



AUDACIOUS

ASPIRATIONS

CHRIS MELEDANDRI'S ABILITY TO DELIVER AUDIENCE- PLEASING STORIES THAT CONVEY A SENSE OF JOY IS BUILT UPON TRUST IN HIS OWN VISION—AND AN ABILITY TO CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE WHERE TALENTED ARTISTS CAN DO THEIR BEST WORK.

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For Chris Meledandri, founder and CEO of the box office-smashing animation studio Illumination Entertainment, character—not story—is king. And there’s a reason. Meledandri might be the ultimate people person. From the artists he collaborates with to the global audience he connects with to the characters he helps create, Meledandri is all about the human experience—even if that means portraying it through singing animals, video game villains or little yellow creatures with one eye.

“Chris’s standout trait is his commitment to portraying the authentic human experience in all his projects,” says Donna Langley, chairman and chief content officer at NBC Universal, of which Illumination is a division. “His high degree of empathy and unique point of view leads to finding the truth in what makes us all truly human.”

That empathy extends also to his collaborators. Writer Matthew Fogel (*Super Mario Brothers*, *Minions: Rise of Gru*) is most inspired by Meledandri’s faith in the creative process and the people he works with. “That faith inspires people to do better and better. And the faith he has in all the creative people, they also have in him,” Fogel says.

For Garth Jennings, writer and director of the *Sing* movies, that faith creates a beautiful symbiotic relationship that is built on trust, which he feels is rare in this business. “People are operating out of fear all the time,” Jennings says. “Chris is operating out of trust and a belief in the creative process. That allows everything to flourish.”

Meledandri then takes that love and respect for talented humans and channels it toward the viewer. “He is so hands-on and hyperfocused on the audience experience,” Langley says, noting Meledandri’s ability to know what the audience will connect with and then



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infusing his films with that feeling.

Langley marvels at Meledandri’s ability to capture the imagination of the elusive 18- to 35-year-old market using tactics that don’t feel like typical blatant marketing. “People didn’t know that they needed the Minions in their lives, but these lovable characters have permeated the culture, creating a global brand that reaches across our entire company.”

COMING INTO HIS OWN

Meledandri grew up in New York City with parents who took him to see movies from a very young age. They weren’t movies made for kids, but rather art house films the adults wanted to see, like *Midnight Cowboy*, *Easy Rider* and every Woody Allen movie. “Except for *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*. That was where they drew the line,” Meledandri recalls.

His folks loved stories and the dramatic process enough to even invest in some failed Broadway shows.

Meledandri was active in his school drama department and worked and volunteered at tiny off-off-Broadway theaters in New York. In his first year of college at Dartmouth, he was focused on pursuing a career as a stage manager and possibly directing for the stage. But he was soon bit by the film bug. “Once I took my first cinema class, I realized that this was the path for me, and I never looked back,” Meledandri recalls.

In college, his most substantial project was a documentary about director Michael Powell (*The Red Shoes*, *Peeping Tom*) coming to Dartmouth to teach a class. One of Powell’s dreams was to direct a movie based on Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea* trilogy. So the class filmed a sequence from the books that Meledandri cowrote and acted in.

A couple of years later, 21-year-old Meledandri was preparing to make a short film for a transfer term at NYU when his life took a dramatic turn: His father died unexpectedly of a heart

Sebastian Maniscalco, Jack Black, Seth Rogen, Charlie Day, Anya Taylor-Joy, Chris Melendandri, Chris Pratt and Mario video game franchise creator Shigeru Miyamoto at a screening of *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* in 2023.



attack, and Meledandri was unable to follow through with NYU.

Meledandri switched gears, moving to Los Angeles and taking a job as a gopher. It didn't take long for him to earn a reputation as one of the most respected and creative collaborators around.

Meledandri started out in Hollywood working for producer Daniel Melnick (*All That Jazz*, *Punchline*, *Footloose*). After paying his dues as Melnick's assistant, Meledandri was given opportunities working for the three producers of *Footloose* along with its director, Herbert Ross, gaining front-row experience in every facet of production.

"I was the second or third person, after the location manager, to arrive in Utah (where *Footloose* was filmed) and one of the last to leave," Meledandri recalls. "I was there for five months through the entire prep and production. Then I worked in marketing between the music and the film and post."

Meledandri responded to the contagious energy of collaboration

on set. "I just loved how all of these different influences and voices wove together to create something that felt seamless," he says.

From there, he cofounded The Meledandri/Gordon Company with Mark Gordon in 1987. Meledandri departed in 1991 to become president of Dawn Steel Productions, where he executive produced *Cool Runnings*, a successful live-action film for Disney.

After making a move to 20th Century Fox, Meledandri was put at the helm of the studio's animation wing. There he produced the successful *Ice Age* movies with Blue Sky Studios, the visual effects house he helped Fox acquire—but only after producing the box office debacle *Titan A.E.*, which nearly cost him his job.

In 2007, Meledandri left Fox to start Illumination. His strategy was to encompass a holistic process, from the inception of ideas through the marketing of movies to the afterlife of his films' characters. Producer Janet Healy left Fox to become the second

employee of Illumination. That's when the *Despicable Me* and *Minions* spin-off films took the world by storm.

"I have never drawn lines between production and creative, which allowed for the discovery of a breadth of talent in Janet that extended way beyond line producing," Meledandri says. "She deployed her vast experience and creative instincts to work side by side with me in the execution of my vision."

According to Healy, many people in the animation business emphasize story when it comes to creating content. But not Meledandri. "Chris always says, 'Story is important, but it's not the ultimate thing that makes our movies distinctive,' Healy says. "It goes back to his commitment to people and creating characters that ring true.

"You'll see that on the page, in the designs, what characters look like, what they wear, and how they act," adds Healy, who retired in 2017.

Illumination is now led by COO



Keith Feldman and four copresidents of production. Joy Poirel and Bill Ryan are based at the company's Santa Monica location. Bruno Chauffard and Nathalie Vancauwenberghe work abroad alongside Jacques Bled, president of Illumination Studios Paris.

"On every movie, we have younger producers who have all come up through the ranks of the company," Meledandri says.

When asked which of his more than 75 characters he's most like, Meledandri says, "There are analogies that have been made about me in relation to Gru (*Despicable Me*). I don't think it's just the bald head. But there's also a reason I felt so pulled to make *The Grinch*. At the heart of both those stories are tales of personal transformation."

Like the characters in *Cool Runnings*, who had never seen snow yet wanted to compete in bobsledding in the 1988 Olympics, Meledandri is drawn to those who have audacious aspirations.

"I respond to that journey of setting

out to do something that you know the world hasn't chosen you to do, but you're determined to get there and complete it," he says.

KEEPING COMPANY

Those who work with him depict Meledandri as a character from one of his movies: intelligent, magical, audacious, loyal, authentic. He identifies the strengths of the artists he works with and coaxes those strengths out.

"When I turned in the first scenes of *Cool Runnings*, it was full of Swedish ski bunnies in bed smoking pot," recalls Tommy Swerdlow, writer of that film and *The Grinch*. "Chris said to me, 'Brilliant. Great. Can you move it over here a little bit?'"

Swerdlow felt like his spirit was never shut down in the writing process. "Chris never messes with my artistry and my poetry. He has the ability to get what he wants and at the same time give me what I need."

Eric Guillon, character designer on the *Despicable Me*, *Sing* and *The Secret Life of Pets* films, cites Chris's ability to synthesize, analyze and make proposals. "His superpower is the ability to make several films at the same time while maintaining the same intensity, the same desire and the same energy for each of his films," Guillon says.

Jennings has learned from Meledandri to see producing as an art. He's observed how the accomplished producer can spin a magical potion between personalities and experience, even with all the conflicting elements. "Chris creates a way for all of this stuff to swim together to make a movie. That is an extraordinary gift that feels as close to a magic trick as anything."

Healy notes that when Illumination's international headquarters was set up in Paris, the founders structured the company very differently from other feature animation studios. "We inserted Chris and his point of view, his taste and his guidance at every critical stage of each production," she says.

Meledandri has his hands on every aspect from set and character design to how the camera is moving in the layout department to how performances look to final lighting and editing.

Healy further touts Meledandri's ability to articulate how to improve issues in both big and small ways. "His aesthetic, sense of story and that all-important sense of character—he's got them to such a level of sophistication. I've never seen anybody work that hard or be that smart."

Those smarts include Meledandri's marketing acumen. To promote Illumination features, the marketing team creates original content—short films that keep their brand top of mind on social media and keep the studio going between feature projects.

"When you finish a movie, you don't want to lay off 90 or 100 people. You've got to keep the pipeline full," Healy explains.

Clearly, Meledandri is onto something. Industry-tracking website The Numbers lists him as the #7 all-time top-grossing producer by domestic and worldwide box office. In 2014, Meledandri won the PGA's Outstanding Producer of Animated Theatrical Motion Pictures award for *Despicable Me 2*, which was also nominated for the Best Animated Feature Academy Award. All four *Despicable Me* movies and two *Minions* movies now make up the most successful animation franchise in history.

That success has garnered him high praise from high places. "Chris is a grand master of the imagination, and his company is the workshop of his dreams," says Steven Spielberg, who has frequently been in contact with Meledandri given that they are both in partnership with Universal. It's no wonder that Meledandri is receiving the PGA's 2025 David O. Selznick Achievement Award in Theatrical Motion Pictures—only the second animation producer to do so.



Q&A

WITH CHRIS MELEDANDRI

DO YOU HAVE A MANTRA WHEN YOU'RE MAKING A MOVIE? SOMETHING THAT FOCUSES YOU WHEN YOU START ON A PROJECT?

The closest thing I have to a mantra is to periodically return to what we started out trying to achieve. Our time frame for making these animated films is many years long, and that's an invitation to get lost. Making movies is a process where you're constantly problem-solving, and some problems loom so large that you confine yourself to taking detours. Going back to what the core objective was at the beginning becomes a touchpoint for guiding us through to the end.

DO YOU THINK SEEING SOPHISTICATED FILMS AT A YOUNG AGE

INFLUENCED YOUR WORK IN WHAT YOU DO NOW WITH KIDS MEDIA AND ANIMATION?

We make films for audiences of all ages, not just kids. I think that it definitely influenced my being drawn into cinema as a career. So much of my early exposure to life came through sitting in a theater and staring at that screen. It was a vibrant part of my learning about many aspects of adulthood. Storytelling became a language, a comfort zone for me. Ironically, I've ended up telling stories that have much more of a focus on conveying joy and entertaining audiences as opposed to more provocative films like the ones I grew up with.

WHAT HAS INFLUENCED YOUR TASTE IN

ANIMATION?

It really wasn't until my first son was born (in 1990) that I began to even watch animation. It started with the Disney renaissance of *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*. Simultaneously, my wife, son and I took a deep dive into (Japanese animation studio) Studio Ghibli. As my son got older, he came of age in the era of the Geraldine Laybourne Nickelodeon creations. So those were the three touchpoints for me in animation: Disney, Ghibli, and the earliest days of Nickelodeon.

WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU HAD KNOWN AT THE BEGINNING OF YOUR PRODUCING CAREER THAT YOU KNOW NOW?

A friend was away on a movie

and couldn't take his son to a final presentation of a film class, so I took him. The kids were all about 11 to 14. The teacher of the class said something that really resonated with me. He described the need to have faith in what the final outcome would be—because if you're consumed with trying to project forward, asking questions like, "How is this going?" at every turn, it becomes almost impossible to fully embrace the process of creation. That struck me because my natural state is always to be projecting into the future.

As a producer, I'm always thinking about where something is leading and the potential potholes that we might fall into. How are all these elements coming together? What can we do to not only anticipate but be prepared when problems occur? Where is the director's vision? Where is the film diverting from a director's vision?

Countless questions. They're not just creative. They're budget questions, scheduling questions. But it's important to have this other side where you go, "OK, I'm going to balance all of that with a core belief that we will emerge with something that is going to be wonderful."

It doesn't mean everybody's going to love it. It doesn't mean that it's going to be successful or not successful. The most important reason to balance it is not only for one's own sanity, but also to create an atmosphere for everybody to do their very best work.

If I'm too consumed with projecting forward, which is a very important part of my own job, I can very easily infect others around me with worries and anxiety. It's something I work on to this very day after all these years making movies.

WHAT DISCOVERIES HAVE YOU MADE AS YOU FORMED YOUR COMPANIES AND MOVED TO DIFFERENT STUDIOS?

I consider myself a late bloomer. It's

hard today for younger people to embrace the idea of being a late bloomer because the culture has fed us so many stories about people who have had extraordinary success in their 20s. Social media is fueled by people creating images of their lives that only show off certain aspects and frequently don't share the struggles.

If you're young, you grow up thinking that immediate meteoric success is going to determine whether or not you'll have a career. I don't think I really hit my stride until my 40s. I had flirtations with success—for example, *Cool Runnings*, or my little credit on *Footloose*. But I also made a bunch of movies that didn't work. Didn't deserve to work.

It didn't mean that I worked any less hard on those movies. I killed myself on those films. I had films where I was

ranked by how much money they lost, not made. I believe that I became more successful as I got in touch with what it was that I truly wanted to do. I had immense determination, but I hadn't quite found what excited me.

So when I talk to people who are starting out in their careers, I encourage them to locate their authenticity, regardless of what it is. For me, it was connected to my ability to recognize talent regardless of what anybody else thought, or what they had or hadn't done. That lit me up. Hence the name Illumination.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST LISTEN TO THAT INNER VOICE PROFESSIONALLY?

My first real experience listening to that inner voice was seeing the

Chris Meledandri with Comcast Chairman/ CEO Brian L. Roberts, Steven Spielberg, Donna Langley, and Comcast President Mike Cavanagh at the 2024 Prelude to the Olympics.



work of Blue Sky Studios, which we eventually purchased at Fox and made *Ice Age* with. I had seen their short clips of animated cockroaches dancing in MTV's first movie, *Joe's Apartment*. The film's director, John Payson, shared these scenes with me. When he saw me get excited, he said, "There's this little company in Westchester County, New York, that did these sequences. It's run by a guy named Chris Wedge. You should go find him."

It was 40 or 50 people, and their business was built around doing work in other people's commercials, or in this case, another person's film. They had a dream to make their own movies and they had immense talent. It was my listening to my own reaction to the work that ultimately led to me offering them *Ice Age*. That led to me trusting my own point of view.

WAS THERE A MOMENT WHEN SOMEONE BELIEVED IN YOUR TALENT REGARDLESS OF ANYONE ELSE'S OPINION?

Peter Chernin, former chairman and CEO of the Fox Group, backed me to make *Ice Age* coming off the massive failure of *Titan A.E.* Even after the success of *Ice Age* and its sequel and *Horton Hears a Who*, people asked, "Why are you going back to him?"

Whatever you set out to realize is not going to be met with affirmation prior to your doing it. You have to do it because of some inner belief. You also have to be prepared to be resilient when it doesn't work. And you can't keep walking down paths that everybody else has walked down already and expect to change the world. Even if you believe in something and it doesn't fit all of the commercial requirements of the moment, you have to find a way to convince people that it's worthy of being made. The creativity it takes for a producer to convince others to follow you, to trust

you, to back you—that is real creativity.

I remember once when Peter Chernin said, "If you bring a project and suggest that we do it and we don't, then somebody else does it and it works, you might have an impulse to say, 'I told you so.' What I'll say back to you is, 'You didn't sell it well enough. It's your responsibility to get this sold.'"

HOW DO YOU ENCOURAGE NEW TALENT IN YOUR COMPANY?

One of the things I'm most proud of is that over the last 16+ years, Illumination has created opportunities for more than 40 people to either direct or codirect an animated film or an animated short for the very first time. I wanted to give opportunity to people whose talent I believed in regardless of what they've done before. For me, the idea that the movies we make bring joy to audiences is so central to what we do: Tell stories that convey a sense of joy.

HOW DO YOU APPROACH MARKETING?

Illumination was founded with the belief that the most effective marketing isn't messaging, but rather creating short-form content that aspires to delight our audience. Above all else, we are making movies for our audience. In animation, one of the benefits of a long production process is to allow the filmmaking team to become the movie's first audience. Given our iterative process, we are able to learn from their reactions.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE PARIS FOR ILLUMINATION'S INTERNATIONAL HEADQUARTERS?

The competition for extraordinary digital artists was so tough here in the States. I needed to find somewhere we could gather 250 to 300 people who are top in their field. It was just

impossible, as a start-up, to do that here in the U.S. France was very advanced in visual effects work. Their ability to make exquisitely beautiful images was extraordinary. I found artists there with a like-minded sensibility. They also have one of the greatest animation universities, and other schools as well, feeding the talent base.

WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT FOR YOUR COMPANY TO BE INTERNATIONAL?

One of my aspirations for Illumination was to build a company where the creative influences were similar to the audience that we intended to reach—and that was cultures from all over the world.

My decision to create a company that had this global diversity and creative leadership came as a result of working with director Carlos Saldanha, who is Brazilian. Even though he speaks English and we could spend hours discussing story points, he was more comfortable in visual language. He would go off and work and come back with solutions that were in a visual language that was more helpful than all the talking we would do. I thought, oh, that's it—visual language is the language of animation. It's the unifying language that brings audiences together. And if I could lean into seeking out this kind of cultural diversity, that's what I wanted to do.

We made the first movie, *Despicable Me*, in France. The original concept was brought to me by a Spaniard. Our composers were Brazilian and American. It was directed by an American and a Frenchman. I was realizing my aspiration.

WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST INFLUENCE ON THE WAY YOU DO BUSINESS AND PRODUCE?

My mother was very savvy about film. Way before I decided to pursue this, she explained to me that a producer's role is to create the stage on which



Janet Healy and
Chris Meledandri
at the premiere of
*The Secret Life of
Pets 2* in 2019.

artists come together to do their very best work. By the way, this was the same mother who, after I made *Ice Age 2*, said, “What is it again that you do on these movies?”

That description has always stayed with me. That stage can be a concept for a movie. I can go to my collaborators and say, “I want to make a movie about the secret life of pets.” That becomes the stage or the foundation for a movie like *Sing*.

It is ultimately about enabling the creative contributions of others. I always reflect back on that when I look at one of our films. I know that when audiences leave the theater, what has entered into their consciousness and remains with them was created by directors and artists, and that makes me really happy.

I get great joy out of the process of watching, on a day-to-day basis, these wildly creative people will these

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stories to life, whether it’s inhabiting an incredible character design with a soul or the writing of a melody that will

carry us through a movie. That’s my joy. Knowing that I’ve given these people that stage is deeply satisfying. ■