The Case for
Adult Animation

What is... *Adult Animation?*

Adult animation—TV shows and movies like *BoJack Horseman, Bob's Burgers*, and *Into the Spider-Verse*—is more than just light entertainment. It has evolved into a **sophisticated medium** that blends *humor, artistry*, and *social critique*. For college students navigating independence, relationships, and identity formation, it can offer unique cognitive, emotional, and social benefits that promote key aspects of *personal* and *professional* growth.

In today's social and political climate, adult animation tackles **complex questions** about identity, power, ethics, and the human condition. It can spark *critical* conversations that bridge pop culture, academic inquiry, and *social change*. It invites viewers to reflect on their experiences through stories that balance absurdity and authenticity, offering space to process challenges with humor and imagination.
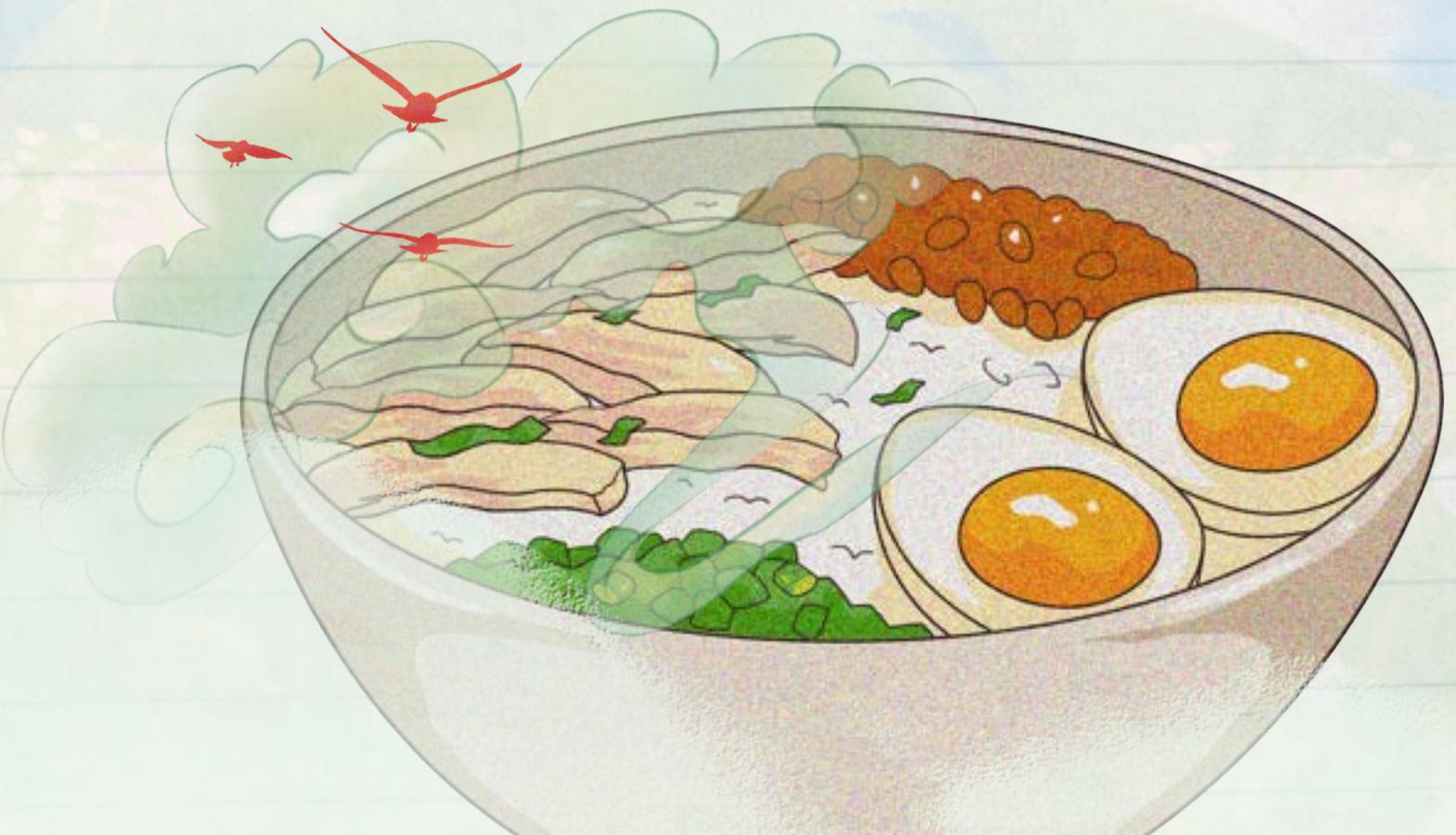
Adult animation goes beyond *recreation* and *leisure*. Engaging with these narratives can help students connect theory to lived experience, **developing skills** such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and ethical reflection. It can provide meaningful benefits across all four dimensions of the DU 4D Experience (*character, intellect, well-being, and purpose*).

"Adult" Animation Across Contexts

While "adult animation" is often treated as its own genre in the United States—typically defined by *mature* themes, language, or humor—the term is more **fluid** globally.

In many contexts, animation isn't inherently categorized by age but by *narrative style* and *artistic intent*. For instance, Japanese anime encompasses everything from children's programming to deeply philosophical dramas, yet many titles originally aimed at younger audiences have large adult followings abroad (Cooper-Chen, 2012).

Similarly, *Studio Ghibli* films like *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbor Totoro* are considered family media in Japan but are celebrated by adults worldwide for their emotional depth, artistry, and *timeless* storytelling. This broader understanding **challenges** Western assumptions about animation as "childish" and affirms its power as a medium for all ages.

- **What animated movies and TV shows did you love growing up?**
- What was special about these *characters* and *world-building*?
- Why do you think they *resonated* so much with you?
- Have you *revisited* them as an adult? How do they make you feel today?

- **As an adult, have you watched a new animated movie or TV show** that was *categorized* for children, but you really enjoyed it?
- Why do you think it resonated so much with your *current* self?
- What *lessons* can you apply to your life and college experience?

A brief history...

Adult animation has a **long** and **evolving** history that reflects broader cultural shifts in art, technology, and social commentary. This evolution has transformed animation into a powerful medium for exploring *social issues*, *identity*, and *meaning*—making it particularly resonant for college students navigating their own growth and discovery.

While animation in the early 20th century was largely aimed at family audiences, creators soon began experimenting with more mature themes. In the 1960s and 1970s, underground and **countercultural** artists pushed boundaries through experimental shorts and films like *Fritz the Cat* (1972), the first animated movie to receive an X rating in the U.S. These projects used animation as a vehicle for *satire*, *political critique*, and *social reflection*—showing that the medium could speak to adult audiences as powerfully as live-action storytelling.

The late 1980s and 1990s marked a turning point with the rise of television shows such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Beavis and Butt-Head*. These series combined humor, irreverence, and commentary on everyday life, shaping a new generation of viewers who grew up seeing animation as both comedic and culturally insightful. In the 21st century, the genre expanded dramatically through **streaming** platforms, which allowed creators to experiment with style, tone, and narrative complexity. Today's adult animation—from *BoJack Horseman* and *Tuca & Bertie* to *Arcane* and *Invincible*—embraces diversity, emotional depth, and sophisticated storytelling.

Why it matters

Watching animation—especially as an adult—offers meaningful **psychological** benefits that support *emotional regulation, creativity,* and *mental well-being*. Research in media psychology suggests that nostalgic or emotionally engaging animated content can activate positive memories, reduce stress, and foster a sense of comfort and continuity during times of change (Lui et al., 2019).

The combination of vibrant visuals, humor, and symbolic storytelling provides a *safe space* to process complex emotions, often helping viewers **externalize** and reflect on experiences such as anxiety, loneliness, or uncertainty. Because animation allows abstract ideas like grief, identity, or moral conflict to be represented visually and metaphorically, it can promote *cognitive reappraisal*, a coping mechanism linked to greater resilience and empathy (Ito-Jaeger, 2022).

Adult animation is also a rapidly **growing** industry. According to market research, the global adult animation market was valued at approximately USD 4.5 billion in 2024, with projections pointing toward USD 9.8 billion by 2033 (Business Research Insights). In the U.S., demand for adult animation rose by about 151% between January 2020 and October 2023, while the supply of new adult animation content rose by only 51% during the same period (Parrot Analytics).

- **When was the last time you felt or experienced nostalgia?**
- What activity or *environmental* cues induced the feeling?
- When you are feeling stressed or anxious, what practices or *pieces of media* can you turn to for comfort?
- Where do you think nostalgia comes from? Is it purely chemical? Or might it be something *deeper*?

- **How does the evolution of adult animation reflect changes in society** e.g. *generational, demographic,* and *technological* shifts?
- In what ways might adult animation be *shaping* society and influencing today's cultural trends? What examples can you think of?
- Which do you think is *driving* this relationship? *Animation* or *society*?

Benefits for College Students

For college students navigating *pressure* and *transition*—social, personal, academic, and professional—engaging with adult animation can be both **restorative** and **reflective**, offering a balance of escapism, insight, and emotional grounding. Today's adult animation features *complex, flawed, multifaceted* characters who model creative risk-taking, emotional honesty, and intellectual curiosity—traits that are vital to thriving in college and beyond.

By engaging with these stories critically and thoughtfully, students can develop *deeper insight* into themselves and the world around them to serve the **public good**. It can be both intellectually stimulating and personally enriching, becoming a meaningful tool for growth across all four dimensions of the DU 4D Experience (*intellect, well-being, character,* and *purpose*).

Curiosity & Intellect

Adult animation use satire, irony, and social commentary to **challenge** norms and assumptions. For example, *Into the Spider-Verse* challenges traditional hero narratives and uses visual innovation and storytelling to reflect complex ideas about individuality, diversity, and perspective-taking. Engaging with these narratives encourages students to think **critically** about *society, culture, norms, beliefs, systems, media, technology, power, etc.*

Recognizing layers of **meaning**—such as subtext, symbolism, and parody—strengthens *analytical reasoning* and supports intellectual curiosity across disciplines. Research shows that for both children and adults, animation **simplifies** complex ideas, bridges gaps, and fosters *cultural appreciation* (Choudhury, 2019). For college students developing skills such as critical analysis, media literacy, and self-reflection, adult animation functions as a *culturally relevant text* they can interrogate.

Emotions & Well-being

Adult animation frequently explores themes such as **mental health**, identity crises, grief, addiction, and existential angst in ways that feel accessible and symbolic. For example, *BoJack Horseman* grapples with depression and self-destruction, and *Big Mouth* tracks puberty and emerging sexuality. The medium's **visual freedom** allows for representation of *internal* states (e.g., hallucinations, metaphorical sequences) that live-action often cannot depict.

Research shows that animation can aid mental health-oriented reflection. By combining elements of *narrative, play,* and *digital art therapy*, animation creates a safe space for individuals to engage with **complex truths**, reconcile sense of self, and practice new behaviors and perspectives (Coughlan et al., 2021). For students dealing with stress, change, and identity exploration, adult animation can serve as a **mirror**, a release valve, and a space for *introspection*.

Emotions & Well-being

Choose **1 emotion** from the chart below and **draw** what it feels like.

- *If the emotion had to take on a physical form, what would it look like?*
- *What would it be doing, with who, and in what environment?*
- *Be as imaginative and out-of-the-box as you can. Lean into the non-human, abstract, fantastical, surreal...*
- *Use colors to bring your drawing to life. Include dialogue boxes or find other ways to visualize communication or the passage of time.*
- *You can design a single frame, or illustrate a few scenes in a comic-book style. List the emotion at the top of the page.*

Emotion: _____

Community & Character

Adult animation often builds vibrant fan communities that foster dialogue, connection, and **belonging**. For example, the *Bob's Burgers* fandom is known for its warmth, creativity, and inclusivity as fans authentically engage through *art, memes, cosplay,* and *online communities.* Engaging with others around shared interests can enhance social well-being and communication skills. In college, participating in such fandoms or using them as *cultural touchpoints* can support relationship building and identity exploration.
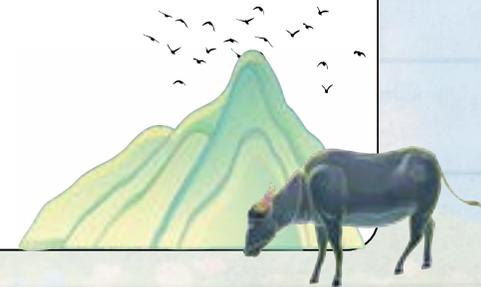
Animated worlds can also push boundaries of **representation** and storytelling, allowing students to explore *diverse identities, cultures,* and *moral questions* in ways that live-action media sometimes cannot (Kumar & Kumar, 2025). The diversity of themes allows students to see aspects of their own identity represented, and to engage **empathetically** with others' difference. These narratives can prompt self-reflection and help students *clarify their values* as they shape their adult identities.

- **Think about a movie or TV show you love.** How does it make use of satire, symbolism, or subtext? What statements does it make about *society, culture, norms, beliefs, systems, media, technology, power, etc.?*
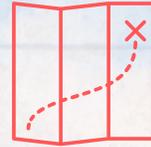
- **Have you ever taken a big creative risk** (e.g. in planning an event or developing a project) and it paid off? How did you deal with the *uncertainty* and *trust your instinct?* How can you draw on this strength in the future?

- **Do you currently belong to any associations or fandoms?** How did you become introduced to this community? How do you *engage* and *support* one another? Are there are any *new* fan communities you are curious about?

Creativity & Purpose

Animation as a medium thrives on **imagination** and **innovation**. Its unique ability to visualize the *impossible* and *surreal*, and employ devices like *non-linear narrative* and *visual metaphor*, can spark creative thinking and inspire students in fields from art and storytelling to engineering and design (Praveen & Srinivasan, 2022). For example, *Flow* (2024) prioritizes dialogue-free storytelling and imaginative visual design, inviting viewers to interpret emotion, resilience, and cooperation purely through *movement, sound,* and *imagery.*

Watching how creators construct **entire worlds** and **narratives** can also offer insight into collaboration, determination, and *purposeful innovation.* When creators take risks in form or content (e.g. *producing a dark animated drama rather than something purely comedic*), it gives others permission to bend and break the rules. Given that the adult animation market is *rapidly expanding,* students interested in media, animation, storytelling, or even entrepreneurship can see new *viable* pathways and emerging sectors.

Have you ever considered a career in the animation industry?

- What talents and **skills** do you bring to the table? Which ones do you need to learn and develop? Where can you *access* these resources?
- Who in your social circle and local community can you **collaborate** with to create something animated e.g. *a short 1 minute video for YouTube?*
- What kinds of stories might you be interested in telling? Who do you think should be **represented**? How might you take advantage of the medium of animation to create something *truly unique?*

Curated Watchlist

Looking for a place to start?

Here are curated lists of adult animation TV shows and movies covering a range of genres (*family media, comedy, romance, fantasy, sci-fi, horror, etc.*) Most were released in the past decade, with some **iconic titles** going back to the 1980s and 1990s. The world of animation is expansive, and this list is far from exhaustive.

Most titles are available on streaming services (*Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, HBO Max, Disney+, Paramount+, Apple TV+*). We encourage you to source these titles **ethically** and **responsibly**, and ensure that the creators are compensated for all the years of hard work, expertise, and *painstaking artistry* put into these projects.

Once you make a selection and source the title, you can plan a **watch party** with your friends, roommates, and loved ones to share in the experience. Use the *discussion questions* provided at the end of the lists to reflect on the piece you watched and *critically engage* with its themes and lessons.

Curated TV shows

- The Midnight Gospel
- Common Side Effects
- Scavengers Reign
- Carol & The End of the World
- Over the Garden Wall
- BoJack Horseman
- Star Trek: Lower Decks
- Invincible
- Steven Universe
- Adventure Time
- Big Mouth
- Human Resources
- Gravity Falls
- Owl House
- Amphibia
- Samurai Jack
- Tuca & Bertie
- Primal
- Love, Death & Robots
- Harley Quinn
- Pantheon
- Krapopolis
- Arcane: League of Legends
- Trese
- Blood of Zeus
- Ninja Kamui

- Blue Eye Samurai
- Devil May Cry
- Devilman Crybaby
- Twilight of the Gods
- Castlevania (+Nocturne)
- Long Story Short
- Scott Pilgrim Takes Off
- Tomb Raider: The Legend of Lara Croft
- Avatar: The Legend of Korra
- Bob's Burgers
- The Great North
- Archer
- Beastars
- Hazbin Hotel
- Helluva Boss
- Invincible
- Undone
- The Second Best Hospital in the Galaxy
- Creature Commandos
- Neon Genesis Evangelion
- Cowboy Bebop
- Major Lazer
- Wolfwalkers
- X-Men '97
- Moonrise
- Æon Flux

Curated Movies

- Loving Vincent
- Flow
- Persepolis
- Your Name.
- Mary and Max
- I Lost My Body
- The Breadwinner
- Ghost in the Shell
- Paprika
- Flee
- Coraline
- Corpse Bride
- A Scanner Darkly
- Ne Zha (+2)
- Entergalactic
- Fixed
- The Witcher: Sirens of the Deep
- Lost in Starlight
- The Summit of the Gods
- Kubo and the Two Strings
- Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio
- Orion and the Dark
- The Dark Crystal (+Age of Resistance)
- Khalil Gibran's the Prophet
- My Life as a Zucchini

- Belle
- The Wild Robot
- The Book of Life
- Fantastic Mr. Fox
- Nimona
- The Iron Giant
- The Princess and the Frog
- The Hunchback of Notre Dame
- Big Hero 6
- Onward
- Elemental
- Wall-E
- Wreck-It Ralph
- Strange World
- Predator: Killer of Killers
- April and the Extraordinary World
- The Last Unicorn
- The House
- The Red Turtle
- Princess Mononoke
- Howl's Moving Castle
- Castle in the Sky
- Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind
- Mary and the Witch's Flower
- Prince of Egypt

Curiosity *& Intellect*

- What *social, political,* or *philosophical* questions does the story raise, either directly or through satire and symbolism?
- How does it encourage you to think differently about *real-world* issues?

Emotions *& Well-being*

- How does this piece of animation portray complex emotions such as *anxiety, grief,* or *joy*—and what storytelling or visual choices help you *connect* with those feelings?
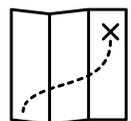
Community *& Character*

- In what ways does the story explore *belonging, family,* or *community*?
- How does its message connect to your own identity, values, and sense of social responsibility?
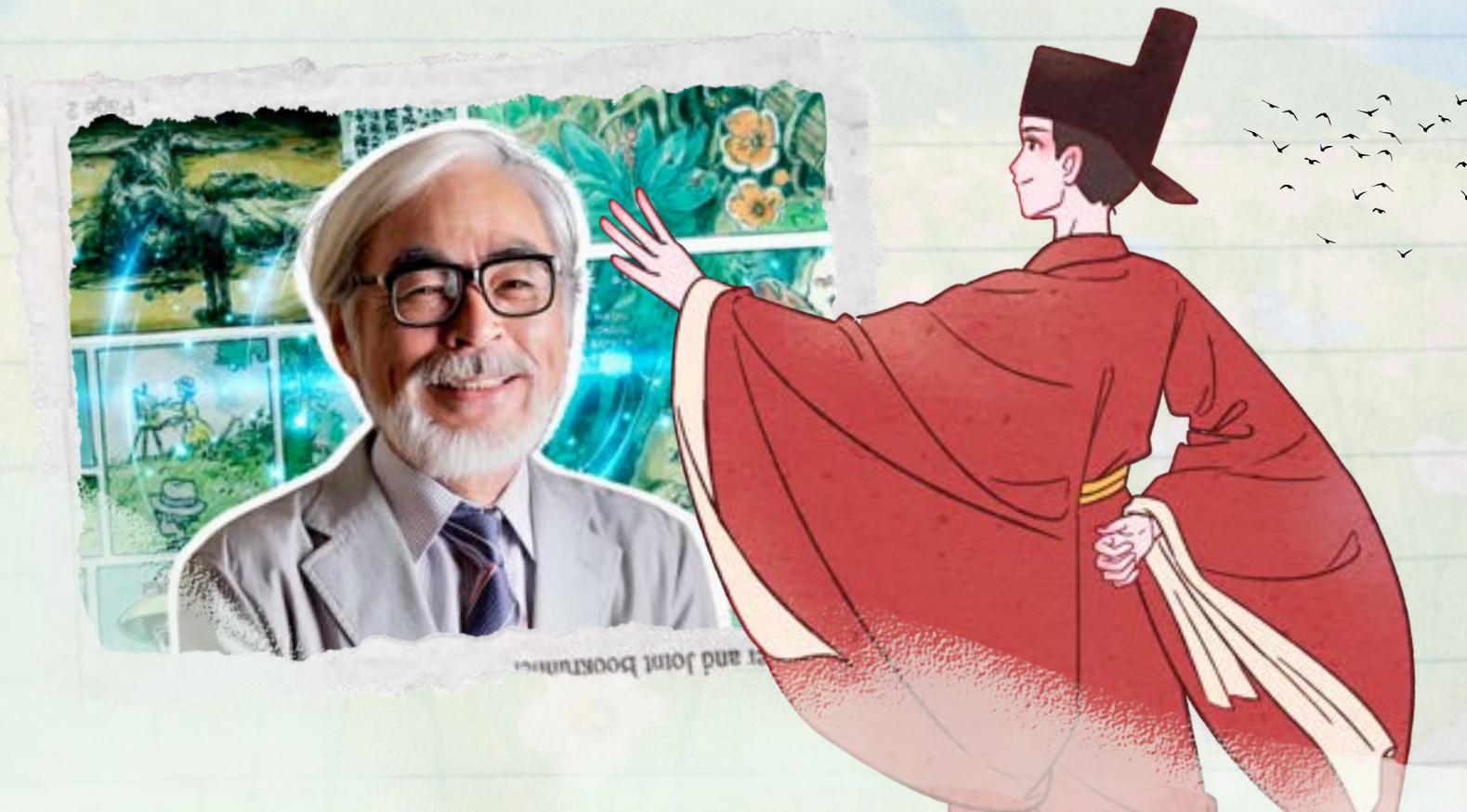
Creativity *& Purpose*

- In what ways does the animation's *style, pacing,* or *narrative structure* break convention and *challenge* norms about what animation "should" be?
- How might these creative choices inspire *new ways* of approaching challenges or expressing ideas in your own work?

Studio Ghibli & the Legacy of Miyazaki

Hayao Miyazaki and *Studio Ghibli* have left an enduring legacy on global animation, reshaping how audiences and creators alike understand the medium's artistic and emotional potential. Through films such as *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *My Neighbor Totoro*, Miyazaki elevated animation to the level of **cinema** and **fine art**—melding hand-drawn craftsmanship with profound storytelling about *nature*, *humanity*, and *moral complexity*. His works emphasize empathy, ecological awareness, and the quiet strength of ordinary people, inspiring generations of animators to approach their craft with **intentionality** and care.

Miyazaki's animation style is renowned for its emotional subtlety and *deep reverence* for everyday beauty. His films often blend the fantastical with the **ordinary**, capturing small, human gestures in the most magical of worlds. His attention to atmosphere and pacing encourages viewers to slow down and notice details, cultivating *mindfulness*. Miyazaki's use of layered backgrounds, fluid motion, and organic color palettes gives his work a warmth and texture **rarely** found in digital animation today.

Adult Animation **Masterclass**
From "cartoons" to groundbreaking cinema

K-Pop: Demon Hunters

- *K-Pop: Demon Hunters represents a growing fusion of global pop culture and animation, blending Korean music, mythology, and aesthetics to tell stories that resonate across borders.*
- *Its vibrant style and focus on female protagonists highlight how animation can celebrate cultural identity while challenging genre norms, expanding representation for young women and Asian creators in global media.*

Jibaro **(Love, Death + Robots)**

- *The 'Jibaro' episode of Love, Death + Robots stands out as a technical and emotional masterpiece—merging motion-capture performance with surreal visual storytelling.*
- *Its dialogue-free narrative about desire, greed, and trauma invites viewers to interpret meaning through movement, sound, and symbolism, showcasing how animation can evoke visceral psychological and moral reflection without words.*
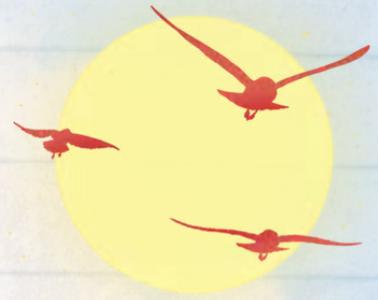
Laika Studios

- *Laika Studios has redefined stop-motion animation through films like Coraline, Kubo and the Two Strings, and ParaNorman, pairing meticulous craftsmanship with darkly imaginative storytelling.*
- *Their innovative blending of practical effects and digital technology pushes the boundaries of what hand-made animation can achieve, and their narratives often center themes of resilience, belonging, and courage—offering rich lessons in perseverance and creative integrity.*

Thank You!

Please take a few minutes to give us some **feedback on your experience** using this zine workbook.

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