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# The Limitations of Animations

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

The animated movie is traditionally light-hearted and fantastic. In such films improbable creatures in impossible worlds turn the laws of nature topsy-turvy, and happy endings and laughter prevail over terrors and tears. Children are the implicit audience. Or, at least, that's the way it was until the arrival on the scene of Ralph Bakshi in whose hands animation has emerged something altogether different.

Mr. Bakshi's first feature, "Fritz the Cat" (also the first X-rated cartoon), was

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## On Film

"American Pop"

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clearly not aimed at kids and in his later films, "Heavy Traffic" and "Coonskin," his interest wasn't in vivifying fantasy but in animating reality—in its grimmest, urban variety. We saw no pleasant figments of the imagination but grotesque versions of unsavory types such as pimps, pushers and prostitutes. His techniques have also tended towards the literal rather than the imaginary: In "Lord of the Rings" he even went so far as to animate by tracing live-action photographs. The implicit aims of all these efforts has been to provoke bitter rather than high-spirited laughter, to create gloomy rather than bright moods and to deliver complex and ambiguous messages rather than simple ones.

These are pretty much the intentions and methods of Mr. Bakshi's current film "American Pop"—though there are also considerable differences. Character and world are rendered in a much more straightforward fashion; the tone and texture are decidedly less violent and irreverent, and the filmmaker's scope is also larger than before. No longer content to treat the '60s as in "Fritz," the '50s as in "Heavy Traffic," he now presents us with a panoramic view of the whole of 20th Century America.

The film follows the fortunes of four generations of a single family, beginning with the Jewish immigrant boy, Zalmie, refugee from a Russian pogrom, and ending with Zalmie's illegitimate great-grandson, a blond and blue-eyed streetwise kid and sometime pusher named Pete.

What unites these various figures, aside from their family ties, is their involvement with pop music: Zalmie is a would-be vaudeville singer; his son, a promising jazz pianist; his son in turn a lyricist; while Pete becomes a rock star. Pop tunes (thus the film's title) are used to help situate these characters in their worlds, as are recognizable bits of history (the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire; gangland murders; images of World Wars I and II). Old newsreels and

stills are interspersed with the animated segments. Mr. Bakshi also attempts to adopt styles appropriate to the various eras. Silent film title cards appear in the pogrom sequence; the '40s are given the look of big band musicals. No matter the format, all are drawn so literally as to suggest tracing.

One certainly has to credit Bakshi for his extraordinary ambitiousness and impressive skill. Some of the sections of "American Pop" are both exquisite to look at and excitingly presented. Many reflect incredibly sharp powers of observation (the wonderfully apt way, for example, that candyman Pete walks and talks and keeps lowering and raising his "shades").

But "American Pop" has its problems. The film's focus is simply too diffuse, and the areas it does zero in on remain consistently underdeveloped. As a history of pop music, for example, the film is simply too jumbled; as a statement about the connections between pop culture and sensibility, it is much too superficial; while as a study of the relationship between fathers and sons, it never goes beyond the blatant and banal (Zalmie wants his son to "live my dream . . . love my life"—so what else is old?). The film also suffers from dramatic clichés and saccharine sentimentality that is quite startling from a previously biting and ironic filmmaker. Zalmie's father fails to escape from the Cossacks because he insists on completing a prayer and Zalmie's grandson, Tony, a city-bred junkie, finds his one true love in the clean Kansas cornfields.

But the film's most central problem lies in the very fact that it is animated. Unlike "Pinocchio" or "Dumbo," "American Pop" contains nothing that could not have been done much better with film clips and live actors. Mr. Bakshi's characters might not have felt so thin if played by real actors. For no matter how realistically rendered, how perfectly traced, animated figures remain simplified and generalized abstractions — reductive images of human beings that simply cannot bear much emotional weight.

This isn't a problem exclusive to Ralph Bakshi. Walt Disney usually failed when he attributed weighty emotions to human figures, and was always best when creating total fantasy and humor (singing mice, jolly dwarfs and so on).

What was true of Disney seems true of animation itself. Its natural habitat is make-believe; its most appropriate tone, light and humorous; its most suitable content, the simple, and its primary audience, children. "American Pop" makes this very clear. What Mr. Bakshi has managed to do in the end is not enlarge animation's possibilities but go against its very grain and emphasize its limitations.