classic Christmas animation, and he filled his position in a freelancing capacity until Clare Kitson took over his role as commissioning editor in 1989.<sup>118</sup> Looking back in 1992, Madden says that he did what he did “with animation because of what the channel was about at the time. We had to do things that were different. I felt that animation has been given a raw deal until then – it wasn't just about kids' cartoons. There was an amazing array of material that television audiences just weren't getting to see.”<sup>119</sup>

With the aim of bringing more sophisticated animation to its viewers whilst simultaneously fulfilling its remit, Madden commissioned Sproxtton and Lord to produce five animated shorts in a series that would be called *Conversation Pieces*.<sup>120</sup> These animations emulated the style of “Down and Out,” which allowed the duo to continue the lip-synch style used previously for BBC's *Animated Conversations*.<sup>121</sup> The five Channel 4 shorts, “Sales Pitch,” “On Probation,” “Palmy Day,” “Late Edition,” and “Early Bird,” were aired on consecutive nights between October 31 and November 4, 1983 in celebration of Channel 4's one-year anniversary.<sup>122</sup> The shorts were well-received by public and professional viewers alike, resulting in a special award for technical achievement for “Late Edition” at the 1985 Los Angeles International Animation Celebration.<sup>123</sup>

Having gathered more critical acclaim for their work and being recognised for their adult-oriented animation, Sproxtton and Lord's studio was doing well professionally. However, the production scale required to create Channel 4's shorts was bigger than any of the projects that the duo had ever worked on, which meant that they were continually short-handed. Nearing the end of production for *Conversation Pieces* in 1983, Sproxtton and Lord chose to hire Richard Golezowski, who became the first official employee of the studio.<sup>124</sup> The addition of Golezowski

<sup>115</sup> “Britain Films: New Customers Keep Britain's Animators Busy; Varied Fare,” *Variety*, 13 Jan., 1982, 192.

<sup>116</sup> Thackray, “Me and My Partner,” 8.

<sup>117</sup> Bob Swain, “Quick on the Draw,” *Broadcast*, June 5, 1992, 20.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Kemp, “20 Years of Aardman,” 17.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> See television listings by Sandy Smithies in the *Guardian* between Oct. 31 and Nov. 4 1983.

<sup>123</sup> “Winners unveiled at animation fest,” *Variety*, Oct. 16, 1985, 95.

<sup>124</sup> Adam Dawtrey, “Golezowski to Helm Aardman's ‘Hare,’” *Daily Variety*, Dec. 21, 1999, 16.

was the first step in Aardman's expansion as a studio and it meant that Sproxtton and Lord were able to take on new challenging projects, which would soon follow thanks to Channel 4.

After the success of *Conversation Pieces*, Madden commissioned another animated short from the Aardman animators for a Channel 4 series of animated short films called *Sweet Disasters*.<sup>125</sup> This series, which revolved around the theme of nuclear disaster, was produced by David Hopkins and had been given a budget of approximately £200,000, which would be spread over the five productions.<sup>126</sup> In a 1986 *Broadcast* article that prefaced the airing of the series, Hopkins noted that "[t]he coherence of the series comes from the unifying content and not the visual style. It is an attempt to make animation grow up in a way that parallels dramatic productions, short stories and novels."<sup>127</sup>

Aardman's contribution to the series came in the form of "Babylon," an ambitious animated short consisting of around fifty models that depict a gala of arms dealers that goes awry.<sup>128</sup> Despite the addition of Golezowski, however, the project was such a high-reaching production that the team needed more hands to complete the many animation models. This led Sproxtton and Lord to Nick Park, who was struggling to finish his final animation project at the National Film and Television School (NFTS).<sup>129</sup> Park, whose introduction to Aardman would greatly influence the future of the studio later on, first came on board as a part-time employee in 1985 in order to help the team finish "Babylon."<sup>130</sup> Finally, with Park's help, the *Sweet Disasters* short aired on Channel 4 on May 4, 1986.<sup>131</sup> Later in the year, the studio's hard work also paid off professionally when "Babylon" was met with critical acclaim at the Canadian International Animation Festival in October 1986, where it won the Public's Popular Prize.<sup>132</sup> This made Channel 4's second commission from Aardman another success, which was great news for both the channel and the studio.

### 3.2.3 | Animation on Television

Like *Variety* did in 1982 and Lord did in 2000, many articles present Channel 4 as the driving force behind the British animation industry and Aardman's growth as a company by extension. For instance, according to Bob Swain in a 1992 article for *Broadcast*,

C4 is usually singled out as the key factor for its longstanding support of creative animation in the UK. It is impossible to deny that the channel has helped to develop a culture where such programme making is thriving. The fruits of earlier efforts are now being seen, with BBC 2 also now playing an important role in the commissioning of animation and the latest C4 season set to be one of the most impressive so far.<sup>133</sup>

However, although it is appealing to make such statements in which Channel 4 is presented as the long-awaited saviour of the British animation industry, it is problematic in that it glosses over animation's history with television prior to Channel 4, as well as its relationship with viewers.

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<sup>125</sup> Roma Felstein, "Animation: Short and Sweet Way to New Techniques," *Broadcast*, Jan. 31, 1986, 18.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> David Sproxtton, "Sidelines," *Broadcast*, May 24, 1996, 19.

<sup>130</sup> Graham Vickers, "Profile: Model Master," *Broadcast*, April 1, 1994, 16.

<sup>131</sup> Sandy Smithies, "Television," *The Guardian*, May 3, 1986, 26.

<sup>132</sup> Howard Beckerman, "Animation Spot: Hamilton '86 Comes Alive," *Back Stage*, Oct. 24, 1986, 45.

<sup>133</sup> Swain, "Quick on the Draw," 20.



While the commissioning of Aardman's animated shorts by both the BBC and Channel 4 is undoubtedly indicative of the shifting attitude towards animation that had started in the 1970s and continued over the course of the 1980s, animation already shared some history with the British television landscape prior to this development. Therefore, in order to understand how British television animation was affected by Channel 4, it is necessary to briefly examine the situation prior to the 1970s.

The conception of the ITV network in 1955 played one important role in shaping the relationship between the animation industry and the British television landscape, as its arrival both rejuvenated and depreciated British animation through its adverts, jingles and idents.<sup>134</sup> The demand for commercial work meant that other narrative-driven projects in the 1950s were sidelined, with studios focusing on the lucrative advertising business instead.<sup>135</sup> Creatively speaking, this was not necessarily a negative development for animation in the beginning, as animators were not restricted in their artistic freedom when producing commercial work. Looking back at this period in 1979, Bob Godfrey describes this as having "more of a free hand in those days as the agency art director took a far less important part in the concept and design of the commercial."<sup>136</sup> This changed at the start of the 1960s when advertisers began to creatively control their investments, which resulted in productions that were conceptually and artistically less challenging.<sup>137</sup>

Another factor that determined animation's role on television was the television schedule, which catered to 30-minute-long programmes.<sup>138</sup> This meant that most animated shorts were too short to fill a slot but were too long to fill small gaps in the schedule, and any shorts that could be aired were often purchased from the United States.<sup>139</sup> The only area where animation flourished not as a schedule-filler but as a narrative-driven medium was children's television programming. As a result, viewers strongly associated televisual animation with either advertising or children's television shows like *The Pingwings*, *Clangers* and *Thunderbirds*.<sup>140</sup> This perception limited the animation industry in its creative output throughout the 1960s and most of the 1970s and was only alleviated towards the start of the 1980s when the shift in attitude towards television brought forth change like Channel 4's innovative remit.<sup>141</sup> After much discussion and governmental legislation, channels were finally interested in broadcasting home-grown content, such as the innovative animated shorts that were commissioned from Aardman by Channel 4 and the BBC, as the broadcasters could serve them to culturally-minded viewers.

### 3.2.4 | Commercial Television: Music Videos and Advertising

The innovative nature of Aardman's animation as showcased by series like *Conversation Pieces* also offered possibilities for other areas of television, including advertising and music videos. Aardman's first foray into music videos was their animated contribution to the 1986 song "Sledgehammer" by Peter Gabriel. The video, which combined live action and animation segments, was directed by Stephen Johnson and offered Aardman the opportunity of working alongside the

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<sup>134</sup> Norris, *British*, 22.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Nicola Lockey, "A Voyage of Discovery," *Broadcast*, Apr. 2, 1979, 20.

<sup>137</sup> Norris, *British*, 26.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Idem*, 27.

<sup>140</sup> Moseley, *Hand-made Television*, 6.

<sup>141</sup> Norris, *British*, 28.

Brothers Quay, two animating twin brothers from the United States.<sup>142</sup> The “Sledgehammer” video was considered a ground-breaking video and was lauded with several awards including five MTV Music Awards in 1986,<sup>143</sup> and an award for the best video at the British pop awards in 1987.<sup>144</sup> Their second music video was commissioned by Charly Records, who were reissuing Nina Simone’s version of “My Baby Just Cares for Me.”<sup>145</sup> Aardman’s video interpretation of the song, in which the studio refashioned Nina Simone as a feline clay-animated jazz singer, also received critical acclaim when it won the First Prize for Promotion Film/Video at the Ottawa International Film Festival in October 1988.<sup>146</sup>

With their music video productions, Aardman proved that their work was not limited to artistic narrative-driven animated shorts or children’s programs, and instead could work equally well for mainstream commercial purposes, just like animation had done in the 1960s. The music videos, which would air on television through programmes like *Top of the Pops*, highlighted the commercial attractiveness of Aardman’s animations, which resulted in commissions for various television adverts from companies like Cadbury’s and Lurpak.<sup>147</sup> A few of these commercials were even recognised and celebrated internationally, including “The Guardian Puppets,” an advert for the *Guardian* newspaper that featured crude marionettes juxtaposed with a smoothly flowing, string-free puppet, which won the company the award for Best Animated Commercial at the French Annecy Animation Festival in 1987.<sup>148</sup> Two years later, Aardman won the same prize at the Annecy ’89 for their commercial “Hang Glider,” which had been commissioned by the butter manufacturer Lurpak and featured a Morph-like character gliding over a table, dangling from a hang glider made from a triangle of toast.<sup>149</sup>

Above all, the television commercials were a great source of income for the animation studio, and whatever was earned was reinvested in equipment.<sup>150</sup> Although the international recognition and critical acclaim that the studio received for their shorts, music videos and commercials helped to put the studio on the map award by award, none of it immediately translated into a cash flow, which made it necessary for the studio to continue producing television adverts. Aardman’s reliance on these commercial productions in the 1980s indicates that despite the transition that the British television landscape had undergone since the 1960s, animation studios like Aardman still needed to produce commercial work in order to exist, let alone thrive.

On top of that, while a welcome addition to their portfolio, the adverts were far from smash-hit productions, which is what the studio really needed in order to grow within the industry. So far, British television broadcasters had given the studio its all-important break, a continuous income and a platform with which to reach a broader audience, but what it needed now was a hit, and the next commission by Channel 4 at the end of the 1980s would allow Aardman’s part-time employee Park to create exactly that.

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<sup>142</sup> Kemp, “20 Years of Aardman,” 17.

<sup>143</sup> “Features Popping Up at British Animated Studios,” *Variety*, Feb. 25, 1987, 166.

<sup>144</sup> Fitzpatrick, Eileen. “Animators Take Low-Tech Style Sky-High,” *Billboard*, Apr. 12, 1997, 51.

<sup>145</sup> “Date Set for Philips CD Video Player,” *Broadcast*, Sept. 11, 1987, 25.

<sup>146</sup> Howard Beckerman, “Animation Spot: Ottawa ’88 Comes Alive,” *Back Stage*, May 4, 1988, 45.

<sup>147</sup> Woolf, Jenny. “FILM/British Invasion, Part Two,” *The Independent*, Apr. 19, 1991, 19.

<sup>148</sup> Howard Beckerman, “Animation Spot: Annecy ’87,” *Back Stage*, June 10, 1987, 34.

<sup>149</sup> Howard Beckerman, “Animation Spot: Annecy ’89,” *Back Stage*, July 27, 1989, 51.

<sup>150</sup> Thackray, “Me and My Partner,” 8.

### 3.3 | Nick Park and the Wallace & Gromit Franchise in the 1990s

Following the work on “Babylon,” Park officially joined Aardman as an animator in 1985. His interest in animation had started many years earlier when he watched television programmes like *Clangers* as a child.<sup>151</sup> This interest was further piqued by the discovery of the single-frame button on his father’s camera and using this camera, he experimented with frame-by-frame illustrations.<sup>152</sup> This led to his early animated short “The Rat and the Beanstalk,” a simple short that featured a rat climbing up a beanstalk and drinking cider.<sup>153</sup>

After his first attempts, Park moved on to stop-motion animation as he found it easier to do, which resulted in the stop-motion animation “Walter Goes Fishing.” This short film featured Walter the Rat, who consisted of cotton bobbins, and a worm that was made from plasticine.<sup>154</sup> Telling the story of Walter, who goes fishing with his worm companion, this animated short showcases Park’s early promise as an animator both in terms of narration and style, and provides a glimpse of what is yet to follow. According to Park, his early work was already a hit with viewers as he describes that “[w]hen the school found out I did this, they insisted I show them at assembly. People loved it, which was great because I loved making people laugh, but wasn’t much by way of a performer.”<sup>155</sup> His greatest feat as a teenage animator would come in 1975, when the BBC aired his animated short “Archie’s Concrete Nightmare” when Park was 17 years old.<sup>156</sup>

After encouragement from his parents, Park enrolled in a Communication Arts degree at Sheffield Polytechnic, and after completing his degree, he continued his education in 1980 at the NFTS in Beaconsfield, London.<sup>157,158</sup> Looking back in 1994, Park speaks positively of his experience at the NFTS as the school taught him valuable information about films: “I gained a lot from the live-action element, learned a lot as a filmmaker. Because I do regard myself as a filmmaker rather than an animator. I want to tell stories, not just make pieces of animation.”<sup>159</sup> He continues his praise of the NFTS as fertile breeding ground for his dream of becoming a filmmaker by noting that “[i]t was well worth going because it really gave me a chance to show what I could do . . . Otherwise I would never have made *A Grand Day Out* because I wouldn’t have had the money. Although I was being offered animation work at the time, what I really wanted to show was that I could direct.”<sup>160</sup>

Park was finally able to showcase his talents as a director at the NFTS when he started working on his graduation film “*A Grand Day Out*,” featuring a middle-aged inventor and his dog.<sup>161</sup> In the film, the duo called Wallace and Gromit run out of cheese and decide to build a rocket for an eventful trip to the moon, being under the impression that the moon is made of cheese.<sup>162</sup> On developing these characters, Park describes finding drawings of the duo in his sketchbooks

<sup>151</sup> Jim White, “One Man, His Dog and Two Oscars,” *The Independent*, Apr. 4, 1994, 18.

<sup>152</sup> Vickers, “Profile: Model Master,” 16.

<sup>153</sup> “Austin Powers,’ Blair Witch’ To Test the Buying Power of Teen Market,” *Billboard*, Sept. 18, 1999, 107.

<sup>154</sup> White, “One Man,” 18.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Stuart Kemp, “Model Animator,” *Screen International*, May 24, 1996, 17.

<sup>157</sup> Vickers, “Profile: Model Master,” 16.

<sup>158</sup> Beth Porter, “Oscar Nominee Park Brings Sly Wit to Animated Shorts,” *The Film Journal*, Mar. 1, 1994, 20.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Vickers, “Profile: Model Master,” 16.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> Porter, “Oscar Nominee,” 20.

from his Sheffield days, although Gromit was not a dog but a cat in the early drafts.<sup>163</sup> Unfortunately, the project proved to be more ambitious than Park had anticipated and he found himself unable to finish the film. By the time that the animator was asked to work for Aardman in a part-time capacity, he had been at the NFTS for five years trying to complete “A Grand Day Out.”<sup>164</sup> Sproxtton and Lord, who were introduced to the budding animator at the NFTS, promised to help Nick finish his project by giving him access to equipment in Park’s spare time. In return, Park would contribute to their ongoing projects. Amongst other animations, this resulted in a memorable contribution to the Peter Gabriel music video “Sledgehammer,” which featured two head- and featherless dancing chickens.<sup>165</sup> His work for Aardman turned out to be to Sproxtton and Lord’s liking, and soon Park was asked to work on newly commissioned work as well, including a series of animated shorts that were commissioned by Channel 4 in the late 1980s called *Lip-Synch*.<sup>166</sup>

Thanks to the help supplied by Aardman, Park eventually finished “A Grand Day Out” in 1989.<sup>167</sup> His project turned out to be a massive hit with both viewers and members of the animation industry, leading to his first Bafta Award for Best Animated Film and the award for Best Animated Film over 15 Minutes at the British Animation Awards in 1990.<sup>168,169</sup> On top of that, the Academy Awards nominated Park’s graduation film for the Best Short Animated Film award.<sup>170</sup> While “A Grand Day Out” did not take home the prize, Park was still awarded the Oscar for “Creature Comforts,” an animated short directed by Park in the *Lip-Synch* series.<sup>171</sup>

### 3.3.1 | At the Academy Awards: “Creature Comforts” and “A Grand Day Out”

It was Madden’s last commission for Channel 4 when he asked Aardman to create five five-minute films which would later be called the *Lip-Synch* series.<sup>172</sup> Like previous series of animated short films by Aardman, this series consisted of stop-motion clay animated characters lip-synching to a soundtrack that was recorded in real life, a technique that also tied the various shorts together as a series.<sup>173</sup> *Lip-Synch* was a collaboration between the different animators at Aardman and consisted of “Going Equipped,” “Next,” “War Story,” “Ident,” and “Creature Comforts.” While Golezowski’s “Ident” and Lord’s “Going Equipped” did not receive critical acclaim, *Lip Synch* was generally well-received by the industry, leading to several international film festival awards in the following year. This included “Next,” also known as “Next – The Infinite Variety Show,” which was created by Aardman-employee Barry Purves and featured William Shakespeare performing all of his works free of dialogue in five minutes, which won Purves the Direction Award for Best Technical Achievement in Animation at the British Animation Awards in 1990.<sup>174</sup> Another prize-winner was “War Story,” a surreal comedy by Lord that was based on an interview with a former

<sup>163</sup> White, “One Man,” 18.

<sup>164</sup> Thackray, “Me and My Partner,” 8.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Kemp, “20 Years of Aardman,” 17.

<sup>167</sup> White, “One Man,” 18.

<sup>168</sup> Porter, “Oscar Nominee,” 20.

<sup>169</sup> Angus Finney, “British Animation Awards: No Mickey Mouse Stuff,” *Screen International*, Dec. 1, 1990, 6.

<sup>170</sup> “1990 Academy/Bafta Nominations: Oscar Nominations,” *Screen International*, Feb. 22, 1991, 10.

<sup>171</sup> “Academy Award Winners.” *Variety*, Apr. 1, 1991, 5.

<sup>172</sup> Kemp, “20 Years of Aardman,” 17.

There is little information available about the *Lip Synch* series. The British Film Institute archive does not list the series as a whole but does list each of the five shorts as part of the series.

<sup>173</sup> Kemp, “20 Years of Aardman,” 17.

<sup>174</sup> Finney, “British Animation,” 6.

war-time munitions worker, which won the award for the best production under 10 minutes and honours for the best animation at the Ottawa International Animation Festival in October 1990.<sup>175</sup> The big winner, however, was Park's Oscar-winning "Creature Comforts," which featured a range of zoo animals commenting on their lives and living arrangements. Aside from "A Grand Day Out," which was technically an NFTS production, "Creature Comforts" was Park's first independent production at Aardman. However, despite being his directorial debut at the studio, the animated short won the Academy Awards' Best Short Animated Film award as well as a range of other international awards, including the 1990 Mari Kuttina Award for Animation at the British Film Institute (BFI) Awards,<sup>176</sup> two prizes at the 1990 British Animation Awards,<sup>177</sup> and the first-ever Cartoon D'Or, the Golden Cartoon award, which was created by the European Community's Cartoon (ECC) initiative at Annecy '91.<sup>178</sup>

The ingenuity of "Creature Comforts" not only attracted critical acclaim, but also yielded more work for the studio in the form of advertising. While Aardman had been asked to produce commercials following the success of early adverts like "The Guardian Puppets" in 1987, it was the first time that an advert acted as a spin-off of one of their animations. The adverts, which were created as a campaign for Heat Electric, were commissioned by the GGK agency in order to promote electric heating and home appliances.<sup>179</sup> Just like "Creature Comforts" and many of Aardman's other animated shorts, the adverts relied upon a combination of interview-style soundtrack and stop-motion animation, which allowed Aardman to create clay-animated animal characters that lip-synch to interviews with real people.<sup>180</sup> However, unlike the animals in the Oscar-winning "Creature Comforts" short, who talked about their living arrangements while depicted in zoo environments, the creatures in the "Heat Electric" adverts talked about heating in their homes while mostly depicted as pets, so as to promote electric heating. When the adverts aired in 1991, they were very well-received by the public and the industry. Two of the adverts in the campaign even garnered critical acclaim, winning Aardman the special jury award for "Heat Electric Frank" and "Heat Electric Pablo" at Annecy '91.<sup>181</sup>

### 3.3.2 | Animation Initiatives and Wallace & Gromit Sequels

The success of Park's work, and in particular the Oscar nominations and win, heralded a new era for Aardman. Their latest shorts also proved to be popular with viewers at home when Channel 4 aired "A Grand Day Out" on Christmas Eve 1990.<sup>182</sup> This transmission followed a month after the channel chose to broadcast "Creature Comforts" on November 30, 1990 as part of *Four-Mations UK*, a nine-day season on Channel 4 that was devoted to animation.<sup>183</sup> The season was a Channel 4 initiative that followed the work that Madden had set out in the early 1980s and acted as a platform for new British animators.<sup>184</sup> As the season turned out to be a success, *Four-Mations* would become a recurrent feature for the channel, leading to a five-week extension of the season

<sup>175</sup> "Soviet Film Wins Prize," *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*, Oct. 9, 1990, n.p.

<sup>176</sup> Patricia Dobson, "Henry V wins BFI Awards," *Screen International*, Oct. 27, 1990, 5.

<sup>177</sup> Finney, "British Animation," 6.

<sup>178</sup> Jeremy Coopman, "Brit Cartoonists Ride a Hot Streak," *Variety*, May 27, 1991, 60.

<sup>179</sup> Emily Bell, "Equity: Drama Out of a Crisis," *The Observer*, Jan. 13, 1991, 35.

<sup>180</sup> Jackson, "Interview / Animated Speakers," 13.

<sup>181</sup> Michael Williams, "Market Keeps Many from Fest at Animation Meet," *Variety*, June 10, 1991, 39.

<sup>182</sup> Sandy Smithies, "Christmas Eve Television Guide," *The Guardian*, Dec. 24, 1990, A15.

<sup>183</sup> "Television Diary," *The Stage and Television Today*, Nov. 29, 1990, 24.

<sup>184</sup> Sandy Smithies, "Watching Brief," *The Guardian*, Nov. 24, 1990, A44.

in May 1992.<sup>185</sup> Thanks to its continuing success, Channel 4 resumed the *Four-Mations* season with “Four-Mations: Winners” in 1993, a twelve-week season of animations that again included Park’s “Creature Comforts.”<sup>186</sup>

Channel 4’s *Four-Mations* season shows that the initial support that was given to the British animation industry following the channel’s special remit continued over the years, with the channel continuing to cater to niche viewers by providing creative content and narrative-driven shorts. However, while the channel’s support of animation had been and would be vital to the industry, Channel 4 was not the only supportive broadcaster. In 1992, *Screen International* observed that “[a]lthough new finance and co-production initiatives are all the time coming on line – First Film Foundation, Channel 4’s Experimentia, BBC Bristol’s 10 x 10 – the prime source of finance continues to be TV networks such as Thames, Central, Granada, S4C and the BBC.”

To further the cause of animation, BBC created the Animation Initiative in 1991, which would be run by BBC Bristol and BBC’s chief of animation Colin Rose. This initiative was meant to stimulate the production of high-quality animation by commissioning animated films that were both suitable for adult and family audiences from independent animation companies.<sup>187</sup> The BBC considered its support of the animation industry to be a long-term investment, with the hope of eventually being able to broadcast more mature content than that of the existing children’s programmes on television.<sup>188</sup> For this reason, following their own initiative and the success of “A Grand Day Out,” BBC Bristol commissioned a sequel from Park for BBC Two called “The Wrong Trousers.”<sup>189</sup>

This joint venture between Aardman, BBC Bristol, BBC Lionheart Television and BBC Children’s International took a considerably shorter period of time to make than “A Grand Day Out,” totalling a period of 13 months instead of over six years.<sup>190,191</sup> This drastic cut in production time was managed thanks to a bigger budget, made available by BBC’s Animation Initiative, as well as a team of professional animators who were at Park’s disposal. In the end, the production of Park’s animated short costed approximately £500,000 and required a team of ten people, who were supported by a number of freelancers.<sup>192</sup>

“The Wrong Trousers,” which features Wallace and Gromit of “A Grand Day Out” on their second adventure, tells the story of an innocent-looking lodger called Feathers McGraw, a penguin who uses a pair of techno-trousers to force Wallace to unwittingly commit a diamond robbery. In terms of narrative and style, the film brings to mind Hitchcockian films and B-movie-thrillers, and even features a high-speed train chase in the finale that is reminiscent of John Ford movies like *Stagecoach*.<sup>193</sup> With these elements, “The Wrong Trousers” was perfect for adult audiences, while the cartoonish style, humour and visual gags made the short accessible for children. This was perfect for BBC’s initiative, as the film was suitable for both children and adults and was produced by a team of local British animators.

Just like Aardman’s animated shorts in the 1980s, “The Wrong Trousers” was a definite success with the industry. The short, which premiered early as a sneak preview at Annecy ’93 in June, won a whole range of prizes and awards, including two prizes at the 1994 Indies Awards,

<sup>185</sup> “Television News: Four-Mations UK Extended,” *The Stage and Television Today*, May 28, 1992, 20.

<sup>186</sup> “Animation Gets Long Run on C4,” *Broadcast*, Apr. 23, 1993, 15.

<sup>187</sup> Burns, “Bristol Gets a Grip,” n.p.

<sup>188</sup> Theresa Fitzgerald, “Drawing on Initiative,” *Screen International*, Mar. 6, 1992, 16.

<sup>189</sup> “Animation Put in The Frame,” *The Stage and Television Today*, Nov. 28, 1991, 18.

<sup>190</sup> Robin Buss, “Arts: Animation: Creatures Great and Small,” *The Independent*, Nov. 7, 1993, 34.

<sup>191</sup> “Small-screen Salvation,” *Screen International*, May 13, 1994, 26.

<sup>192</sup> Vickers, “Profile: Model Master,” 16.

<sup>193</sup> Porter, “Oscar Nominee,” 20.

the 1994 Bafta award for Best Short Animated Film and the Cartoon D'Or.<sup>194,195</sup> Like Park's previous work, "The Wrong Trousers" was nominated for and eventually awarded the 1993 Oscar for Best Short Animated Film. When "The Wrong Trousers" finally aired on BBC Two over the Christmas period in 1993, it also proved to be a ratings success for the BBC and a hit with viewers.<sup>196</sup> The short drew around 3.2 million viewers during its Christmas television premiere and was the most-taped program in years with an estimate of 1.5 million recordings, according to research by the BBC.<sup>197</sup>

### *BBC Commissions Second Sequel*

While the success of "The Wrong Trousers" upon release of the film was unprecedented, the knock-on effect it had for the studio was equally impressive. Thanks to the second Oscar win and third nomination for Park, Aardman attracted the attention of big companies, including The Walt Disney Company. As early as 1994, the American entertainment conglomerate talked with the studio about producing a feature-length film featuring Wallace and Gromit.<sup>198</sup> However, as the studio did not feel ready to produce such a film at the time, they declined Disney's offer.<sup>199</sup> Instead, they chose to produce a third Wallace & Gromit short with more financial support from the BBC.<sup>200</sup> This short, called "A Close Shave," would be another animated short of around thirty minutes and would feature Wallace and Gromit on their third adventure.<sup>201</sup>

In "A Close Shave," Wallace and Gromit are window cleaners who are joined by Shaun, a sheep who accidentally wanders into their home. The duo and Shaun get caught up in a cattle raid after Wallace and Gromit clean the windows of a wool shop owned by potential love interest Wendolene, who turns out to rustle sheep on the side. The film ends with a high-paced finale in which Wallace, Gromit and a load of sheep are almost turned into dogmeat. Like "The Wrong Trousers," this third short film featuring Wallace and Gromit was completed in a fraction of the time it took to produce "A Grand Day Out." According to Park, it took approximately 18 months to finish the film from script to screen and, in order to meet the Channel 4's Christmas deadline, a team of over forty people worked on six sets at the same time during this period.<sup>202</sup> Thanks to this set-up, Aardman eventually met the deadline, with "A Close Shave" airing on Christmas Eve 1995 on BBC Two.<sup>203</sup>

Like its predecessors, "A Close Shave" was a hit with viewers and critics alike. According to the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB), the film drew BBC Two's best audience of 1995, with an estimated 10.6 million viewers tuning in to watch Aardman's short film.<sup>204</sup> Following its triumph on television, BBC Worldwide managed to sell the animated short to 28 international broadcasters, including Germany's ZDF, Italy's RAI and the United States' channel Fox.<sup>205</sup> Park's animated short also did well on the film festival circuit, with its most prestigious prize being Park's third Oscar win for Best Short Animated Film at the Academy Awards in

<sup>194</sup> "Television News." *Broadcast*, Mar. 31, 1994, 24.

<sup>195</sup> Kemp, "Model Animator," 17.

<sup>196</sup> Simon Croft, "Animate Objects: Aardman Animations," *Screen International*, May 28, 1993, 13.

<sup>197</sup> Derek Elley, "Trousers' Wearing Well in U.K.," *Variety*, June 20, 1994, 39.

<sup>198</sup> David Wood, "Disney in Film Talks with Park," *Broadcast*, Apr. 15, 1994, 9.

<sup>199</sup> Andy Klein, "Park: Oscar's Shorts King," *Variety*, June 24, 1996, 92.

<sup>200</sup> "Aardman's Third Course," *Broadcast*, July 22, 1994, 5.

<sup>201</sup> Carl Franklin, "Aardman Up for an Oscar After British Awards Win," *Broadcast*, Feb. 16, 1996, 11.

<sup>202</sup> Klein, "Park: Oscar's Shorts King," 92.

<sup>203</sup> "News Desk: BBC Celebrates New Year Ratings Triumph," *Broadcast*, Jan. 5, 1996, 2.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> "Close Shave Snapped Up," *Broadcast*, Apr. 26, 1996, 5.

1996.<sup>206</sup> The film also did well at the British Animation Awards in 1996, winning the awards for Best Scenario, Best Film over 15 Minutes, the Public's Choice awards for Funniest Film and Best Film.<sup>207</sup> Towards the end of that year, "A Close Shave" was even awarded an Emmy in the category Popular Arts, giving Aardman its first television award.<sup>208</sup>

Over a period of five years, Park's three films featuring Wallace and Gromit had evolved into a fully-fledged film franchise that aired in seventy territories and had merchandising agents in twenty-five territories.<sup>209</sup> Thanks to all the recognition and resources that Aardman reaped following the release of Park's three films, the studio no longer needed to be at the mercy of benefactors like the advertising industry and television broadcasters. But while Aardman was finally in a place where their work had become a sought-after commodity, meaning that talks about feature-length films with companies like Disney could be reignited, Aardman continued to work on whatever projects came their way, as they had done with *Vision On*, *Conversation Pieces* and even Peter Gabriel's "Sledgehammer." This approach had served Aardman well in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, and would continue to be their preferred mode of operation in the 1990s. This meant that even though the resources generated by the Wallace & Gromit films could have been pooled into one ambitious project, the studio instead chose to work on several smaller projects while producing Park's films, resulting in a range of commercial work and commissioned shorts by other Aardman directors. Despite being well-received, these productions are often glossed over due to the fact that they do not measure up to the Wallace & Gromit franchise in terms of prestige, popularity and size. However, they are a small but vital part of Aardman's history as they would help to lay important foundations for the future of the studio.

### 3.3.3 | Channel 4 Commissions and the Broadcasting Act 1990

Although slightly overshadowed by Park's success, the 1990s was a productive decade for Aardman. Whilst simultaneously producing the Wallace & Gromit films, the studio released a number of commissioned shorts and commercials by the hands of different Aardman directors. This strategy, in which they combined commercial and commissioned work with their desire to produce independent films, gave the studio its own identity within the animation industry. In an early interview in 1990, Lord argues that he believes their combination of commercial and independent work makes them unique: "[t]here are some strictly cottage industry outfits of just one or two people producing independent films almost the whole time, like the Quay brothers, who are wonderful; and there are people who just do commercials, but I think we're about the only company that combines the two."<sup>210</sup>

Thanks to this unique identity, Aardman was able to cater to all areas of British television, which led to the studio being commissioned to create characters like Morph, commercials like Lurpak's "Hang Glider" and creative animated shorts like "Creature Comforts." Veteran animators like Lord and Golezowski took on a part of the influx of commissions while Park worked on the Wallace & Gromit shorts, but the studio still needed to hire more animators to take on the new work. During this period, Aardman hired a number of professionals and new animators, including Steve Box and Peter Peake, who brought along ideas for short animated films and continued to produce great animations for the studio in the years to come.

<sup>206</sup> "Double Top for BBC 2 at Academy Awards," *Broadcast*, Mar. 29, 1996, 8.

<sup>207</sup> Franklin, "Aardman Up for an Oscar," 11.

<sup>208</sup> "1996 Intl. Emmy Award Finalists," *Variety*, Nov. 25, 1996, 54.

<sup>209</sup> Virginia Robertson, "Nick Park Stays Put in Bristol," *Kidscreen*, Dec. 1, 1997, 18.

<sup>210</sup> Jackson, "Interview / Animated Speakers," 13.



Most of the commissioned work consisted of animated shorts for Channel 4, whose *Four-Mations* seasons continued to run in support of British animation.<sup>211</sup> This meant that a majority of animations created by Aardman in the 1990s was commissioned by a British broadcaster; the Wallace & Gromit shorts were commissioned by the BBC and most of their other work was commissioned by Channel 4. With all the projects at hand, independent work was less of a priority, although Aardman still managed to produce their own animations. One of these independently produced animated shorts was “Adam.” Directed by Lord at the start of the 1990s, “Adam” is a dialogue-free animated short depicting the interactions between the first person on the planet and the actual hand of God. The short was broadcast on April 5, 1992 by BBC Two and was nominated for a Bafta in the same year.<sup>212</sup> In 1993, the film was also nominated for an Academy Award for Best Short Animated Film, giving Aardman its third Oscar nomination in total.<sup>213</sup>

After “Adam” and the success of Park at the Academy Awards two year prior, Aardman was commissioned to produce a number of animated shorts. In 1993, Channel 4 commissioned a short by new hire Boris Kossmehl called “Not Without My Handbag.” This animated short, which depicts a lady who inadvertently sells her soul to the devil when she falls behind on her payments for her hire-purchase washing machine, received the award for best animation at the 24<sup>th</sup> Tampere International Short Film Festival in 1994.<sup>214,215</sup> Three years later, Kossmehl’s short was released on a home entertainment video alongside shorts like Park’s “Creature Comforts” and Lord’s “Adam.” The video, which was released by the American Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment company, was available to the public from October 21, 1997.<sup>216</sup>

This home entertainment video also featured “Wat’s Pig,” another animated short that was directed by Lord. The short, which was commissioned by Channel 4 and was released in 1996, depicts the lives of royal twins who become separated at birth.<sup>217</sup> The short film made its UK debut at the Cardiff International Animation Festival in 1996 as part of a programme that celebrated Aardman’s twenty-year anniversary.<sup>218</sup> The programme not only featured “Creature Comforts” and “Morph” as part of the line-up, but also included the UK debut for the animated short “Pop” by Aardman’s new animator Sam Fell.<sup>219</sup> In February of the following year, “Wat’s Pig” was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Short Animated Film, which brought the total of Oscar nominations for the studio to six, with “The Wrong Trousers” and “A Close Shave” responsible for the intervening years between Lord’s “Wat’s Pig” and “Adam.”<sup>220</sup> Eventually, Lord’s 1996 animated short also became available to television audiences on March 19, 1998 when Channel 4 aired the animated short as part of their recurring *Four-Mations* series.<sup>221</sup>

### 3.3.4 | “Stage Fright,” “Hum Drum” and the Deregulation of Channel 4

Despite the success of these animations, commissions from Channel 4 started to dwindle towards the end of the 1990s. The steady stream of commissions from the broadcaster had trickled down

<sup>211</sup> “Television Thursday,” *The Guardian*, Mar. 19, 1998, A24.

<sup>212</sup> “The Observer Television & Radio: Thursday,” *The Observer*, Apr. 5, 1992, 72.

<sup>213</sup> “1993 Academy Award Nomination Checklist,” *The Film Journal*, Mar. 1, 1993, 57.

<sup>214</sup> Deborah Young, “Brit Pix Big at Shorts Fest in Finland,” *Variety*, Mar. 21, 1994, 35.

<sup>215</sup> Ruth Hessey, “Animated Anarchy,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, Apr. 5, 1996, 15.

<sup>216</sup> Eileen Fitzpatrick, “Fox to Fill Demand for ‘Creature Comforts,’” *Billboard*, Oct. 11, 1997, 80.

<sup>217</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Animators,” 51.

<sup>218</sup> Steven Lowe, “Cardiff Animation Draws the Best.” *Broadcast*, Apr. 5, 1996, 5.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> “Channel 4 Films Vie with Patient for Oscar Honours,” *Broadcast*, Feb. 14, 1997, 5.

<sup>221</sup> “Television Thursday,” A24.

to some promotional work, a few short films and a final late-night television series. Amongst other works, this resulted in the shorts “Stage Fright” and “Humdrum,” and a series of twenty-two five-second idents that were directed by animator Luis Cook.<sup>222</sup> Cook, winner of two prizes at the British Animation Awards for his adverts “Smartipants” and “Knobs in Space,” used a combination of live-action and animation segments to create the idents, which would be broadcast in the spring of 1996.<sup>223</sup>

In the following year, Aardman released Steve Box’s “Stage Fright,” one of their last animated short films for Channel 4 in this decade. Box had previously acquired work experience as an animator at Aardman whilst working on “The Wrong Trousers” alongside Park.<sup>224</sup> After animating Feathers McGraw in the second Wallace & Gromit film, Box was asked to work with Park again on “A Close Shave,” this time for the animation of Wendolene.<sup>225</sup> However, despite his wealth of experience as an animator on successful productions like the Wallace & Gromit films, Box was yet to direct his own animated short. This changed when Channel 4 commissioned the 1997 eleven-minute animated short “Stage Fright,” which tells the story of Tiny, a vaudeville dog juggler who battles with a movie star villain when he steals one of Tiny’s dogs. The film went into world-wide premiere at the San Sebastián Film Festival on September 19, 1997.<sup>226</sup> The following year further showcased the success of Channel 4’s commission, with Box’s work being nominated for a British Animation Award in February 1998 and winning a Bafta for Best Animated Short Film in the same year.<sup>227,228</sup>

Channel 4’s last commissioned animated short in the 1990s was “Humdrum.” The short was directed by Peter Peake, who was responsible for the 1994 animated short “Pib and Pog,” which focused on two characters who repeatedly decimate each other in a series of excessive stunts.<sup>229</sup> “Humdrum” was released in 1998 and depicts the story of two shadows that play shadow-puppets together. In 2000, the animated short was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Animated Short.<sup>230</sup> While the film did not win the Oscar, it did take home the Public Choice award for Favourite Film at the British Animation Awards in the same year.<sup>231</sup>

### *Broadcasting Act 1990*

Considering the excellent reception of Aardman’s high-quality award-winning animations for Channel 4, it seems strange that commissions from the British broadcaster decreased. To understand this development, it is necessary to look at changes throughout this decade that affected both the British television landscape in general and Channel 4 specifically. A factor that had great impact on both was the Broadcasting Act 1990. Ten years after they instated the fourth British television channel, the British government approved a bill that would effectively end the duopoly of public service broadcasting and commercial television that marked the television landscape from 1955 up to this point. The effect of the bill on the landscape was threefold. Firstly, through the Broadcasting Act 1990, the government decided that the ITV network would no

<sup>222</sup> “Broadcast in Production: Showcase,” *Broadcast*, Mar. 8, 1996, A20.

<sup>223</sup> Franklin, “Aardman Up for an Oscar,” 11.

<sup>224</sup> Buss, “Arts: Animation: Creatures,” 34.

<sup>225</sup> “News: Article,” *Broadcast*, Sept. 19, 1997, 5.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> “News in Brief: Contenders Line Up for British Animation Awards,” *Broadcast*, Feb. 13, 1998, 12.

<sup>228</sup> “News in Brief: Aardman and Celtic Scoop Bafta Film Awards,” *Broadcast*, Apr. 24, 1998, 6.

<sup>229</sup> Stephen Holden, “A Plasticine Pair Tangled Up with A Cruel Mutton Maker,” *The New York Times*, Apr. 10, 1996, 13.

<sup>230</sup> Marc Graser, “AtomFilms Ignites with Oscar Noms,” *Daily Variety*, Feb. 16, 2000, 32.

<sup>231</sup> “Robbie Wins by A Nose in Animation Awards.” *Broadcast*, Mar. 17, 2000, 10.

longer need to be regulated by a board like the IBA.<sup>232</sup> Secondly, a fifth terrestrial channel would be instated, which would eventually lead to the launch of Channel 5 in 1997.<sup>233</sup> Finally, the bill determined that Channel 4 would no longer be dependent on ITV, which meant that it would need to sell its own advertising space.<sup>234</sup>

The effects of the bill on Channel 4 were significant. Alongside its other stipulations, the Broadcasting Act 1990 specified that Channel 4 needed to continue creating programmes for audiences that the ITV channel did not cater for. This meant that the channel could not depart from its special interest remit, so its programming remained public service-based. At the same time, however, the channel was no longer able to obtain its source of income from the regional ITV contractors that sold commercials for Channel 4, as stipulated by the Broadcasting Act 1980. Instead, from the start of the 1990s onwards, the channel became dependent on its own stream of commercial revenue.<sup>235</sup>

This deregulation of Channel 4 meant that, for the first time, a broadcaster with a public service remit was required to attract commercial advertisers in order to provide an income. Although the bill was designed in such a way that Channel 4 would build up a reserve fund as a safety measure that they could rely on if the terrestrial revenue level of 14% was not reached, they would still need to sell adverts to create excess revenue to supplement this fund in the first place.<sup>236</sup> As this convergence of commercial funding and a public service remit was unprecedented in the British television landscape, expectations were low. However, Channel 4 managed to make the new funding structure as stipulated by the Broadcasting Act 1990 a success, with over 95% of the revenue gathered from advertising.<sup>237</sup> One of the factors that played an important role in this success was that, unlike commercial broadcasters like ITV, Channel 4 was not required to turn over any dividends to shareholders.<sup>238</sup> On top of that, the channel chose to focus on a younger, wealthier and lighter audience.<sup>239</sup> This helped to attract specific advertisers, but also impacted the channel's special interest remit. While, financially speaking, Channel 4 was successful in being able to adjust to the new stipulations of the British government, its new audience focus meant that Channel 4 was less likely to broadcast innovative programmes that appealed primarily to niche viewers. Subsequent shifts in Channel 4's programming also reflect this development, with entertainment programming rising from 25.5% to 31%, while arts and music programmes decreased from 4% to 2.3% between 1992 and 1993.<sup>240</sup> Although Channel 4 did not abandon their remit completely, as they continued to cater for special interest viewers to some extent, its focus on animation and aim of encouraging the local production of animation decreased throughout the decade and tapered down to one last commission, a late-night television series called *Angry Kid*.

### 3.3.5 | Comedy TV for Adults and the Digital Switch-Over

The decrease of commissions from Channel 4 did not slow down Aardman's production of animations but instead simply meant that the baton of animation commissions was passed to the

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<sup>232</sup> Valerie Swales, "Television in The United Kingdom," in *Television in Europe*, eds. James A. Coleman and Brigitte Rollet (Bristol: Intellect Books, 1997), 24.

<sup>233</sup> *Idem*, 25.

<sup>234</sup> *Idem*, 24.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> *Idem*, 25.

<sup>237</sup> *Idem*, 32.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

other broadcasters. In this period, Aardman produced work like the television series *Rex the Runt*, which was directed by the studio's veteran animator Golezowski. The main character Rex first surfaced in Golezowski's sketchbook in 1991 as a counteraction to the smooth, sleek commercials he was working on for the studio.<sup>241</sup> Despite being the exact opposite of Aardman's bread-winning work, the studio agreed to fund two pilots, which would lead to two animated short films called "Rex the Runt: Dinosaurs" and "Rex the Runt: Dreams."<sup>242</sup> These animated shorts, which featured Rex and three of his canine friends in a range of different adventures, were well-received from the start and were nominated for the Mari Kuttna Award for Animation at the BFI Awards in 1992.<sup>243</sup> Three years later, Aardman was reported to be working on the *Rex the Runt* series, which would be suited for an adult audience and would most likely be picked up by the BBC.<sup>244</sup> After several years of production, *Rex the Runt* premiered at the Cardiff International Animation Festival in 1998 and was broadcast on BBC Two in the winter of that year.<sup>245</sup>

While a seemingly smooth journey for Golezowski and his character Rex, it looked uncertain at the time that Aardman's first television series would actually go into production. Golezowski intended to produce *Rex the Runt* as an adult animation, which was a relatively untapped market at the time, making it difficult to sell the format to broadcasters. Aardman finally succeeded in 1996, when BBC's animation producer Colin Rose commissioned thirteen ten-minute episodes.<sup>246</sup> This proved to be another hurdle for the veteran animator, as the current scripts were half the length. According to Golezowski, this had an enormous impact on the series, as "[i]n a five-minute episode, you can get away with a stream of consciousness, but in 10 minutes you need a plot . . . It turns into something not so off-the-wall."<sup>247</sup> The final hurdle facing the project was financial. After spending a £125,000 on the initial development of the series,<sup>248</sup> Aardman budgeted £1.3 million for the production of the *Rex the Runt* series.<sup>249</sup> However, they were only able to provide £400,000, with the BBC providing an additional 25%.<sup>250</sup> With a little over half of the budget covered, their animation financier EVA Entertainment brought in the children's publisher Egmont Imagination from Denmark to balance out the rest of the budget so production of the series could go ahead.<sup>251</sup>

Despite Aardman's initial struggles with *Rex the Runt*, the series was met with critical acclaim. In 2000, Golezowski's series won the Animation Award at the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Indie Awards at the BBC Television Centre,<sup>252</sup> while the episode "Rex the Runt: Stinky's Search for A Star" was nominated for an award in the category for animation programmes at the Banff Rockie Awards.<sup>253</sup> In the same year, Aardman was commissioned by the BBC to produce a second series of *Rex the Runt* involving another thirteen ten-minute episodes.<sup>254</sup> On top of that, both series were sold in multiple overseas territories including the United States. There, it was bought by television producer Lorne Michaels, who obtained both the North American licensing and merchandising

<sup>241</sup> Alice MacAndrew, "TX Rex the Runt," *Broadcast*, Dec. 11, 1998, 26.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> Louise Bateman, "Book Opens on BFI Awards," *Screen International*, Sept. 18, 1992, 7.

<sup>244</sup> "Aardman Produces First Series For TV," *Broadcast*, Sept. 15, 1995, 8.

<sup>245</sup> Chris Fuller, "Growing Up Fast," *Broadcast*, June 19, 1998, 16.

<sup>246</sup> MacAndrew, "TX Rex the Runt," 26.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> "Trends in International Sales," *Broadcast*, June 19, 1998, 19.

<sup>249</sup> MacAndrew, "TX Rex the Runt," 26.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> "2000 Awards: The Winners," *Broadcast*, Mar. 17, 2000, 14.

<sup>253</sup> "Banff Rockie Awards Nominees," *Broadcast*, Apr. 28, 2000, 18.

<sup>254</sup> Tara Conlan, "Egmont Subsidiary for London," *Broadcast*, Mar. 17, 2000, 12.

rights for *Rex the Runt*.<sup>255</sup> By the hand of Michaels' company Broadway Video Entertainment, the total of twenty-six ten-minute episodes would be rearranged into thirteen half-hour segments that would better suit American programming so the series could be sold on to networks like Cartoon Network, Comedy Central and TNN.<sup>256</sup>

### *Early 2000s: A New Attitude Towards Adult Animation*

Although Golezowski's initial decision to market *Rex the Runt* to adults proved difficult, it would later turn out to be its unique selling point as Alex Drosin of Broadway Video Entertainment points out in 2002. According to Drosin, "[w]e feel this could have a huge amount of appeal for an older-skewing age group. We've seen a proliferation of channels going after older-skewing, cutting-edge, comedy-driven animation. Because of our heritage comedy background, we see this as a natural evolution."<sup>257</sup> Although Aardman had produced animations for adult audiences in the past with *Animated Conversations*, *Conversation Pieces* and *Lip-Synch*, the adult comedy-driven approach used in *Rex the Runt* was new to the studio. However, with the advent of animation series like *The Simpsons*, the British television landscape was slowly becoming accustomed to this type of animation, which created a fruitful climate for programmes like Golezowski's *Rex the Runt*. As early as 1992, Channel 4's commissioning editor Clare Kitson discussed the impact of *The Simpsons* by pointing out that "[a] lot of activity has now been inspired by *The Simpsons*, which is important to me because it means that we should be able to liberate better airtime."<sup>258</sup> Similarly, Golezowski argues of *The Simpsons* that "[n]ext to Nick Park, who is a genius, that show has changed attitudes at a commissioning level about what is possible with 'adult' animation."<sup>259</sup>

This changing climate proved fertile breeding ground for Aardman, who followed their production of *Rex the Runt* with a series of inserts called "Angry Kid," featuring moments in the life of a flippant, rebellious child. Aardman hoped that these animations, which were directed by Darren Walsh, would be picked up as a television series.<sup>260</sup> Channel 4 did so in 1999, when the channel's night-time editor Steven Keane commissioned the studio to produce twenty-six one-minute episodes for *4Later*, Channel 4's late-night strand of television.<sup>261</sup> Aardman eventually produced twenty-five one-minute episodes,<sup>262</sup> but although Channel 4 broadcast a few episodes in 1999,<sup>263</sup> the channel chose to discontinue transmission as the content was considered to be too provocative.<sup>264</sup> Instead of suspending *Angry Kid*, Aardman resolved to launch the entire series via AtomFilms, an online film distributor who previously made Aardman's back catalogue available to online audiences.<sup>265</sup> From May 7, 2000, the *Angry Kid* episodes were posted at regular intervals on the website of AtomFilms.<sup>266</sup> Despite being an unprecedented move for the studio, Aardman's *Angry Kid* proved a successful endeavour with the show reaching one million hits two months later.<sup>267</sup> Following the success of the series online, it was reported in July 2000 that *Angry Kid*

<sup>255</sup> Michael Schneider, "'Rex' Appeal Tests U.S.," *Daily Variety*, June 11, 2002, 1.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Swain, "Quick on the Draw," 20.

<sup>259</sup> Fuller, "Growing Up Fast," 16.

<sup>260</sup> Ellen Wolff, "New Skits Knit Brit Wit with Visual Hits," *Daily Variety*, Nov. 10, 1998, A23.

<sup>261</sup> Walé Azeez, "New Shows for C4 In Night-Time Revamp," *Broadcast*, Sept. 24, 1999, 5.

<sup>262</sup> Adam Dawtrey, "Aardman's 'Angry' At AtomFilms Site," *Daily Variety*, Apr. 12, 2000, 12.

<sup>263</sup> "Guide Friday: Watch This," *The Guardian*, Dec. 10, 1999, A20.

<sup>264</sup> Poole, Oliver. "Angry Kid, Son of Wallace & Gromit, Slips the Net For TV," *The Telegraph*, Sept. 24, 2000, n.p.

<sup>265</sup> Dawtrey, "Aardman's 'Angry,'" 12.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> "Programming: Broadcasters Vie for Aardman's Angry Kid." *Broadcast*, July 7, 2000, 2.

might return to the British television landscape, with broadcasters hoping to air the episodes on television.<sup>268</sup> Two years later, it was the BBC who managed to obtain the rights to broadcast Walsh's series as part of the launch of their new digital youth channel BBC Three, which would go live on February 9, 2003.<sup>269</sup>

### *BBC and the Digital Switch-Over*

Following approval from the British government, BBC Three was set up by the BBC as a youth-oriented service that would function both as a relaunch of BBC Choice and as an addition to their digital portfolio.<sup>270</sup> This was considered necessary in light of the impending digital switch-over, which meant that British households would be required to switch from analogue-only to digital television reception.<sup>271</sup> As British consumers were not necessarily supportive of this development, the government required the BBC to take a leadership position in this switch-over, which resulted in the creation of several digital channels, including BBC Three, and the services BBC Four, CBBC and CBeebies which were launched a year earlier in 2002.<sup>272</sup> These channels would help to strengthen the BBC's position as a digital television broadcaster, with the BBC aiming to create programming that would motivate consumers who were not interested in paid television services to purchase the relevant digital television receivers so they could watch the BBC's services.<sup>273</sup>

Like Channel 4, BBC Three and the other digital channels were required to adhere to a specific remit. The remit for BBC Three stipulated that the service should target 16- to 34-year-olds with high-quality content that was innovative, engaging and original, whilst simultaneously supporting and nurturing local talent.<sup>274</sup> The service license also specified that the mixed-genre schedule should include animation amongst other genres like drama, current affairs and news programmes.<sup>275</sup> This meant that while Channel 4 was on its decline as a television haven for animation due to the deregulation of its funding structure, making the channel wary of provocative content that could scare off advertisers, BBC Three was able to take over its innovation-driven scheduling with regards to animation.

Not only did the service not shy away from acquiring challenging content like the *Angry Kid* series, it also commissioned more animated work from Aardman. In April 2003, it was announced that BBC Three had commissioned a second series of *Angry Kid*, which would be aired in autumn of the same year.<sup>276</sup> Other work included the new channel's idents "The Blobs," which were directed by Stefan Marjoram.<sup>277</sup> "The Blobs" were inspired by characters that were included on a reel that was shown to the BBC by brand consultancy Lambie-Nairn, which led to the production of twenty idents for BBC Three.<sup>278</sup> The blob-like characters in the idents lip-synched to fragments from the BBC archives, which formed an homage to Aardman's early adult-oriented animations for the BBC in their 1980s series *Animated Conversations*.<sup>279</sup> "The Blobs" were considered a hit

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Leigh Holmwood, "BBC 3 Launches with Raft of New Shows," *Broadcast*, Nov. 20, 2002, n.p.

<sup>270</sup> Petros Iosifidis, "Digital Switchover and the Role of the New BBC Services in Digital Television Take-Up," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 11, no. 3 (Aug. 2005): 57.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> "BBC Three Service Licence," BBC Trust, Sept. 2013, 1.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>276</sup> "Absolutely Productions MD Quits," *Broadcast*, Apr. 17, 2003, n.p.

<sup>277</sup> "Aardman Picks Up 2 Soho Awards," *Broadcast*, Aug. 6, 2004, n.p.

<sup>278</sup> Brendan Christie, "Special Report: Broadcast Designers: Air Play," *Boards*, May 1, 2003, 55.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

with critics and won the Quantel Title Sequences & Idents Award at the 6<sup>th</sup> Rushes Soho Shorts Awards in 2004.<sup>280</sup> Critical recognition for Aardman's work for BBC Three continued two years later, when Aardman's animated television special "Angry Kid: Who Do You Think You Are" was nominated for the Best TV Special category at the British Animation Awards 2006.<sup>281</sup>

Without the special remits that BBC's digital channels needed to adhere to, these successful productions would likely have not existed. Instead, the BBC would continue to commission animations from Aardman for their digital channels. This resulted in the production of a range of series, shows and shorts for services like CBBC, which would provide a steady income for the expanding studio. It would also give Sproxtton and Lord a solid foundation from which to expand their ventures to include the production of a feature film, which, if successful, would truly elevate the studio from a cottage industry outfit to a professional media production company. As the last chapter of Aardman's history will illustrate, Aardman was able to explore the feature-film market from the safety of the British broadcasting landscape.

### 3.4 | Feature-Length Films and Spin-Off Series in 2000-2005

From its inception, Aardman had achieved its fame and success through short films, commercials and music videos made for the British television industry. However, the successes of Park's "A Grand Day Out" and "Creature Comforts" at the 1990 Academy Awards brought the Bristol-based studio to the attention of American film companies. At first, Aardman was not ready to increase the scale of production, with Park stating that the studio had been "itching to satisfy a desire to make [a feature film], but we didn't feel ready for it after 'The Wrong Trousers.'"<sup>282</sup> Nevertheless, attention from international companies persisted, with the studio being approached by Disney in 1994.<sup>283</sup> By then, Lord stated that the studio was ready to develop their own full-length films, arguing that "feature films get taken that much more seriously. They're hellishly difficult and challenging, but now I think we can do it. I feel that the market is ready for it."<sup>284</sup>

Even so, Aardman initially seemed ambivalent about producing a feature film, which appeared to stem from a fear of losing the British sensibility that makes their animations unique. Park pointed out that the studio was wary of the influence of Hollywood on their films by arguing that "[w]e find it quite important to not be too much a part of the system [in Los Angeles] . . . We want to keep that drab, dreamy mood [of Northern England] even if we're making Hollywood pictures."<sup>285</sup> An issue that complicated the matter of producing their first feature film was acquiring the necessary funding, as Lord acknowledged that the studio would most likely be dependent on major funding from the United States:

A lot of money will come from America. You couldn't raise money for a feature film in Britain alone, sadly. But it's not just that we need the American market. We *want* the American market. It's not just their money. We want to charm and delight them as well. We've all been brought up on Hollywood as everyone in the Western world has. So to stand up, shoulder to shoulder, with the Hollywood studios, that feels great.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> "Aardman Picks Up," n.p.

<sup>281</sup> "Wallace & Gromit In Line for British Animation Award," *Broadcast*, Feb. 13, 2006, n.p.

<sup>282</sup> Klein, "Park: Oscar's Shorts King," 92.

<sup>283</sup> Boyd Farrow, "Disney Link Up with UK Model Animator," *Screen International*, Feb. 18, 1994, 9.

<sup>284</sup> Porter, "Oscar Nominee Park," 20.

<sup>285</sup> Robertson, "Nick Park Stays Put," 18.

<sup>286</sup> Wade Major, "English Extra: Animator Nick Park," *Boxoffice*, July 1, 1996, 69.

These statements fuelled the idea that Aardman was unsure about engaging with American investors, as Sproxtton, Lord and Park considered the influence of companies like Disney to be potentially detrimental to their unique British approach. At the same time, they admitted needing their funding and craving access to Hollywood and the American market, and without this financial backing, Aardman would be unable to produce a feature-length film at all. So, following courtship attempts by Disney and others, it was now Aardman who was looking for a suitable match to start their feature film journey.

### 3.4.1 | Funding Foundation: A Deal with DreamWorks

Following the success of “A Close Shave,” which Park considered “a dry run for a feature,” Aardman was finally ready to engage in talks with companies about the production of a feature-length film that would be directed by Park and Lord. This led to a deal with Jake Eberts’ Allied Filmmakers in 1995, who would finance the upcoming feature film.<sup>287</sup> This agreement suited Aardman perfectly, as it meant that the studio was not committed to one American film studio but could simply decide which film to develop and which parties to involve.<sup>288</sup> As Aardman also required an American partner for distribution, talks with Disney continued in 1996.<sup>289</sup> However, at the Bafta Craft Awards on April 14 of that year, Park confirmed that the studio was also considering the American film studio DreamWorks SKG as a potential partner.<sup>290</sup> These talks continued for almost two years, with DreamWorks eventually securing the bid in December 1997 thanks to the persistence of DreamWorks co-chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg.<sup>291</sup> In this deal, DreamWorks would help co-finance the film’s budget of between £15 and 25 million.<sup>292</sup> In return, the American film studio would obtain rights for the American market,<sup>293</sup> while the European rights would be handled by the French media conglomerate Pathé, who boarded the project earlier in 1997 as another co-financier.<sup>294</sup>

By then, Aardman was fourteen months into pre-production on the film, which was titled *Chicken Run* and would tell the story of a prisoner-of-war escape drama.<sup>295</sup> The film, which emulates John Sturges’ 1963 World War II epic *The Great Escape*, revolves around Ginger, a chicken who dreams of escaping her 1950s prison-like Yorkshire farm surroundings with the help of the other chickens in her hut and a mysterious, enigmatic rooster called Rocky, in order to save them from being turned into chicken pie by the proprietors of the farm, Mr. and Mrs. Tweedy.<sup>296</sup> According to early reports on the film in April 1997, *Chicken Run* was expected to be released towards the end of the following year.<sup>297</sup> However, towards the end of 1997, the projected release date was moved to spring or summer of 2000.<sup>298</sup> This gave the studio enough time to complete the film and roll out an extensive campaign featuring television and print adverts, merchandising,

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<sup>287</sup> Liz Shackleton and Rebecca Hodgson, “Allied Draws Aardman Into Animated Features,” *Screen International*, Mar. 31, 1995, 11.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Stuart Kemp, “Disney, DreamWorks Court Aardman,” *Screen International*, Apr. 19, 1996, 10.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Dan Cox and Nick Madigan, “D’Works’ Feat of Clay,” *Daily Variety*, Dec. 4, 1997, 1.

<sup>292</sup> Robertson, “Nick Park Stays Put,” 18.

<sup>293</sup> Cox and Madigan, “D’Works,” 1.

<sup>294</sup> “Guild Takes Novel Approach,” *Screen International*, Apr. 18, 1997, 10.

<sup>295</sup> Rupert Widdicombe, “Animated Debates,” *Screen International*, May 23, 1997, 14.

<sup>296</sup> Byrne, “Sneak Preview,” 46.

<sup>297</sup> Rex Weiner, “Aardman Studio Plans Fowl New Ani Feature,” *Variety*, Apr. 14, 1997, 15.

<sup>298</sup> Cox and Madigan, “D’Works,” 1.



interviews, product licensing and other promotions.<sup>299</sup> Prior to its eventual cinema release in June 2000,<sup>300</sup> Aardman also showed preview scenes of *Chicken Run* at Animated Encounters, a new Bristol-based animation festival that ran between May 19-21, 2000 and was sponsored by DreamWorks.<sup>301</sup>

Once released in cinemas, *Chicken Run* was an instant hit with viewers. The film opened with a gross of £3.8 million, which stood in stark contrast to *Gladiator*, DreamWorks' other release in the previous month which only accumulated a three-day gross of less than £1 million.<sup>302</sup> The reign of *Chicken Run* continued with a total gross of £14 million over a period of seventeen days, which pushed *Mission: Impossible 2* to the second place in the UK film charts.<sup>303</sup> Aardman's first feature film was also very well-received by critics within the film and animation industry, with the film garnering nominations for best film at the 13<sup>th</sup> European Film Awards,<sup>304</sup> best musical or comedy film at the 58<sup>th</sup> Golden Globes Awards,<sup>305</sup> and the Alexander Korda Award for the Outstanding British Film of the Year at the 54<sup>th</sup> Baftas.<sup>306</sup> Aside from these nominations, the film was chosen as the best submission in the animated film category by the New York Film Critics Circle, which took place towards the end of 2000.<sup>307</sup> These ratings and the critical acclaim suggests that, despite facing some initial fears and struggles concerning financing and delays, Aardman was able to call *Chicken Run* its first feature-length success.

### 3.4.2 | Funding Continues: DreamWorks' Second Deal

While *Chicken Run* proved its worth at the box office, the collaboration between Aardman and DreamWorks was already considered such a success during the production of the film that the American film studio offered Sproxtton and Lord a deal to finance the studio's four upcoming films.<sup>308</sup> Aardman had previously rebuffed similar deals from other film studios in favour of the one-picture deal offered by DreamWorks for *Chicken Run*.<sup>309</sup> In December 1999, however, Aardman was convinced to sign an exclusive £160 million deal with the American film studio for four animated feature-length films that would follow *Chicken Run*.<sup>310</sup>

In the same month, it was announced that veteran animator and director Golezowski, who now worked for Aardman in a freelance capacity, was slated to direct the first feature film in the package deal with DreamWorks.<sup>311</sup> This animated film, which had a projected budget of more than £26 million,<sup>312</sup> was titled *The Tortoise and the Hare* and would be based on Aesop's fable.<sup>313</sup> Aardman's version would feature a retelling of the story in a mock-documentary style in which the animal characters lip-synched to real-life voice recordings similar to the studio's early work like "Creature Comforts."<sup>314</sup>

<sup>299</sup> Leon Forde, "Film Brands: Keeping It in the Family," *Screen International*, June 2, 2000, 11.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Adam Minns, "DreamWorks Sponsors Bristol Animation Fest," *Screen International*, Feb. 17, 2000, n.p.

<sup>302</sup> Mary Scott, "Gladiator Is Hen-Pecked from Top Spot," *Screen International*, July 7, 2000, 23.

<sup>303</sup> Mary Scott, "British Patriotism Eggs Chicken Run Back to Top," *Screen International*, July 17, 2000, n.p.

<sup>304</sup> "European Film Awards: The Nominees," *Variety*, Nov. 27, 2000, 50.

<sup>305</sup> "Nominees for the 58<sup>th</sup> Golden Globe Awards," *Variety*, Jan. 1, 2001, 24.

<sup>306</sup> Leon Forde, "Gladiator Leads Nominations for Revamped Baftas," *Screen International*, 31 Jan. 2001, n.p.

<sup>307</sup> K.D. Shirvani and Jonathan Bing, "N.Y. Critics Make Shop for 'Traffic,'" *Variety*, Dec. 18, 2000, 11.

<sup>308</sup> Mike Goodridge, "Aardman To Make Wallace And Gromit Movie," *Screen International*, June 20, 2000, n.p.

<sup>309</sup> Shackleton and Hodgson, "Allied Draws," 11.

<sup>310</sup> Andy Fry, "Aardman Inks Four-Pic Deal with DreamWorks," *Kidscreen*, Dec. 1. 1999, 10.

<sup>311</sup> Dawtrey, "Golezowski to Helm," 16.

<sup>312</sup> Adam Minns, "UK Production on Course for Bumper Year," *Screen International*, Aug. 28, 2003, n.p.

<sup>313</sup> Dawtrey, "Golezowski to Helm," 16.

<sup>314</sup> Goodridge, "Aardman To Make," n.p.

However, unlike their first feature film *Chicken Run*, which ran smoothly aside from some time and finance issues, *The Tortoise and the Hare* posed a stream of problems during the production process. Initially, the studio seemed to be off to a good start, with the film being scheduled for release only two years after *Chicken Run*.<sup>315</sup> By July 2000, it was even reported that the Aesop-inspired film was in pre-production, with talks about the next feature film already on the table.<sup>316</sup> However, in March 2001, problems began to appear for the studio with reports coming in that *The Tortoise and the Hare*, which had been renamed *Tortoise vs. Hare*, was rescheduled for release in 2003.<sup>317</sup>

While Aardman had faced some delays before on a feature-length scale, the production issues surrounding *Tortoise vs. Hare* seemed much more extensive. In July 2001, the studio was forced to cut ninety staff-members from the animation department following a decision to instate a hiatus so the studio could rework the script.<sup>318</sup> In order to do so, Aardman hired Rob Sprackling and John Smith, who would focus on rewriting the original script written by Karey Kirkpatrick and Mark Burton.<sup>319</sup> According to Aardman's executive feature film producer Michael Rose, it was not the script, however, that posed the problem but the story-reel, as "[t]hat is where animation is special. It is where we put everything into images before filming. It was at that point that we felt the story needed developing."<sup>320</sup> The situation worsened over the next three months, with reports of fifty additional lay-offs surfacing in October 2001.<sup>321</sup> As a result, Aardman was left with a skeleton crew of ten employees in the feature department, with production delayed an additional nine to twelve months.<sup>322</sup> Eventually, the development of *Tortoise vs. Hare* came to a complete standstill in February 2003 after having shot a total of eight minutes of the entire film.<sup>323</sup> While UK production listings kept including the film as being in pre-production up until February 2005, no mention was made of any further developments regarding the film. Ultimately, Aardman's second feature-film was left to fade away into obscurity without any official statements acknowledging the failure for both Aardman and DreamWorks.<sup>324</sup>

Considering the continuous stream of successes leaving the Bristol-based studio and the financial backing of a big American studio like DreamWorks, it seems surprising that the Aesop-inspired feature film never came to fruition. While the failure of *Tortoise vs. Hare* was primarily attributed to issues with the story-reel, the actual problem appears to have been the studio's change of approach. With *Chicken Run*, Aardman had treaded very carefully from the earliest moments of development and pre-production to the release of the film. As pointed out above, Sproxtton and Lord waited out talks with Disney, who were reportedly keen for the animators to move to its Burbank studios, in favour of a one-picture deal that left the studio in control of the entire process.<sup>325</sup> They also decided to postpone talks until the script for *Chicken Run* was complete, with Park stating that "[w]e want to get the script in shape first. The most valuable thing is keeping our identity and individuality intact."<sup>326</sup> With *Tortoise vs. Hare*, however, Aardman abandoned its cautiousness and signed a deal that put more pressure on the development and

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Adrian Pennington, "The Main Draw," *Screen International*, July 14, 2000, 16.

<sup>317</sup> Adam Dawtrey, "Rose Blooms at Aardman," *Daily Variety*, Mar. 14, 2001, 17.

<sup>318</sup> Adam Dawtrey, "Script Had Aardman Pulling Its 'Hare' Out," *Daily Variety*, July 6, 2001, 1.

<sup>319</sup> Patrick Frater, "Aardman's Tortoise vs Hare Back on Track," *Screen International*, Aug. 8, 2001, n.p.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Joanna Scott, "Aardman Lays Off Another Fifty from Feature Animation," *Broadcast*, Oct. 25, 2001, n.p.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Adam Minns, "UK Animation Grows Up," *Screen International*, Feb. 18, 2003, n.p.

<sup>324</sup> "UK Production Listings – January 24," *Screen International*, Feb. 24, 2005, n.p.

<sup>325</sup> Kemp, "Disney, DreamWorks," 10.

<sup>326</sup> Klein, "Park: Oscar's Shorts King," 92.

forced a quicker time-line than the studio had worked with before. This left them little time between the two films to polish the script and story-reel, which Sproxtton confirms in 2003 when he argues that “[b]ecause we were working on *Chicken Run*, we weren’t developing another one behind it. The biggest risk is going to be after the first movie.”<sup>327</sup>

### 3.4.3 | Broadcasting: Spin-Offs and Series in 2000-2005

As noted above, Aardman had been keen to produce a feature film in order to raise their profile as a professional, international film studio, and the success of *Chicken Run* had done exactly that. However, the failure of *Tortoise vs. Hare* showed the studio the darker side of film production. Although it did not deter the studio from making more feature films, it did mean that Aardman faced a five-year gap between *Chicken Run* and the next film. While the feature department focused on the next full-length undertaking, the rest of the studio filled this gap with the development of new television shows. However, instead of creating new content, Aardman relied mostly on the popularity of its back catalogue and chose to produce spin-offs of their original animations, saving them valuable development time whilst hoping to emulate the success of the originals.

Aardman’s first spin-off series was *Wallace and Gromit’s Cracking Contraptions*, a series of one- to three-minute shorts showing eccentric inventions from the Wallace & Gromit universe, which was released online in October 2002.<sup>328</sup> The series, which was produced by Park but directed by Chris Sadler and Lloyd Price, was released online by Aardman’s internet distributor AtomFilms and was available to audiences following a \$9.95 subscription.<sup>329</sup> The ten episodes in the series would also be broadcast on BBC 1, with the first episode premiering on BBC’s News Online website.<sup>330</sup>

#### *First Commission for ITV: A Creature Comforts Spin-off*

At the same time, Aardman also produced a more traditional television series in this five-year gap with a spin-off of Park’s “Creature Comforts,” which they developed for ITV following a commission by ITV’s controller of entertainment Claudia Rosencrantz in May 2002.<sup>331</sup> This series, which consisted of thirteen ten-minute episodes, was geared towards a family audience and was directed by Golezowski.<sup>332</sup> Although Park was not involved with the series as director, he was consulted throughout the entire process,<sup>333</sup> and noted that he had “had this project in mind for a few years now. The technique of putting real-life interviews into the mouths of plasticine characters will remain entertaining as long as there are interesting people to interview and there are.”<sup>334</sup> The series, which took two years and an estimated \$4.2 million budget to create, would be broadcast by ITV1 in the autumn of 2003.<sup>335</sup> In September, it was announced that the international television and home video rights to the series had been secured by Granada International, which meant that the series could be sold to territories outside the United Kingdom, Australia and the

<sup>327</sup> Minns, “UK Animation,” n.p.

<sup>328</sup> David Bloom, “Cyber Biz,” *Daily Variety*, Oct. 17, 2002, 14.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>330</sup> “Wallace and Gromit Return To BBC,” *Broadcast*, Oct. 15, 2002, n.p.

<sup>331</sup> Steve Aston, “ITV Orders New Creature Comforts Series,” *Broadcast*, May 30, 2002, n.p.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>333</sup> Steve Clark, “Programs Worth Watching,” *Variety*, Sept. 29, 2003, A4.

<sup>334</sup> Aston, “ITV Orders,” n.p.

<sup>335</sup> Clarke, “Programs,” A4.

United States.<sup>336</sup> Granada did so in December 2003, when the television series *Creature Comforts* was sold to the public broadcaster SVT Sweden, as well as broadcasters TVNZ in New Zealand, Ale Kino Poland and NRK Norway, amongst others.<sup>337</sup>

Like its short film predecessor, the *Creature Comforts* series turned out to be a massive hit with audience members and critics alike. In 2004, it was awarded the prize for best comedy at the Golden Rose (Rose D'Or) Entertainment Television Awards.<sup>338</sup> On top of that, the episode "Cats & Dogs" won the Discreet animation award at the 6<sup>th</sup> Rushes Soho Shorts Awards alongside Marjoram's "The Blobs."<sup>339</sup> The series would continue to win a slew of prizes over the following months, including the Cristal Award for best TV production at the Annecy Animation Festival in 2005.<sup>340</sup> Following the success of this spin-off, Rosencrantz commissioned a second series of thirteen episodes from Aardman in March 2004, which were slated for transmission on ITV in the autumn of 2005.<sup>341</sup> The first episode of the second series was eventually broadcast on October 30, 2005 on ITV at the 7.20 p.m. slot and attracted 8.8 million viewers, with the showing accounting for 35% of the viewer total that evening.<sup>342</sup>

Thanks to the great reception of the series, Aardman was able to sell both series to BBC America, which Aardman's head of broadcast Miles Bullough describes as a great development as "it will put the strange accents into immediate context for the US audience."<sup>343</sup> In the same month, however, it was also announced that Aardman and the Gotham Group would collaborate to create an adapted version of the series for US audiences, complete with American animals and voices.<sup>344</sup> However, when the adapted version was broadcast on CBS on June 5, 2007, it received mixed reviews, and was not recommissioned in the following years.<sup>345</sup>

#### *A Return to Children's TV with CiTV's Planet Sketch*

While this five-year interval was mostly marked by the production of spin-off series, Aardman also produced a television show based on original content that would bring the studio back to the realm of children's television. Alongside ITV's *Creature Comforts* recommission in 2004, ITV's children's division CiTV commissioned thirteen eleven-minute episodes of CGI animation for a children's show with the working title "Animated Sketch Show."<sup>346</sup> The CGI show would be targeted at six- to eleven-year-olds, making it Aardman's first children's programme since the Morph series.<sup>347</sup> As the show, which would eventually be titled *Planet Sketch*, was the first CGI animated programme by Aardman, the studio collaborated with Canadian media production company Decode Entertainment and distributor Teletoon for the production of the series.<sup>348</sup>

*Planet Sketch*, which featured a cast of recurring characters in a series of high-energy animated sketches, was soon sold to international broadcasters including Cartoon Network Latin

<sup>336</sup> "Granada International Takes Comfort," *Broadcast*, Sept. 11, 2003, n.p.

<sup>337</sup> Marlene Edmunds, "SVT Pacts with Granada," *Daily Variety*, Dec. 24, 2003, 9.

<sup>338</sup> "Ant and Dec Win 2 Awards at Golden Rose," *Broadcast*, Apr. 19, 2004, n.p.

<sup>339</sup> "Aardman Takes Two Awards at Rushes Shorts Festival," *Broadcast*, Aug. 12, 2004, n.p.

<sup>340</sup> "Creature Comforts Crosses Pond," *Broadcast*, Oct. 6, 2005, n.p.

<sup>341</sup> "ITV Orders Aardman Animations," *Broadcast*, Mar. 25, 2004, n.p.

<sup>342</sup> "BBC1's Egypt Dazzles 7m." *Broadcast*, 31 Oct. 2005, n.p.

<sup>343</sup> "Creature Comforts," n.p.

<sup>344</sup> "Aardman Secures Deal for Shaun," *Broadcast*, Oct. 24, 2005, n.p.

<sup>345</sup> Brian Lowry, "Creature Comforts," *Daily Variety*, June 4, 2007, 6.

<sup>346</sup> "ITV Orders," n.p.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>348</sup> "Aardman Lines Up CGI Show," *Broadcast*, Oct. 7, 2004, n.p.

America,<sup>349</sup> France 3 and Nickelodeon France.<sup>350</sup> In 2006, Teletoon and CiTV commissioned a second series of *Planet Sketch* for a further twenty-six eleven-minute episodes, for which Decode Entertainment secured pre-sales with international broadcasters including Jetix, operating in Italy, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the Netherlands, amongst others.<sup>351</sup>

While the show sold well abroad, the ratings in the United Kingdom were disappointing, with *Planet Sketch* drawing an audience of only 301,000 in February 2006, accounting for only 3.8% of viewers. Following these unsatisfactory ratings and the lack of viewers for their other children's programmes, ITV announced in 2006 that it would drop its weekday CiTV strand altogether.<sup>352</sup> While this development was met with concerns from the television industry, Aardman had already moved on to their next feature-film endeavour, a Wallace & Gromit feature film, and the spin-off shows it generated.<sup>353</sup>

### 3.4.4 | Wallace & Gromit Hit the Big Screen

In the summer of 2000, it was announced that Aardman would produce a feature-length animated film starring Wallace and Gromit.<sup>354</sup> This film would be produced as part of their four-picture deal with DreamWorks, in which the American studio would equity finance Aardman's film like it had done with *Chicken Run*. However, in contrast to *Chicken Run* and *Tortoise vs. Hare*, Sproxton and Lord negotiated a deal in which the studio would handle most of the merchandising and retain the character rights to Wallace and Gromit.<sup>355</sup>

Compared to Aardman's previous feature film endeavours, the production of this Wallace & Gromit film ran smoothly from the start. According to reports in October 2003, the film had been moved into pre-production under the working title "The Great Vegetable Plot."<sup>356</sup> In the following month, it was announced that a team of 180 people were about to start an eighteen-month shoot for the film, which had been renamed "The Curse of the Were-Rabbit."<sup>357</sup> This number was expected to rise to 220 during the shoot, which made it the most ambitious project that Aardman had embarked on up to this point.<sup>358</sup>

The film, which was directed by Park and Steve Box, who had previously worked on two of the Wallace & Gromit shorts as well as his own short "Stage Fright," tells the story of the inventor and his dog in their new occupation as pest control specialists.<sup>359</sup> They are set to work to catch a nocturnal beast that threatens the vegetable growing competition at the annual village fête.<sup>360</sup> Like *Chicken Run*, the voice cast of this film was made up of well-known actors, with Ralph Fiennes, Helena Bonham-Carter and Nicholas Smith joining Peter Sallis in his role as Wallace.<sup>361</sup> *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* eventually premiered on September 4, 2005 in

<sup>349</sup> "Aardman's Sketch Show Sold to Latin America," *Broadcast*, Oct. 3, 2005, n.p.

<sup>350</sup> "French Deals for Planet Sketch," *Broadcast*, May 2, 2006, n.p.

<sup>351</sup> "Second series commission for Planet Sketch," *Broadcast*, July 11, 2006, n.p.

<sup>352</sup> Jon Rogers, "Dropping Kids Pays Off for ITV," *Broadcast*, Mar. 1, 2007, n.p.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> Goodridge, "Aardman To Make," n.p.

<sup>355</sup> Minns, "UK Animation," n.p.

<sup>356</sup> "UK Production Listings - October 6 2003," *Screen International*, Oct. 6, 2003, n.p.

<sup>357</sup> Tim Dams, "Aardman Embarks on Lengthy Curse Shoot," *Screen International*, 5 Nov. 2003, n.p.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*

Sydney,<sup>362</sup> and was released country-wide in Australia on September 15 in order to coincide with the country's school holidays.<sup>363</sup> The film was later released in cinemas throughout October 2005, with the film being released in the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Germany, Belgium and other countries throughout the rest of the year.<sup>364</sup>

In terms of the box office, the opening weekend of *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* was considered a success, with the film grossing an estimated \$16 million when it reached American cinemas on October 7, 2005.<sup>365</sup> On October 17, the film had collected \$33.3 million in the United States and \$40.3 million internationally, with the United Kingdom accounting for \$16.2 million.<sup>366</sup> This success continued throughout the month, with the film grossing over \$108 million worldwide by October 23.<sup>367</sup> While the great reception of the film was to be expected in the United Kingdom due to the popularity of the previous Wallace & Gromit animated shorts, the international success was more surprising. This led to speculations that a recent fire on October 10, which destroyed Aardman's storage warehouse in Bristol containing props, sets and storyboards from previous projects,<sup>368</sup> contributed to the initial box office success.<sup>369</sup>

Like most of Aardman's previous projects, *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* did well at both the box office and many of the film festivals. The film was not only well-liked by the public but also lauded by critics in the film industry and was nominated for a number of prizes and awards, of which it won most. At the end of 2005, the Wallace & Gromit feature was nominated for fifteen awards at the 33<sup>rd</sup> annual Annie Awards, which included a nomination for best animated feature and voice acting nominations for a number of the cast members.<sup>370</sup> On 4 February 2006, the film won the award for best feature as well as nine other Annie Awards for effects, character animation, music, storyboarding, production design and direction, amongst others.<sup>371</sup>

Later in February, the film also won the Alexander Korda Award for Best British Film at the 2006 Baftas, which Aardman had previously won for *Chicken Run*.<sup>372</sup> Other prizes garnered by the film included the awards for best animated character at the Visual Effects Society awards in Los Angeles,<sup>373</sup> best feature film at the British Academy Children's Film and Television Awards,<sup>374</sup> and Best European Director of the Year for Park and Box at the European Animation Awards.<sup>375</sup> In March 2006, the film also received an Oscar for best animated feature at the Academy Awards, which marked Park's fourth Oscar win and was also the first time the studio was acknowledged for an animated feature film at the awards ceremony.<sup>376</sup>

However, despite winning many awards and grossing over \$150 million at the box office by November 2005, *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* was considered a disappointment by Aardman's financier, with DreamWorks' co-chairman Katzenberg admitting that "unfortunately, despite

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<sup>362</sup> Sandy George, "Wallace And Gromit Enjoy Upbeat Oz World Premiere," *Screen International*, Sept. 5, 2005, n.p.

<sup>363</sup> Halligan, Finn. "UIP Readies Global Were-Rabbit Campaign," *Screen International*, Aug. 18, 2005, n.p.

<sup>364</sup> Jeremy Kay, "Wallace & Gromit Rule US With \$16.1m Weekend," *Screen International*, Oct. 10, 2005, n.p.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Dave McNary, "'Gromit' Gets Groove on Overseas," *Daily Variety*, Oct. 17, 2005, 15.

<sup>367</sup> Mohr, Ian. "Claymation Duo Hits \$108 Million Worldwide," *Variety*, Oct. 31, 2005, 16.

<sup>368</sup> Thomas, Archie. "Fire Destroys Gromit's U.K. Lair," *Daily Variety*, Oct. 11, 2005, 1.

<sup>369</sup> Ian Mohr, "Blighty Alrighty," *Daily Variety*, Nov. 1, 2005, 1.

<sup>370</sup> Maressa Brown, "'Were-Rabbit' Draws 15 Annie Noms," *Daily Variety*, Dec. 5, 2005, 41.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Wendy Mitchell, "BAFTA 2006 Winners in Full," *Screen International*, Feb. 19, 2006, n.p.

<sup>373</sup> "Facilities; VES Honours UK Visual Effects," *Televisual*, Mar. 20, 2006, 51.

<sup>374</sup> Jon Rogers, "Another Bafta for Wallace and Gromit," *Broadcast*, Nov. 27, 2006, n.p.

<sup>375</sup> Martin Blaney, "Aardman Director Duo Nominated for Cartoon Movie Tributes," *Screen International*, Feb. 27, 2006, n.p.

<sup>376</sup> "Wallace & Gromit Team Pick Up Fourth Oscar," *Broadcast*, Mar. 6, 2006, n.p.

being one of the best-reviewed films of the year, 'Wallace & Gromit' has fallen short of the financial objectives we had for the movie."<sup>377</sup> These objectives were most likely set on the basis of *Chicken Run's* enormous success, which grossed around \$214 million worldwide.<sup>378</sup> On top of these expectations, DreamWorks was faced with the consequences of the agreement that was struck regarding character rights and merchandising. According to Sproxtton in 2003, this deal allowed the studio to "effectively recoup from first dollar gross rather than net profits," which made the deal more lucrative for the Bristol-based studio but put a strain on the profits for DreamWorks.<sup>379</sup> Because of this, *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* was unable to meet DreamWorks' financial expectations, leading to a financial write-down for the American film studio.<sup>380</sup>

### 3.5 | Funding Fails, Films and Spin-Offs 2005 – Onwards

Despite the failure of *Tortoise vs. Hare* and the financial disappointment of *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*, DreamWorks continued to honour their deal with Aardman. While the rest of the studio was working *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* and the *Creature Comforts* series, Lord began working on the development of the studio's next feature-length film, *Flushed Away*.<sup>381</sup> In contrast to Aardman's previous stop-motion animated feature films, this film would be a CGI collaboration between the two studios.<sup>382</sup> As Aardman only had a small computer animation department in Bristol, the entire production of *Flushed Away* took place at the DreamWorks studio in Los Angeles.<sup>383</sup> This made *Flushed Away* not only Aardman's first full-length computer-generated project but also their first production that took place outside the Bristol-based studio.

The film, which was directed by DreamWorks' animator David Bowers and Aardman's short film director and animator Sam Fell, tells the story of Roddy St. James, a pet rat from a wealthy home who ends up in an underground sewer city after being flushed down the toilet by an intruder.<sup>384</sup> While searching for his way home, he meets a courageous, spirited rat called Rita and together they fight off an evil toad who plans to destroy the sewer city.<sup>385</sup> Like Aardman's other feature films, *Flushed Away* was voiced by a cast of well-known actors, including Hugh Jackman as Roddy, Kate Winslet as Rita, Ian McKellen as the toad and Andy Serkis, Bill Nighy, Shane Richie and others in supporting roles.<sup>386</sup> Unlike the troubled production of *Tortoise vs. Hare*, however, the production of *Flushed Away* seemed to run smoothly, with Aardman already announcing their next project at the 2005 Cannes film festival.<sup>387</sup> This film, to be named "Crood Awakening," was based on a script by John Cleese and was expected to be released in cinemas in 2007.<sup>388</sup>

After premiering in October 2006 at film festivals in Hollywood and Tokyo, *Flushed Away* opened in cinemas on November 3 in the United States and internationally between November 2006 and January 2007.<sup>389</sup> Unlike *Chicken Run*, which was an instant hit, and *The Curse of the Were-*

<sup>377</sup> Ben Fritz, "Grousing over 'Gromit,'" *Daily Variety*, Nov. 11, 2005, 1.

<sup>378</sup> Halligan, "UIP Readies," n.p.

<sup>379</sup> Minns, "UK Animation," n.p.

<sup>380</sup> Fritz, "Grousing," 1.

<sup>381</sup> Adam Dawtrey, "London Eye," *Variety*, Aug. 4, 2003, 9.

<sup>382</sup> Halligan, "UIP Readies," n.p.

<sup>383</sup> Ellen Wolff, "Digital Pic Shows Aardman Fingerprints," *Daily Variety*, Nov. 8, 2006, A2.

<sup>384</sup> John Hazelton, "Flushed Away," *Screen International*, Oct. 16, 2006, n.p.

<sup>385</sup> Todd McCarthy, "Flushed Away," *Variety*, Oct. 23, 2006, 30.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>387</sup> Elizabeth Guider, "'Crood' Comment," *Daily Variety*, May 13, 2005, 4.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>389</sup> Hazelton, "Flushed," n.p.

*Rabbit*, which initially did well at the box office, *Flushed Away* had a disappointing opening weekend in the United States, where it grossed \$18.8 million, making it the weakest performing CGI production for DreamWorks since their 1998 animated film *Antz*.<sup>390</sup> Because of the low gross and total cost of \$149 million, the American financier was facing another write-down on earnings, leading to speculation that the deal between Aardman and DreamWorks would come to an end prematurely.<sup>391</sup> In December 2006, with *Flushed Away* having grossed \$83 million in total, DreamWorks' co-chairman Katzenberg indicated that the companies would discuss the future of the deal, with Katzenberg noting that "[w]e're only going to continue in a business where we make money and feel confident about that."<sup>392</sup>

At the end of January 2007, it was officially announced that the deal between DreamWorks and Aardman has been terminated.<sup>393</sup> When asked about this decision, Katzenberg concluded that "[t]oday, DreamWorks Animation is focused on producing two computer animated movies per year, with a full film slate laid out into 2010. While I will always be a fan and an admirer of Aardman's work, our different business goals no longer support each other."<sup>394</sup> A month after announcing the discontinuation of their agreement, it was reported that DreamWorks took a \$109 million write-down following *Flushed Away*, which had grossed over \$177 million in the United States and overseas territories together, confirming that the deal between both studios was no longer a profitable one.<sup>395</sup>

### 3.5.1 | Broadcasting: Spin-Offs and Series

Aardman seemed less affected by the disappointing performance of *Flushed Away* at the box office than DreamWorks, who had gone from a \$63.2 million profit to a \$21.3 million loss over 2006.<sup>396</sup> In fact, Aardman's annual reports showed continuous growth for the studio over the years, with an increase in turnover from £10.3 to £43 million and an increase in profit from £1.4 to £2 million over 2004 to 2005.<sup>397</sup> While the studio was in good health, likely thanks to its merchandising strategy and international sale of its broadcasting productions, the discontinuation of the deal wiped the studio's production slate clean, as the rights for "Crood Awakening," the next movie that was scheduled to be released by Aardman, reverted to DreamWorks, who eventually released the film as *The Croods* in 2013.<sup>398</sup> This meant that Aardman was again faced with a production gap that needed to be filled in order to sustain the studio.

While talks about a new feature-film deal with a different financier were taking place, Aardman chose to continue focusing its remaining energy on the production of various spin-off television series, which had been a successful strategy for the studio in the previous five-year period. This resulted in a series of animated shorts called *Pib and Pog*, which were derived from Peter Peake's 1994 animated short. Like the original, this series of animations was directed by Peake for an adult audience. The shorts featured two pre-school style characters that engage in slap-stick gags combined with dark humour and adult topics. Like the adult-oriented *Angry Kid*

<sup>390</sup> Ben Fritz, "An Aard-Knock Life," *Variety*, Nov. 13, 2006, 5.

<sup>391</sup> Jill Goldsmith, "The 'Flush' Brush-Off," *Daily Variety*, Nov. 16 2006, 1.

<sup>392</sup> Ben Fritz, "D'Works: Toons Too Alike," *Daily Variety*, Dec. 6, 2006, 8.

<sup>393</sup> "Aardman and DreamWorks Finally Part Ways." *Screen International*, Jan. 31, 2007, n.p.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>395</sup> Ben Fritz, "'Flushed' Drains Profits," *Daily Variety*, Feb. 28, 2007, 6.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>397</sup> Leah Stoker, "Feature Comforts," *Broadcast*, Nov. 23, 2006, n.p.

<sup>398</sup> Ben Fritz, "Aardman Deal Flushed," *Daily Variety*, Jan. 31, 2007, 1.



series, these shorts were distributed by AtomFilms on their website as an exclusive online series and premiered on July 18, 2007.<sup>399</sup>

### 3.5.2 | CBBC's Shaun the Sheep and Aardman's In-House Distribution

In the same year, Aardman also premiered *Shaun the Sheep*, a stop-motion animated children's television series that was inspired by the Wallace & Gromit short "A Close Shave." In 2004, it was announced that Shaun, one of the characters in Park's 1995 animated short, would be the star of his own series of 40 seven-minute episodes directed by Golezowski.<sup>400</sup> The show was first broadcast on March 5, 2007 by BBC One as part of their CBBC children's schedule,<sup>401</sup> and featured Shaun and his farmyard friends in a series of short, dialogue-free adventures targeted at five- to eight-year-olds.<sup>402</sup>

Just like in 2002, when BBC Three acquired the *Angry Kid* series, Aardman had the impending digital switch-over to thank for the initial transmission of *Shaun the Sheep*. The series had been commissioned by Dorothy Prior for BBC's digital children's service CBBC in order to fulfil a remit that had been set by the British government.<sup>403</sup> CBBC had been launched in 2002 alongside BBC's other children's service CBeebies as part of the broadcaster's preparation for the digital switch-over.<sup>404</sup> Just like BBC Three, CBBC and CBeebies were required to adhere to a remit that stimulated the commissioning of output from within Europe and the European Economic Area.<sup>405</sup> As *Shaun the Sheep* was produced within the United Kingdom, the show was perfect for helping CBBC meet its remit, leading to the commission of *Shaun the Sheep* in 2004 and other commissions by the service in the future.<sup>406</sup>

The commission of *Shaun the Sheep* was reminiscent of Aardman early work in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the BBC had given Aardman its start on shows like *Vision On* and *Take Hart*. While those early commissions by the BBC provided exposure for the studio, this commission by CBBC provided the financial stability that the studio needed to explore the feature-film market. On top of that, the success of this series caused Aardman to outgrow its existing strategy, leading to new departments like an in-house distribution division.

Following production of *Shaun the Sheep*, it was reported in 2005 that Aardman had secured a number of pre-sales at Mipcom from broadcasters like WDR Germany, ABC Australia, TVNZ in New Zealand and a number of broadcasters in Scandinavia.<sup>407</sup> The international interest was so overwhelming that Aardman considered starting its own international distribution department, as, at that point, distribution had been spread over *Creature Comforts'* distributor Granada International and *Planet Sketch's* Decode Entertainment.<sup>408</sup> Aardman's head of broadcast Miles Bullough was cited as being the driving force behind this development, with Bullough describing that "[o]ne of the things I found when I got to Aardman was the rights weren't being

<sup>399</sup> Jessica Rogers, "Aardman Works With Atom Films on Animated Shorts," *Screen International*, July 18, 2007, n.p.

<sup>400</sup> "ITV Orders," n.p.

<sup>401</sup> David Chater, "Viewing Guide," *The Times*, Mar. 5, 2007, 23.

<sup>402</sup> Michael Schneider, "Disney Rounds Up Aardman's Kids TV 'Sheep,'" *Daily Variety*, June 22, 2007, 12.

<sup>403</sup> "BBC Boosts Animation with Aardman Order," *Broadcast*, Sept. 29, 2004, n.p.

<sup>404</sup> Iosifidis, "Digital Switchover," 57.

<sup>405</sup> Steemers, Jeanette. "The BBC's Role in the Changing Production Ecology of Preschool Television in Britain," *Television & New Media* 11, no. 1 (2009): 44.

<sup>406</sup> "BBC Boosts," n.p.

<sup>407</sup> "Aardman Secures," n.p.

<sup>408</sup> Schneider, "Disney," 12.

exploited in a co-ordinated manner across TV and video. We're looking at setting up international distribution in-house but we're not going to do it yet."

In the following year, with the release of *Shaun the Sheep* drawing closer, it was announced that Aardman would see its plans for an international distribution division through.<sup>409</sup> In August 2006, the studio appointed Alix Wiseman as the head of the new distribution arm, who would not only look at international distribution but also at exploitation of television, licensing, merchandising and new media by third parties.<sup>410</sup> At the start of 2007, Wiseman observed that "2007 promises to be a busy year with further sales across all platforms. We are hopeful [Shaun the Sheep] will become a global brand."<sup>411</sup>

This was a grand statement by Wiseman, especially considering how *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* and *Flushed Away* has performed internationally at the box office. However, television would once again prove to be Aardman's strong suit and their in-house distribution division delivered on Wiseman's expectations by arranging many new deals in countries like Switzerland, Japan and Croatia and territories including Asia and Latin America.<sup>412</sup> Alongside these deals, the studio managed to arrange licensing deals with third parties including TF1 in France and Sony Consumer Products in Japan regarding merchandising, home video and television rights.<sup>413</sup> The distribution department proved to be so effective that halfway through 2007 the series had been sold to over 145 territories, and had even been acquired by the Disney Channel where the shorts would feature as interstitials between shows.<sup>414</sup> The division had also arranged a deal with HIT Entertainment, a company that would be able to handle licensing and home video rights in the United States and Canada, with Aardman's CEO Stephen Moore stating that HIT's "talent in managing top international brands will give Shaun and Wallace & Gromit a great springboard for tremendous success."<sup>415</sup>

With worldwide distribution covered, *Shaun the Sheep* was indeed on its way to becoming an incredibly successful brand for Aardman. Not only was the show a great hit with its target audience, it was also well-received by the animation and television industry. Following transmission in 2007, *Shaun the Sheep* won several awards, including a 2008 International Emmy award in the category Children & Young People,<sup>416</sup> and the award for best children's series for the episode "Shaun the Sheep: Still Life" at the British Animation Awards in the same year.<sup>417</sup> Following the success of the first series, it was announced in September 2008 that CBBC had ordered a second series of another 40 seven-minute episodes, which was again picked up by broadcasters like TF1 and WDR.<sup>418</sup> Over the years, CBBC has continued to recommission new series of *Shaun the Sheep*, leading to awards like the award for best animation at the Bafta Children's Awards in 2014.<sup>419</sup> The success of the series eventually culminated in the series' own spin-off *Timmy Time*.

<sup>409</sup> "Aardman Goes It Alone on Sales," *Televisual*, June 8, 2006, 5.

<sup>410</sup> "Aardman Appoints International Sales Head," *Broadcast*, Aug. 14, 2006, n.p.

<sup>411</sup> Jessica Rogers, "Global Buyers Snap Up Shaun the Sheep," *Broadcast*, Jan. 18, 2007, n.p.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>414</sup> Schneider, "Disney Rounds," 12.

<sup>415</sup> Josef Adalian, "Aardman Draws License Deal," *Daily Variety*, Sept. 13, 2007, 3.

<sup>416</sup> "International Emmy Awards 2008," *Broadcast*, Nov. 25, 2008, n.p.

<sup>417</sup> Michael Rosser, "British Animation Awards 2008: The Winners," *Broadcast*, Mar. 14, 2008, n.p.

<sup>418</sup> Will Hurrell, "Shaun the Sheep to Return," *Broadcast*, Sept. 23, 2008, n.p.

<sup>419</sup> "Lego Movie Wins Children's Bafta," *Screen International*, Nov. 24, 2014, n.p.

### 3.5.3 | Timmy Time and Other Spin-Offs in the Wallace & Gromit Universe

In November 2007, it was reported that Aardman was working on a stop-motion animated series featuring Timmy, the only lamb in the flock of sheep in the *Shaun the Sheep* series.<sup>420</sup> This spin-off series, produced by Jackie Cockle, would consist of fifty-two ten-minute episodes featuring Timmy and a cast of other baby animals in adventures at nursery school.<sup>421</sup> While Shaun had found its home at CBBC, where it targeted a primary-school audience, Timmy would be aired on CBeebies with the aim of attracting preschool viewers. Although the spin-off featuring Timmy would not equal the popularity of *Shaun the Sheep*, it was picked up by the Disney Channel in 2008, leading to international transmission in territories including the United States, Latin America, Europe and the Middle-East in 2010.<sup>422</sup>

In 2007, it was also announced that Park had started pre-production on a new stop-motion animated short featuring Wallace and Gromit.<sup>423</sup> The short, operating under the working title “Trouble At’ Mill,” was commissioned by the BBC for broadcast at the end of 2008.<sup>424</sup> After the feature film *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* and the television series *Shaun the Sheep*, Park was ready to return to the short film format as “the production of *Chicken Run* and *Curse of the Were-Rabbit* were virtually back to back and each film took 5 years to complete. *Trouble At’ Mill* will be so much quicker to make and I can't wait to get back into production.”<sup>425</sup> Park’s new animated short, which was eventually titled “A Matter of Loaf and Death,” paid homage to the murder mystery genre and featured Wallace and Gromit as bakers who meet the charming Piella Bakewell and soon become wrapped up in a serial killer-spree involving bakers.<sup>426</sup> The short film featured Sally Lindsay as Wallace’s love interest Piella Bakewell opposite Peter Sallis as Wallace and was shown on BBC 1 at Christmas, following the tradition of Park’s previous Wallace & Gromit shorts as Christmas television classics.<sup>427</sup>

In line with “A Close Shave” and “The Wrong Trousers,” “A Matter of Loaf and Death” was a hit with viewers, with the animated short being the most viewed programme on BBC’s online video player iPlayer between Christmas and New Year’s Day.<sup>428</sup> The short also won a Bafta for best short animation in 2009,<sup>429</sup> and received an Oscar nomination in the same year.<sup>430</sup> Although the animated short would not win the Oscar as Park’s previous shorts had done in the past, the film did win an award for best animated short at the 2009 Annie Awards.<sup>431</sup>

Despite the positive response from both viewers and critics, Aardman would not release another Wallace & Gromit film in the years to follow, whether in feature or short film format. Instead, the studio focused on recommissions of *Shaun the Sheep* and *Timmy Time*, as well as on other projects like the CGI series *Chop Socky Chooks*, a series about Kung Fu chickens that was created in collaboration with Decode Entertainment and released in 2007.<sup>432</sup> The last project to

<sup>420</sup> Kate Calder, “Aardman Marks Preschool Turf,” *Kidscreen*, Nov. 1, 2007, 20.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>422</sup> Michael Rosser, “Aardman’s Timmy Heading Worldwide with Disney,” *Broadcast*, Apr. 7, 2008, n.p.

<sup>423</sup> Mitchell, Wendy. “Aardman Plans Wallace and Gromit Short for BBC TV,” *Screen International*, Oct. 3, 2007, n.p.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>426</sup> Candice Pires, “Corrie Star Lends Voice to Wallace and Gromit,” *Broadcast*, Mar. 17, 2008, n.p.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>428</sup> Katherine Rushton, “Gromit Wins iPlayer Battle,” *Broadcast*, Jan. 6, 2009, n.p.

<sup>429</sup> Robert Shepherd, “Wall to Wall and Aardman Scoop Baftas,” *Broadcast*, Feb. 8, 2009, n.p.

<sup>430</sup> “10 Animated Shorts Move Ahead in 2009 Oscar Race,” *Animation Xpress*, 23 Nov. 2009, n.p.

<sup>431</sup> Peter Debruge, “‘Panda’ Packs Punch,” *Daily Variety*, Feb. 2, 2009, 4.

<sup>432</sup> Leah Stoker, “Decode Launches Aardman Co-Pro,” *Broadcast*, Oct. 3, 2006, n.p.

feature Wallace and Gromit was a science-themed series called *Wallace and Gromit's World of Invention*, which combined stop-motion animation and live-action footage, with Wallace and Gromit as the presenters of the educative programme.<sup>433</sup> According to Aardman's head of broadcast Miles Bullough, *World of Invention*, which was released in 2010, was "an essentially logical step for us - we think of Wallace and Gromit as real characters, so it was a case of, 'What do we do next with our stars?'"<sup>434</sup> While it has not been announced officially that the studio has ceased the production of films featuring the duo, the death of Wallace voice-actor Peter Sallis in 2017 complicates any future productions.<sup>435</sup>

### 3.5.4 | Aardman's Feature Future

As Aardman released successful broadcast productions like *Shaun the Sheep*, *Timmy Time*, and "A Matter of Loaf and Death," the feature department was able to further explore the feature-film market. Following the termination of the DreamWorks deal, which came as a relief for Aardman, Lord stated in 2007 that "[w]e just feel liberated in an incredibly delightful way. Many other people are interested in doing business with us, both within Europe and in the US. What it means creatively is that there is more chance for us making feature films now than ever before."<sup>436</sup> This claim was followed up a month later when Aardman signed a three-year first-look deal with Sony Pictures.<sup>437</sup>

Ultimately, the collaboration with Sony led to two feature films. The first was the CGI Christmas film *Arthur Christmas*, which was produced together with Sony's Columbia Pictures Corporation and was released in the UK on 11 November 2011.<sup>438</sup> In the following year, Aardman released another Sony collaboration called *The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists*, after Gideon Defoe's homonymous book. This 3D stop-motion animated film, which was directed by Lord and Jeff Newitt, opened in UK cinemas on March 28 2012, followed by its release on April 27 in the United States.<sup>439</sup>

Following the success of these films, Aardman continued to produce feature films in their Bristol-based studio, although they chose to distance themselves from American film studios and instead opted for a deal with StudioCanal, a Franco-British film production and distribution company.<sup>440</sup> This collaboration led to the release of the stop-motion animated feature film *Shaun the Sheep Movie* in 2015, followed by Park's *Early Man* in 2018.<sup>441</sup> In the meantime, the studio continued to produce broadcast productions like the 2015 Christmas special "Shaun the Sheep: The Farmers Llamas," which was commissioned and broadcast by the BBC.<sup>442</sup> Other innovative projects include "Brand New Morph," a YouTube channel that features Aardman's original character in a series of animated shorts funded by a crowd funding campaign on Kickstarter.<sup>443</sup>

<sup>433</sup> "Wallace and Gromit to Front Science Show," *Broadcast*, 29 Aug. 2009, n.p.

<sup>434</sup> "Aardman Reducing Reliance on TV," *Broadcast*, Apr. 12, 2010, n.p.

<sup>435</sup> "Peter Sallis, Voice of Wallace, Dies At 96," *Screen International*, June 6, 2017, n.p.

<sup>436</sup> Geoffrey Macnab, "European – Aardman Animations – 'We Feel Liberated in a Delightful Way,'" *Screen International*, Mar. 2, 2007, n.p.

<sup>437</sup> Adam Dawtrey and Ben Fritz, "Sony Pix Partners with U.K. Toon Team," *Daily Variety*, Apr. 3, 2007, 1.

<sup>438</sup> "Arthur Christmas," *Screen International*, Nov. 10, 2011, n.p.

<sup>439</sup> "The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists," *Screen International*, Mar. 19, 2012, n.p.

<sup>440</sup> "Aardman Reteams with StudioCanal on 'Early Man,'" *Screen International*, May 6, 2015, n.p.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>442</sup> "BBC Orders Shaun the Sheep Christmas Special," *Broadcast*, 15 Oct. 2014, n.p.

<sup>443</sup> Harriet Green, "The Right Trousers," *Campaign*, May 18, 2015, 20.

As for the future, Park says he has ideas, stating he would “love to think of coming back to Wallace & Gromit, for example. They’re my babies.”<sup>444</sup> While no new Wallace & Gromit films have been announced, the studio is working on *Shaun the Sheep Movie: Farmageddon*, a sequel to the *Shaun the Sheep Movie* that is due in 2019.<sup>445</sup> Aardman also announced that it will release a sequel to *Chicken Run* following *Farmageddon*, which will be directed by *Flushed Away* director Sam Fell and will be executive produced by Lord and Sproxton.<sup>446</sup>

## History | In Conclusion

Looking back at over forty years of history, Aardman has become the industry-leading enterprise it hoped to be, having grown from a two-person cottage industry outfit to a professional media production company with over two-hundred employees.<sup>447</sup> While in the later years the studio was known for its feature-film production, from the successful *Chicken Run* film to its impending sequel, its true strength was broadcasting. The British broadcasting industry not only gave the studio its break with BBC’s commissioned work for *Vision On* and *Take Hart*, it also continued to provide a source of income and a home for Aardman.

While early commissions in the late 1970s and early 1980s helped Sproxton and Lord become a recognised studio, BBC’s commissions of Park’s Wallace & Gromit shorts in the 1990s helped put the studio on the map, leading to interest from international feature-film financiers. This history suggests that while the entire British broadcasting industry contributed to the growth of Aardman, it was the BBC in particular who helped the studio transform into an internationally lauded company. While Channel 4 also played a role by commissioning work from the studio, the influence of this channel is not as vital as suggested in accounts like Kotlarz and Kitson’s, where Channel 4 is described as a vital contributor to the bloom of the animation industry in the United Kingdom.

Overall, without the influence of the British broadcasting industry, it is unlikely that Aardman would have been able to secure the necessary funding for *Chicken Run*. Without the reliable foundation that the broadcasting industry provided, Aardman could have buckled under the pressure of DreamWorks and the financial failure of *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* and *Flushed Away*. Instead, the versatile nature of television and the studio’s adaptability led to an incredibly diverse back catalogue, including animated shorts, television series, adverts, music videos, CGI productions and idents, which have been viewed by a world-wide audience. While the studio will likely remain best known for Park’s Wallace & Gromit universe, future productions may well push the studio to new heights. For now, the future of Aardman as a leading stop-motion animation studio looks bright.

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<sup>444</sup> “Nick Park Discusses His Return to Directing with Aardman’s Stop-Motion ‘Early Man,’” *Variety*, Feb. 15, 2018, n.p.

<sup>445</sup> “Aardman Announced Sequel to ‘Chicken Run,’” *Animation Xpress*, Apr. 28, 2018, n.p.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>447</sup> Green, “The Right Trousers,” 20.

## 4 // Reflection on Aardman in Digital Archive

The history of Aardman presented in this study was created with the aid of primary sources that were gathered through digital archival research. The aim of using these documents as opposed to secondary sources was to present a comprehensive history of Aardman that was well-documented, factual and focused on the studio's course of life, unlike available analyses like Kotlarz's undocumented account of Channel 4, Kitson's analysis based on working at Channel 4 or Quigley's focus on Aardman's glocalised business practice. As none of these secondary works presented an exhaustive account of Aardman's past, a thorough analysis of media and entertainment industry papers from the late 1970s onwards would be a valuable foundation for future analyses of Aardman.

The primary sources used for this history were obtained exclusively via online archives, which is convenient as a research method but may also affect research strategies and results as outlined in Chapter 2. As predicted by Helen Tibbo, online search methods are now ubiquitous in both scholarly and personal spheres thanks to technological advancements, in which we have become accustomed to the idea that everything can be found online.<sup>448</sup> As information has become so readily available, it is inviting to use these materials as one-for-one substitutions, especially if they come from reputable sources like nationally-governed archives. However, as Janine Solberg points out, it is necessary to be aware of the limitations of digital search methods, as it can affect a history like the one presented in this research.<sup>449</sup> This section will use Solberg's concept of affective, geographical and virtual proximity to engage critically with the sources, and it will address the nature and possible impact of these primary sources on the presented history of Aardman.

### 4.1 | Proximity to Sources

The idea of constructing a comprehensive history of Aardman emerged from a personal interest in stop-motion animation and the desire to uncover the success of a studio that began as a two-person cottage-industry outfit. Unfortunately, there were no monographs dedicated to the studio, and available articles were academically unreliable or lacked depth by glossing over larger parts of Aardman's history. In order to rectify this gap and to expand my own limited understanding of the studio, an examination of primary sources would provide a more reliable foundation for a description of the studio's past and an outline of its position within the relevant media landscapes.

The collection of primary sources brought forth its own limitations in terms of geographical proximity, as media archives that hold large collections of sources on Aardman cannot be found in the Netherlands. As the studio is based in the United Kingdom, most relevant sources are held by the BFI National Archive, an archive run by the British Film Institute (BFI) that collects materials regarding British film and television programmes. As visiting the archive in

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<sup>448</sup> Tibbo, "Primarily History," 21.

<sup>449</sup> Solberg, "Googling," 61.

person was not possible due to time constraints and lack of funding, online archives were explored to determine whether digital sources could be used. Thanks to the ease of access and speed offered by these archives, this was a relatively low-stake exploration; the efforts and resources involved in determining whether a history of Aardman would be a suitable topic for research were minimal, allowing me to explore other topics if necessary.

While digital access covered issues of geographical proximity, the use of online archives brought along its own set of implications regarding virtual proximity. While a vast amount of materials can be found online, paywalls and other subscription systems limit access to some databases. This is also the case for BFI InView, a catalogue of over 2,000 film and television titles curated by the BFI, which is only accessible to higher and further education institutions within the United Kingdom. The rest of the collection by the BFI is not available online. However, it is possible to review summaries of their collections and request specific documents on-demand, meaning that a digital copy of the chosen source will be sent to you directly for a fee. Although this on-demand strategy offers access to digital copies, the requirement of paying a fee per item makes scholars less inclined to work through the entire bulk of sources as they would do in a traditional archive, where the cost of examining ten or a hundred sources would be the same. Instead, the listed summaries force scholars to pick and choose specific articles or materials, which limits the chance of serendipitously finding new information and interpretations.

Alternatively, these summaries can function as overviews of sources that are considered relevant by an archive like the BFI. As these summaries come equipped with the necessary publication details, they can be used to find the sources elsewhere if they are not unique to the archive. This approach was also used for this study, as other online archives and databases were available, including LexisNexis and ProQuest, which subsequently gave way to archives like the Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive (EIMA). As the BFI collection on Aardman consisted almost exclusively of articles that were originally published in entertainment industry magazines, the EIMA formed a suitable substitute archive.

Unfortunately, while this strategy helped to improve virtual proximity by circumventing the BFI's on-demand system, the EIMA was limited in its use for a history of Aardman as it focuses on material between 1880 and 2000. Although LexisNexis also includes industry magazines in their search results, there was a notable decrease in total number of sources in the period after 2000, which suggests that LexisNexis is less exhaustive in their inclusion of industry magazines in their database than the EIMA. As there was a large amount of overlap between the sources, with *Variety*, *Broadcast* and *Screen International* often reporting the same news, the available sources after 2000 were considered sufficient for the purpose of constructing a history, although a more exhaustive account of Aardman's past should revisit this issue. As both LexisNexis and ProQuest provide access to newspapers, articles from the British newspapers the Independent and the Guardian were used to supplement the history where necessary. As this setup provided ample access to archives and databases, although paired with their own limitation, the next phase of the research focused the excavation and use of these sources and their limitations for research.

## 4.2 | Excavation and Search Limitations

While online archives and digital databases may be limited in their use, either due to paywalls or a restricted scope, they are open at all times from any location. This means that you do not need to be physically present to visit the archive or need to adhere to opening hours. While it would have been possible to visit an archive like the BFI National Archive and gather up all the sources

that were linked to Aardman, it would have been difficult to return on a regular basis, which would impede any future inquiries.

Throughout this excavation phase of the archival research, new information about Aardman surface regularly. Initially, the keywords used to find relevant sources included “Aardman,” “David Sproxton,” “Peter Lord,” “Nick Park,” and variations thereof. However, new information found in the search results led to new inquiries and different keywords. As the databases were available at all hours regardless of location, it was possible to follow a hunch or a new line of inquiry without necessitating a trip to an archive. Valuable resources like time and money could possibly be wasted, which discourages the exploration of these inquiries. Unfortunately, this limits the depth of a study, which is why online archives are a valuable tool to expand or narrow down a study without affecting the researcher’s available resources.

Furthermore, compared to traditional archives, excavation in digital databases and online archives is incredibly fast, as it is possible to aggregate a large number of sources in a matter of seconds using keyword search. You can then choose to filter the results using meta-data like dates, publications titles and authors if so desired or even search for specific keywords within the given results. Although materials in traditional archives are also indexed and can be found through keyword search, the actual process of accessing these materials can take up valuable time. This does mean that you are less likely to happen upon unsolicited but welcome information.

Fortunately, digital archives like the EIMA allow you to access a scan of the publication in which the information was printed. In theory, this offers a great substitution for original documents and materials that would otherwise be available through traditional archives exclusively. In practice, however, the scans are not always of high quality or function as real documents would. For instance, in some cases, it is not possible to zoom in, which is never an issue with original sources. In other cases, as experienced in this study, the page has been cropped so you cannot verify information like page number or author, making it necessary to assume that the source has been documented without error by the digital archivist. This calls into question the authenticity of a source and may make scholars hesitant to use these materials in the future. On top of that, it shows that while scholars may be primarily interested in the content that a source has to offer, the form in which the information is presented can be of equal importance to determine the validity of a copy.

## Reflection | In Conclusion

While using digital surrogates inevitably leaves room for some mistakes, it is up to the scholar to determine whether this trade-off can be afforded. In this specific case, access and speed encouraged the exploration of a topic that would have otherwise been out of bounds. Although I deem it likely that these sources contain some errors that are now sustained by the history in Chapter 3, the alternative would be to not attempt a history of Aardman at all. In order to make readers aware of these implications, this reflection on the nature and impact of these sources is a vital part of research and should be included by other scholars who use sources obtained from online archives and digital databases.

Ultimately, scholars should aim to perform archival research that uses traditional and digital archives in tandem, as complementary parts of a study that integrates offline and online sources into one archival research. This way, topics that were previously limited geographically can be explored virtually. Thanks to digital archives, scholars are able to test ideas and gain an understanding of the scope of available sources for a research. Original, authentic sources can then



be examined in traditional archives, where sources can be validated and further serendipitous discoveries can be encouraged. Instead of substituting one for the other, future studies that are based on digital archival research should integrate both practices into one research strategy.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to explore digital archival research through a history of the British stop-motion animation studio Aardman Animations. This history sought to not only outline the studio's past productions, but also examine the studio's position within the British television landscape and the influence of British broadcasters on the success of the studio. This analysis would help to gain a better understanding of the growth of a company that began as a two-person cottage-industry outfit and grew into an internationally lauded media production company. The idea of constructing a comprehensive overview of Aardman's past was also fuelled by a gap in literature surrounding animation, in which a deficit of research surrounding stop-motion animation meant that works about Aardman were sparse. The scholarly analyses that included Aardman in their reviews of animation or broadcasting were either poorly documented in terms of referencing, based on personal accounts or focused on specific company aspects like marketing and management strategies. In order to produce an analysis of Aardman's position within the British television landscape, it was necessary to construct a history based on primary sources instead of the academically unreliable sources available. Because British film and television archives like the BFI National Archive were unavailable to this research due to geographical restrictions, primary sources were gathered from online archives. While digital databases and online archives offer features that help to improve digital archival research, there are a number of limitations that affect research, as also encountered in this study, which need to be mapped in order to engage critically with the primary sources obtained via digital archival research.

The first chapter of this study uncovered a lack of histories of stop-motion animation and animation on television that were attributed to a more wide-spread neglect of animation by media, film and television scholars. Recent attempts to address this deficit in research has led to accounts of television animation by Van Norris and even a study of stop-motion animated children's television programmes by Rachel Moseley. These studies are indicative of a shift that is taking place within animation studies, in which stop-motion animation and television animation are recognised as being worthy of scholarly attention. This growing interest has also led to a forthcoming anthology edited by Annabelle Honess Roe, which confirms the idea that analyses of Aardman, as a producer of stop-motion animation for both cinema and television, can produce valuable insights for animation studies as well as the field of television and film studies. The chapter also discussed other articles that address Aardman in some capacity. Although the articles that examined Aardman's marketing and management strategies were limited in their applicability to this research, the examinations of Channel 4 and its impact on the British animation industry indicated that British broadcasters likely played an important, if not fundamental role in the growth of Aardman.

The second chapter discussed the merits and limitations of digital archival research by mapping issues like the authenticity of original artefacts found in traditional archives versus the ease of access provided by digital archives. This chapter shed light on the convenience of access through keyword search functions and the ability to circumvent restrictions in terms of geographical access to archives. In terms of limitations, it is pointed out that keyword search is

limited in its scope and restricts serendipity in research; what is sought after is what is presented in the search results, but peripheral matters that may be of interest to research are unlikely to arise. This review also pointed out that digital archives help to preserve documents that may deteriorate over time. Thanks to digital preservation, the information contained in original artefacts like the entertainment industry papers and magazines used for this study will remain accessible long after the printed papers have disintegrated. As digital copies can be manipulated or are simply of low quality, efforts should be made to preserve the original artefacts, which enables scholars to verify aspects of the digital copies if necessary. This means that even if it is not the form that is of interest to the study but the information contained in the source, the original format will remain of importance for authentication of the source. For this reason, it is recommended that traditional and digital archives continue to exist in tandem, with scholars using both archives as tools to further their research. This chapter also highlights the need of engaging critically with primary sources when performing digital archival research. Instead of substituting original sources with digital copies one-for-one, a reflection on the affective, geographical and virtual proximity of the sources helps to understand how these sources may affect research.

The third chapter presented the history of Aardman, which began in 1966 when Aardman's co-founders met each other, although it would take ten years for the studio to be formed officially. This part of the study presented a mostly chronological overview of the studio, which addressed the inception of Aardman, its early work for the BBC and Channel 4, the start of the Wallace & Gromit franchise and its later venture in the feature-film industry. This overview was supplemented with information about developments that took place in the British television landscape, including governmental regulations that led to Channel 4 and ITV and the impending digital switch-over that inspired the BBC to set up digital channels like BBC Three, CBBC and CBeebies. The history uncovered that while Channel 4 was important for the overall bloom in the animation industry and also provided Aardman with commissions throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it was the BBC who played a fundamental role in commissioning the Wallace & Gromit shorts from Park, which helped put the studio on the map. This drew attention from international animation studios and feature-film producers like Disney and DreamWorks, leading to Aardman's first film *Chicken Run* and later productions like *Flushed Away* and *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*. While these productions were an indication of the international status that the studio had acquired, without the continuous financial support of British broadcasters, Aardman would have likely buckled under the pressure of being a Hollywood film producer. Ultimately, this history of Aardman suggests that the studio would not have been able to achieve its status as an internationally lauded company without the aid of British broadcasters.

The final chapter provided a reflection on the process of digital archival research by highlighting the various advantages and disadvantages faced while using online archives for the excavation of primary sources. This section highlighted the struggles of geographical proximity that were lifted by access to digital copies of sources that were otherwise available in archives abroad. The speed and ease of access were also considered advantageous for this research, as this meant that the study of Aardman and its history could continue whilst being able to go back to the archive to examine new inquiries without draining resources. While the use of digital archives improved access, this reflection also pointed out that databases can be limited in access due to paywalls or contain only a specific range of sources. On top of that, digital copies may be of low quality or contain mistakes, which makes it necessary to review the original artefact. This means that while many sources are instantly available, digital archives are not necessarily better or more inclusive. The reflection concludes with a recommendation that scholars use both types of archive to create the most comprehensive, exhaustive histories possible.

Ultimately, this study has aimed to evolve our understanding of Aardman and contribute to the shift within media studies that suggests that stop-motion and television animation should be examined further. Although this research comes with its own limitations in terms of the primary digital sources used for the construction of the history, the overview of Aardman's productions and achievements forms a solid foundation for any future research of Aardman that necessitates an overview of its history.

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- The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists*. Directed by Peter Lord, Jeff Newitt, Aardman Animations, Columbia Pictures Corporation, Sony Pictures Animation, 2012. Feature film.
- The Simpsons*. Created by Matt Groening, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television, Gracie Films, 1989-present. TV series.
- The Snowman*. Directed by Dianne Jackson, Jimmy T. Murakami. Written by Raymond Briggs, Snowman Enterprises, Channel 4 Television Corporation, TV London, 1982. Film.
- "The Wrong Trousers." Directed by Nick Park, Aardman Animations, 1993. Short film.
- Thunderbirds*. Created by Gerry Anderson and Sylvia Anderson, AP Films, ITC Entertainment, 1965-66. TV series.
- Timmy Time*. Created by Jackie Cockle, Aardman Animations, 2009-2012. TV series.
- Top Cat*. Directed by William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, Hanna-Barbera Productions, 1961-62. TV series.
- Top of the Pops*. Created by Johnnie Steward, BBC, 1964-2006. TV series.
- Vision On*. Directed by Ursula Eason and Patrick Dowling, BBC TV, 1964-76. TV series.
- Wallace & Gromit's Cracking Contraptions*. Directed by Chris Sadler and Lloyd Price, Aardman Animations, 2002. TV series.
- Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*. Directed by Nick Park and Steve Box, Aardman Animations, DreamWorks Animation, 2005. Feature film.
- "War Story." Directed by Peter Lord, Aardman Animations, Channel 4 Films, 1989. Short film.
- "Wat's Pig." Directed by Peter Lord, Aardman Animations, 1996. Short film.



**AARDMAN IN ARCHIVE** aims to explore digital archival research through a history of Aardman Animations. This research aims to present a comprehensive history of Aardman in which it seeks to examine the studio's position within the British television landscape and the influence of British broadcasters on the success of a studio that began as a two-person cottage-industry outfit and grew into an internationally lauded media production company. The need for this history arose from a deficit of academically reliable secondary sources and a general lack of scholarly attention to animation and stop-motion animation in particular. While it was found in the history that the British broadcasting industry played a vital role in developing Aardman into a renowned studio that attracted attention from international feature-film financiers, it was not the influence of Channel 4 but the BBC that proved to be fundamental. The history also shows that the continued support of British broadcasters remained crucial in the later years as it enabled an exploration of the feature-film market by providing a constant stream of revenue. While this exhaustive history forms a solid foundation for future analyses of Aardman, the use of primary sources obtained via digital archival research in order to construct this history of Aardman has its own limitations that affect the authenticity of this account. To by-pass these limitations in future research, this study suggests combining both traditional and digital archival research to create well-rounded histories.

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