

# Cinephile

The University of British  
Columbia's Film Journal



# Alchemical Animations

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respectfully acknowledge that the UBC Vancouver-Point  
Grey academic campus is located on the traditional,  
ancestral, unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples,  
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Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and saílłwataʔł (Tsleil-Waututh)  
Nations.***

***We seek through this statement to acknowledge the  
privileges we have been granted due to the ongoing legacies  
of settler violence, colonial occupation, and dispossession  
of this land.***



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# CINEPHILE VOL. 18.2



UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

**JADE COURCHESNE**

**DAVID WU**

**JENNY YANG**

COVER ART AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

**EMILIE SURETTE**

FACULTY ADVISOR

**DR. CHRISTINE EVANS**

PROGRAM ADMIN

**CAMERON CRONIN**

PRINTING

**EAST VAN GRAPHICS**



Scholars

Artists

# Sean Macdonald

Sean Macdonald is Associate Professor of Chinese Studies at Huron University, where he lectures on Chinese language, culture, and media. He has published on animation, modernism, aesthetics, and film and media studies.

# Gabrielle Berry

Berry is a PhD candidate in *Cinema and Media Studies*, whose research focuses on the intersections of sound, deaf, and disability studies.

# Susan Napier

Napier is the author of *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art* and a professor in International Literary and Cultural Studies at Tufts University in Massachusetts, USA.



# Yojevika

@Yojevika  
yothegardener.carrd.co/#growyourown  
toyhou.se/Yo\_the\_Gardener  
instagram.com/yo\_the\_gardener/

Yo the Gardener is a freelance artist active in the adoptable community online, creating character designs and animated works inspired by flora and fauna.



# Ryan Hanretta

undertonefx.com  
artstation.com/ryandex108

Ryan is a real-time visual effects artist at *Undertone FX*. His work features in a range of games from smaller fantasy titles to *Netherrealm's* most recent *Mortal Kombat 1*.



# Ru

@cozyspell  
vgen.co/cozyspell  
cozyspell.carrd.co/  
cozyspell.art/

Ru is a freelance artist who returns to art through the lens of healing, hence their cozy theme. They currently take commissions, including for animation, on VGen.



# Lynn Fong

@trianglart  
tumblr.com/trianglart  
twitter.com/trianglart?lang=en  
instagram.com/trianglart/

Based in New York, Lynn is an artist and animator whose broad range of work reflects on their experiences as a queer Chinese-American.



# Chia

@ChiaSeed  
chiaseed.itch.io/a-hint-of-osmanthus

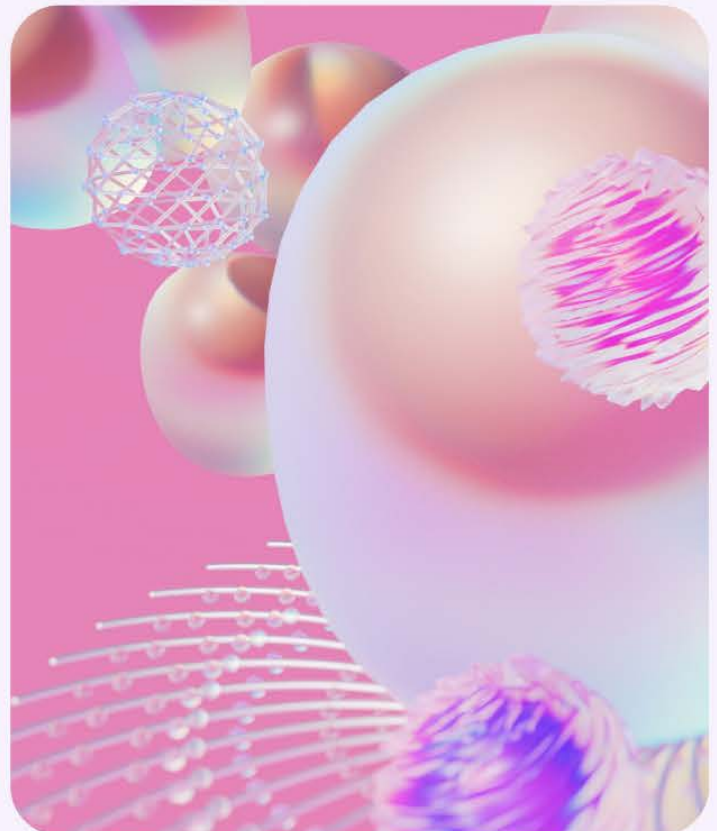
Chia is an Australian-based artist working in design for digital technologies, and has worked in animation for personal projects.



# Sharlene Yap

@snickerduu, @\_yapsharlene  
x.com/\_yapsharlene  
youtube.com/@shar  
tumblr.com/snickerduu  
yapsharlene.artstation.com/resume

Sharlene Yap is a Filipino-Chinese web developer and artist whose commissioned, original, and fan animations can be found on her various artist platforms.



Courtesy of Emilie Surette

# THANK YOU TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES



# FLIPBOOKS AND ELIXIR



## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

JADE  
COURCHESNE

In the first flipbook I made, a peppermint tea-bag with googly eyes tries to jump into a mug and misses the rim, then flops onto a doily. I had a few Post-it notepads lying around (and lots of time), and later recorded the animation with sound effects from the *Super Mario Bros.* Nintendo game.

A couple of years later, I showed it to my six-year-old cousin and she called me a witch.

I return to the word *alchemical* as an intriguing starting point for our issue, given the similarities between the speculative philosophies of alchemy and the transformative nature of animated works. Despite my interest in making flipbooks and other small animated projects, I never got the hang of apps like Blender or Aftereffects and fell into a new interest through teaching. I had just started working in a university classroom and felt underprepared to navigate the questions of a room full of undergraduates, whose fearsome and expectant stares seemed to me tremendously intimidating. As I eased into the semester, I found that animated media examples offered the most effective starting points when delving into film theory and history. For instance, I introduced our week on sound design with Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and encouraged ethical questions with clips from Jonas Poher Rasmussen's *Flee* (2021). The response was

overwhelmingly positive — many students could effectively channel their nostalgia for hand-drawn animation into productive conversation and were disarmed by the unexpected case studies.

Over the past two years I continued to research active learning practices and critical media literacy, and found myself revisiting the work of Vivian Vasquez and Debbie Reese on the importance of fostering analytical, flexible ways of knowing in everyday curricula. Reese is especially dedicated to the unlearning of dichotomous thinking and the integration of Indigenous authors' works in the classroom. She urges instructors to consider persisting stereotypes in popular media and prompts students to evaluate issues of cross-cultural equity and unchecked prejudice by interrogating their texts' biases and intent. Working with *alchemical* animations in the classroom, therefore, means mindful, participatory forms of learning supported by adaptive pedagogical techniques.

Anyway, making a mug of peppermint tea doesn't exactly make me a master of alchemy but the process of its animation offers lots of possibilities for creative play and childlike whimsy, even if it prompts a weird compliment or two from a kid.

Jade Courchesne

CO-EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
Design Courtesy of Emilie Surette



CHAPTER PREVIEW:

# JAY LEYDA WATCHES CARTOONS

DR. SEAN MACDONALD



The selection in this issue is taken from an early version of the final chapter of his book, *Animation in China: History, Aesthetics, Media*.

***We Need a Mickey Mouse for China — Jia Zhaozeng (1988)***

“The past few years television programming has become very rich. As an educational worker, I am concerned about children’s programming. I always feel something is missing, but what? That would be a made in China animated series welcomed with open arms by the majority of children.

Every Sunday, the first program on China Central Television is *Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck*. I am an art teacher, as well as someone who has published cartoons in quite a few children’s publications. Ordinarily I am the type of person who really likes watching animation, but after watching, my interest dropped drastically so that I stopped watching. Even though the technique exhibited in this series is admittedly very high, especially from the point of view the design of the movement and the movement itself. Neither Japanese nor Chinese can compare here. Of course this has to do with the technology. On account of the recording equipment we use, there’s no way we can achieve this kind of liveliness of movement. As for the content, it’s always the same genre, every story stays within the same structure, really senseless. When I was small I watched Disney’s *Dumbo*, a production that brought together animation, live actors, and puppet models in one film which was so groundbreaking, sympathetic, and fascinating, that it has left an impression on me ever forty years after I first saw it. The early Mickey Mouse too also used interesting plot structures, not like the commercial films they make nowadays which are a real waste of the audience’s time.

Frankly I find the Japanese animated series *Astro Boy* more interesting because the plot shows more promise of being an inspiration for children. But the production techniques are still inferior to Mickey Mouse.

Even though I really do not enjoy watching *Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck*, I have to admit that when the show is on my children and grandchildren will wait in front of the television. My two-year-old grandson really enjoys this show. Although he still cannot understand a television series, *Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck* can hold his attention for the duration.

As a result I wonder, shouldn’t we have our own animated television show? Shouldn’t we have shows able to hold the attention of a two year old?”

This short essay on children’s animation by Jia Zhaozeng, a *manhua* artist, but his critique emerges from not only his professional position, but from his social position as well. He acknowledges the technical accomplishment that a Disney studio animation represents, as well as the drawing power of Disney productions for children. Jia’s comments also signal a shift in the PRC to daily television programming had probably been going on for at least a decade when he wrote this in 1988. As Niklas Luhmann notes, programming for television is a matter of

fitting content into “rubrics and templates” determined by “[t]ime and available space.”[1] The formatting, the scheduling, the need to fill up space, these things affected content in new ways in the PRC after television became a dominant medium. The way television programming emerged in particular markets still partially determines the format and presentation of online content as well. McLuhan claimed a “new” medium might use an “old” medium as content, for example, a movie might use “a novel or a play or an opera” as content.[2]

McLuhan was right to get away from a literary analysis of “content,” but part of the medium *is* the message delivered by content (the term “content provider” is not coincidental), and the content also has to do with the format of the medium. So nowadays although the online media are fairly open-ended in form, the form of online media is determined by “older” media like the film (as a duration), or the television series as a series of episodes (which can now be accessed without the limits of weekly schedule).

***A Letter For The Shanghai Animation Film Studio — Jiang Zemin***

You have produced an animated series based on a selection of stories about young foreign and Chinese heroes from the past and present. This is a very meaningful project. Using excellent works to inspire people is an important task on the cultural front. Children are the hope and future of the Chinese nation. In the end, the important task in the realization of the goal of the third step in China’s socialist modernization will fall on the shoulders of the present generation of children. It is the historic responsibility of literature and art workers to help children, from the time they are small, to stand tall and to vigorously develop and firmly establish the long-range ambitions of our nation. Literature and art workers must ensure our children, as the new generation of socialism, foster idealism, morality, culture, and discipline. Hopefully the vast numbers of animation arts workers can, with the guidance of the Party, ceaselessly promote thoughtful, visually stunning, and superb works of outstandingly unified animation art that can provide a higher quality of spiritual nourishment in greater amounts, which in turn will allow images of our own animated heroes to become the models and friends for the broad masses of children. Jiang Zemin, August 28, 1995.

Jiang Zemin’s letter to the SAFS comes at a crucial time in animation history, and an important time for redefining animation within the sectors of cultural production

in the PRC. Jiang Zemin is referring primarily to a series *Zigu yingxiong chu shaonian* (Heroic Children in History), a series of one hundred five to six minute

shorts featuring heroic models of children from history. Jiang Zemin legitimates the series by emphasizing the didactic aspects. The few I have watched online are fairly

[1] Luhman is discussing news programming here. But I believe the problem of format is not unique to news programs. In his discussion of entertainment, Luhman unfortunately chooses to reduce this genre of media to the novel.

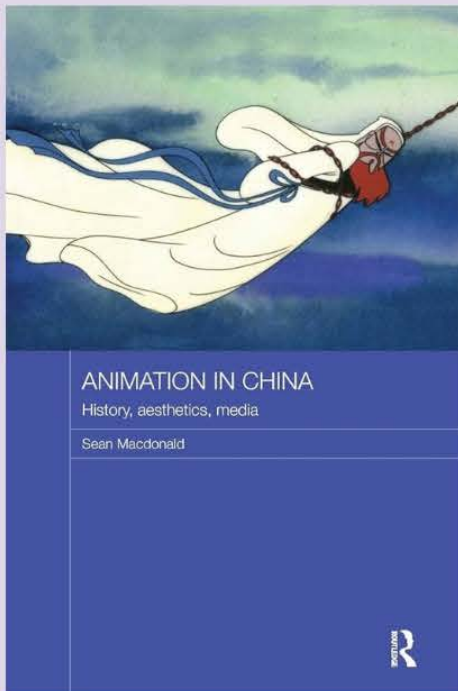
[2] “For the ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind. The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as ‘content.’ The content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera. The effect of the movie form is not related to its program content. The ‘content’ of writing or print is speech, but the reader is almost entirely unaware either of print or of speech.” See McLuhan 1994: 18.



well done, but they have the feeling of being “spots,” like short public service announcements about good children. That Jiang would write such a letter to the SAFS is interesting, since animation had been taking off in the PRC since the 1980s, and the SAFS was hardly the only animation producer at this time. Jiang’s *jingshen liangshi*, literally spiritual or mental grain, which I have translated here as spiritual nourishment, recalls an articulation made by Chen Bochui during the “Discussion of Animated Cinema” some thirty six years earlier which referred to cultural production for children with the same metaphorical term.[3] This metaphor for film production performs a triple function. First, the metaphor establishes film as a product of labor. Secondly, the term is a reminder of the ideological aspect of filmmaking. And thirdly, the metaphor occurs within a policy consistently upheld by the CCP that quantifies production. Film retains the function as a medium used to deliver messages, and a quantifiable product which can be projected as quotas. However, despite the metaphorical implications of film production as a product within Party cultural policies and modernization strategies, Jiang Zemin’s focus on animation and film arise within the context of the conceptualization of production, an abstraction of the production process.

In an article published two years before Jiang’s letter to the SAFS, Bao Jigui commented on recent reforms to animated film production. According to Bao, from 1986 to 1991 the number of animation studios increased in the PRC from one to fifty studios; however, only ten studios were actually producing local films, the rest were outsource studios for foreign animation studios. Bao estimates that the ten studios producing for the domestic market produce around fifty or sixty films, of which only ten hours will be broadcast on television stations. He estimates that American, Japanese, Canadian, French and Yugoslavian studios produce around fifteen hundred to two thousand hours, whereas from the founding of the PRC, the total animation produced in the PRC is around six

hundred minutes. At this time, reporting numbers was dour, things have certainly picked up since this time (more on that below). Also, the producers in the United States and Japan would have been producing for at least a couple of decades for television, which is a medium that demands filling time slots with anything that moves (although the people may not blink. I must admit my own experience as a consumer of American television cartoons prejudices me here). But the most somber part of Bao’s report concern the SAFS which had, according to Bao, dropped in 1991 to a profit level of 470,000 RMB from a high in 1986 of 1,440,000. Thus, by the time Jiang Zemin addresses his letter to the studio, the SAFS was relying on subsidies to finance production (perhaps this contributed to the public service format of *Heroic Children in History*). Bao attributes the causes to the problems with the national animation industry to the planned economics of the state (apparently by the 1980s, the state permitted 38 animation productions a year, 35 for SASE, two for Changchun Film Studio, and one for the Liaoning Educational Film Studio). Bao’s proposal is for the China Film Company to open up animation to the market by 1994 (Bao Jigui 1993).



Ian Condry makes the case for what he calls the “democratic capitalism” of manga production in Japan. Condry acknowledges the anime industry is threatened by the long hours and low pay, but he stresses the role of manga in the popularity of anime. The popularity of manga are not reliant on promotion and advertising but the popularity of titles amongst readers, and “about 60% of anime programs are based on manga series.” As Condry puts it: “Manga’s success as a media form relies on the feedback loop

between producers and audiences” (Condry 2013: 106-107).

Of course, what works in one market cannot be simply imported into another market, especially for content like manga and anime that relies first on establishing a local audience. But the success of Japanese manga and anime globally is really quite remarkable. In Hong Kong and Taiwan Japanese manga and anime have been a part of local mass media and popular culture for some time. People I spoke to told me there is still a gap

between the content of the two forms in the PRC where more freedom seems to exist in print than in television and film. The weekly *Zhiyin manke* manga weekly is published in Wuhan and boasts a readership of 7.2 million copies. At its height in 1995, the Japanese *Weekly Shonen Jump* had a readership of 6.53 million (see “The Rise and Fall of Weekly Shonen Jump”). But the relationship between manga and anime in the Chinese market is not nearly as close as it is in Japan.

### Ad Copy for *The Dreaming Girl* (梦里人, 2002) — dir. Li Jianping

A 26-episode series is in production called *The Dreaming Girl*. The series is based on a manga of the same name by Yao Feila, material serialized over a few years and critically successful with a large number of young readers. The series depicts the high school student, Li Mengling and her friends Sun Yuzhou, Guo Youyong, Wen Mo, and Cowboy, a young American woman, as they grow-up into maturity while pursuing their dreams. The series shines a light on the everyday experiences of growing up, reflects the open-minded and optimistic attitudes of contemporary young people, and expresses their uniquely rich emotional life while revealing their healthy and vibrant imaginations. The series is “positive reinforcement film for young people” filled with romantic warmth and emotion. This film retains a close relationship with reality, the visual style is based on studies of live models, the characters are modeled on real life actors and even the backgrounds will be based on an actual seaside city. *The Dreaming Girl* is the first Central Television production to target youth, the first series to express high school life as the material for an animated television program, the first domestically produced animated series to deliberately employ a realistic style, and first attempt in China to use new style manga to produce an animated television program.[1]

This was the ad copy for the only cel animation television series developed from a manga series directed by Li Jianping, presently the Dean of the School of Animation at the Beijing Film Academy. *Mengli ren* (*The Dreaming Girl*) was first aired in 2005 and was based on a 1996 manga series of the same name by manga artist Yao Feila, based in Wuhan. *The Dreaming Girl* protagonist is Li Mengling a sixteen-year-old high school student. The manga version I have seen animated resembles Japanese manga stylization more than the television series. The television series uses a slightly different animation style, just differentiated enough so the series would not be mistaken for a Japanese anime (the characters’ eyes and mouths are key here). Besides the differences in design, the series trajectory would not be mistaken for a Japanese series. The first episode opens with a dream that resembles (perhaps parodies) a science fiction anime as with military helicopters defend the seaside city there the series takes place from a tentacled octopus-like monster. Complaining about the inconvenience of the situation, Mengling runs out onto a

street and, holding a jeweled bracelet above her head, shouts *bianshen!* (change!) and becomes into *Chaonengli shaonü*, perhaps best translated as super girl, she wears an oddly designed costume that includes a red bordered yellow heart, a red cape, and a hat or pilot’s helmet including goggles, on her head. But this opening seems to be deliberately parodic of anime. Super girl Mengling defeats the monster and a prince in a flying carriage descends from the sky to thank her for her protecting peace. But a police car with a wailing siren pulls up and her father angrily slaps parking tickets on the prince’s carriage. This is followed by a brief battle between Mengling and her father who fires a missile at her that circles her and explodes to the sound of the alarm in her father’s hand who shouts in a somewhat mocking tone that it is time to go to school. Right from the first episode a clear distinction is made between the world of dreams and the real world, although this distinction is consistently undercut for the duration of the series through a series that highlights dreams, during the day and night. Perhaps the most peculiar characters is Mengling’s

father. Far from a figure of authority, her cartoon watching father seems at time to be either indifferent (one night she returns home late and he ignores her while watching a Gundam-style cartoon on television) or overly doting (as when he pays a young man to deliver flowers to her on Valentine’s Day). The series begins like a *shojo* or young women’s series, but very quickly Mengling befriends three young men who live in a large house above the ocean called *yuzhou de jia*, the “home of the universe.” This young men’s space is a rationalist utopian space of scientific knowledge and computers. They play a game involving mysterious coordinates for a treasure hunt on the Internet seemingly orchestrated by an online persona, *niuzaï* (cowboy) (who ends up being a young American girl who joins the crew a few episodes later). The deliberately slow action of the plot does not resemble Japanese anime. As the sole series that used the model of manga into anime development, the series is a stand-alone in the PRC and sufficiently unique to reject simple comparison to Japanese anime, indeed, the series remains rooted in a didacticism that would not appeal

[1] Translated from the ad copy for *Mengli ren* (*The Dreaming Girl*), February 14, 2001. Sean Macdonald thanks Li Jianping for providing this text.

to an audience used to the themes and pacing of Japanese anime. *The Dreaming Girl* relies on an understated style to construct a postmodern youth cultural space that references online culture, print media like manga, other animation, and popular music (one of the young men plays guitar and sings). Situated in an intertextual world of popular culture, Mengling is a figure for contemporary mass culture. But perhaps more importantly, Mengling is a figure for Chinese urban, middle-class culture in the twenty-first century, and this includes the economic reach of the state and industry of the PRC. In the second episode, after Mengling dives in the water to save someone and is mistaken by a film production crew for a stunt-person, she dreams (or has she drowned?) and faces a tribunal in hell where she is judged for her transgressions (which includes being late for school), is put in a cangue, and tossed out into space. Here she meets *xiao jingling An'ni Duo'er* a fairy like woman with wings and a wand who promises to grant her almost all her wishes (except for those she is unable to grant). After Mengling starts to fly (“No need to stick out your arms, you’re not a plane!”) she becomes separated from the fairy and ends up in a market either in the Middle East or Africa. The ambiguity of this scene is not unproblematic since all Mengling seems able to do is ask the way to China over and over, and the first person she

meets is primitivized, he has dark skin, a long beard and hair, and bones in his ears he also chases her around the marketplace threatening her with a club. I would never read the figure in animated television series of a young woman from the PRC unable to communicate with her interlocutors in a foreign country as a national development allegory. However, since the image is derived from a manga first published in the mid-1990s, and reproduced in cel animation in 2002, this scene marks an upward arc in bilateral trade between the PRC and countries on the continent of Africa, when investments first started to rise dramatically during this period.[2] Mengli and the fairy visit space a number of times and linger by a space station, “Century no. 3.” In episode six, while flying around the space station, the fairy and Mengling discuss the idea of dreaming and mention the well-know story about the philosopher Zhuangzi who dreamed he was a butterfly, but when he awoke he wondered whether he was a man dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was a man. The scene of two characters talking about dreams and the Zhuangzi story as they fly around a space station is a complex multivalent trope for media in the digital age that adds resonance to *The Dreaming Girl* as she looks back at the planet, just a year before the PRC launched its first manned spaceflight.



*The Dreaming Girl* (2005)  
dir. Li Jianping



*The Dreaming Girl*  
Issue #1(1995)  
Yao Feila

**Susan Jolliffe Napier** is the author of *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art* and a professor in International Literary and Cultural Studies at Tufts University in Massachusetts, USA.

Her research interests include Japanese literature, animation (anime) and comics (manga); contemporary constructions of gender and the body; fan culture; and representations of trauma and loss.

## SPECIAL ISSUE SUSAN NAPIER:

**Considering the interdisciplinary nature of animation studies, which academic overlaps do you personally find most intriguing, and why?**

That's a great question and not often asked so it's fun to think about. Obviously video game studies and theory comes to mind immediately. My specialty is Studio Ghibli and it is abundantly clear that the films of Miyazaki in particular have been deeply influential on both a visual and to some extent at least a character level. I'm thinking of *Breath of the Wild* but I know I've seen references to Miyazaki in reviews of more recent video games.

But there are so many other overlaps! Literature is probably the deepest and most important—characters, narrative and imagery. Adventures and coming of age stories are enormously influential across the board. And there are important films based on novels and stories—Takahata and Miyazaki who would ultimately form Studio Ghibli first wet their feet in some major adaptations of Western children's literature—the Canadian Anne of Green Gables and the Swiss story "Heidi"—both poignant stories of young girls growing and both beautifully translated into television series.

More adult material would include Miyazaki's mega popular *Howl's Moving Castle*, based on the English YA novel, and Takahata's classic war movie *Grave of the Fireflies*, based on the tragic autobiographical story of two children in wartime by Akiyuki Nosaka.

Related to literature are mythology, religion, and folklore (both Japanese and Western) all of which are mined deeply and widely across fantasy, horror and apocalyptic anime. These

include the enormously popular *Demon Slayer* movies and the recent hits from Makoto Shinkai, *Your Name* and *Weathering with You* and many many others—a personal favourite of mine is Rumiko Takahashi's *Inuyasha*, set in roughly the same period as the current live action series *Shogun*. *Inuyasha* and many samurai anime also dip a lot into Japanese history.

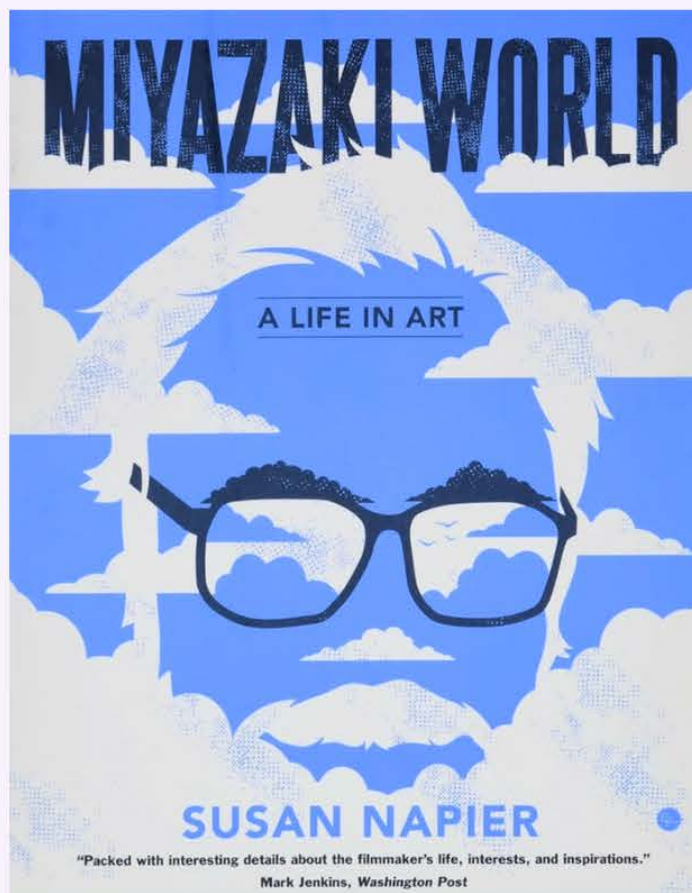
There are also important overlaps with media studies. Japanese pop culture in general is a popular subject for analysis in sociology, and anthropology classes and specific features of anime such as the *shojo* and *moe* phenomenon are often discussed for sociopolitical considerations. They are also important objects of study in gender studies.

**Do you have any books that you would consider 'essential reading' in the field?**

For animation in general, I would recommend every book ever written by Paul Wells. He is the guru of animation studies and his book *Understanding Animation* is a classic in the field. But everything else he has written, from *An Animated Bestiary* to *Animation and America* is informative and insightful.

Unfortunately, Wells deals very little with anime—a real loss as I think his comments would be fascinating.

Scholars who deal with both animation and anime include Christopher Holliday and Chris Pallant, whose books on animation and landscape and animation and fantasy include both Western and Japanese animation.



Among people who work exclusively on anime, Jonathan Clements and Helen McCarthy have contributed a great deal on both anime history (Clements), and on Miyazaki and Tezuka Osamu (McCarthy). Together they have edited *The Anime Encyclopedia*, an essential reference work.

Rayna Denison has written an important book on anime (entitled simply *Anime*) and a recent book on Studio Ghibli. She also is the editor of a valuable book of essays on Princess Mononoke called *Miyazaki's Monster Princess*. It's weird, all of the scholars I've mentioned above are British. American scholars who have shown a sustained interest in anime over the years include the Japan-based Roland Kelts whose book *Japanamerica* introduces the many conjunctions between American and Japanese popular culture. I should also mention Christopher Bolton whose book, *Interpreting Anime* includes some wonderful chapters on two of my other favorite anime directors, Mamoru Oshii and Satoshi Kon. Matt Schley is another Japan-based anime and popular culture scholar whose book, *Pure Invention* looks at the rise and penetration of anime and Japanese pop culture in general.

I would also like to suggest my three books, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy*, and *Fan Cult in the Western Imagination*, and my most recent book, *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art*. I'm proud of them all, maybe especially *Anime* because it was one of the very first scholarly books on anime and is still in print, but I'm also really thrilled that my book *Miyazakiworld* has so far been translated into 14 different languages!

**What drew you to animation studies as a field of interest over academic work in live-action cinemas?**

I always loved classic Disney, particularly *Fantasia*, but also loved low budget limited animation series like *The Flintstones*. But when I first became a professor in Japanese studies, animation was simply not a serious subject for scholars. My first two books were on literature therefore but, even then, the second one was on fantasy, which left me open to investigating this new trend from Japan called anime. And then, when I was teaching in London, I saw the European premier of *Akira*

and that was life-changing. I came out of the theater dazzled, almost trembling. I mean, it took me to places I had never imagined experiencing in any kind of film. And it still holds up! Even decades later. My students are always surprised and impressed by the sheer creativity and kinetic quality of the animation. *Akira* really started the whole anime boom in the U.S. (Although Studio Ghibli films and series like *Gundam* and *Sailor Moon* were also extremely important). I felt myself immersed in a new and enthralling universe and I've never looked back.

---  
**How did you find community in the anime scene when you started working in the field?**

It was very exciting getting to know other anime fans. At that time, back in the 1990s, it was a pretty male-dominated and techy world, but everyone was incredibly friendly and generous with lending tapes and giving suggestions. I really enjoyed going to the weekly showings at the Friday Night Anime Club at the University of Texas where I was then teaching. A lot of people were students but others ranged from a physics professor to artists to someone who worked for NASA. I think we all felt a little bit like a special community, one that outsiders kind of didn't understand and that made the fandom warmer and cozier and also exhilarating. The first anime cons that I went to, such as OTAKON in Baltimore, were incredibly intense and positive experiences. It was also great for a Japan scholar such as myself to see such interest in and knowledge of Japanese culture among the other fans.

I also got involved with an online group called the Miyazaki Mailing List and the comments on the list really blew me away—smart, interesting, nice people discussing everything from a Lacanian interpretation of *Spirited Away* to consoling a young student who was very upset about the Gulf War and exhorting them to try and see life “with eyes unclouded”—a reference to *Princess Mononoke*.

**What do you find especially compelling about anime to discuss not just casually or in a fandom space, but also academically?**

These days I'm especially interested in anime and animation as a medium. What are its special capabilities that allow people to access different sensations and maybe different parts of the brain? How can anime be so universal and beloved by so many people but also so amazingly culturally specific at the same time?



I mean, you wouldn't necessarily have expected a young Canadian or American viewer really getting into *Sailor Moon*, but they clearly found something in the series that was not available on North American television.

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**Did you face any particular obstacles or prejudices while engaging with anime in the 90s, 00s as the medium began to gain traction?**

Huge ones. Especially and ironically from my fellow Japan scholars whom I think were vaguely ashamed of anime—it wasn't what they thought of as Japanese culture—no literature, no zen, no art, no history. Of course, and this is the hugest irony of all, anime is about *all* of those things—it's just that they are presented in a medium that was seen as trivial and childish. Fortunately, outside scholars and grant funding agencies were very open to investigating the is fascinating new art form and I was lucky to receive a number of fellowships that really supported my work (in both senses of the term).

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**What about prejudices against animation itself as a medium? Do you have any comments on the way animation is viewed and/or treated by the industry?**



Certainly there are/is great animation for children but one would think that by now anyone would understand how much animation exists that can be appreciated by adults. Well, apparently, not necessarily! Even though, since I first started researching animation in the 1990s, there has been increasingly widespread acceptance of animation as art, I am still amazed that I sometimes meet people who do indeed look down on ‘cartoons.’ Most of them are middle-aged and older, but there are even some younger people who have preconceptions of anime as weird or pornographic, not realizing that the world of anime is a very large one that encompasses many different genres. Fortunately, however, that happens less and less. I'm heartened by how *The New York Times* and other major media outlets pay more and more attention to new anime films and sometimes to anime series. Still, it remains a bit of an uphill battle. I sometimes give my students a final assignment which is to imagine that they are back home at a family holiday party and they have to explain to “Uncle Bob” why they are taking a “frivolous” course on “Japanese cartoons.” By that point in the course the students usually come up with great answers but they also acknowledge that the question still resonates!

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**Any thoughts on the recent trend of animated films that feature national or culturally-specific folktales (as in *Wolfwalkers* and *20,000 Miles from Chang'an*)?**

Indeed, one of the great things about animation is how an animator can express their respective cultures in a really different and powerful way precisely by using the incredible flexibility and creativity of

animation as medium and its special capabilities such as a fluid imagery and seamless metamorphoses. That being said, I think all animation and art in general explore, or at least express, one's culture. But yes, some are more specific than others. The team that produces *Wolfwalkers* has done two previous films related to Irish culture and they are all wonderful, giving you a real flavour of a particular Irish sensibility. At the same time, however, they also deal with tropes that are universal—such as the human-beast connection. In fact, their earlier film, *Song of the Sea*, with its vision of the Selkie mother reminded me a lot of Japanese folklore in which birds and beasts become brides of human men (although usually only temporarily). Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, set in a bathhouse for the gods, seems initially completely “Japanese” with its emphasis on purity and ritual cleansing, but other aspects of the film—most notably the idea of the apprentice—hark back to medieval European literature.

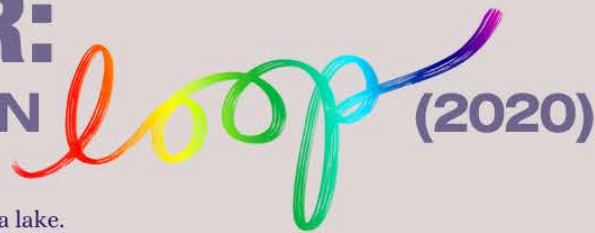
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**Can you tell us more about your research and/or your current book?**

Thanks for asking! I'm currently finishing up a book comparing Walt Disney Studios with Studio Ghibli. I've been teaching a course on the topic for a couple of years but it turns out that the actual writing has been quite challenging, simply because it's an enormous topic. The overall framework of the book is about the differing world views between the two studios—Disney's “happily ever after” versus Ghibli's overall emphasis on ambiguity—but I explore this in specific ways. I'm including chapters on gender roles and nature/the environment, both of which are pretty obvious topics if you know these studios. But I'm also including somewhat more surprising topics such as the role of War and also of the Gothic. It's been an utterly fascinating research experience and I almost hate to finish it. I'll be very curious to see what people think about it. The students in my course are usually both Ghibli and Disney fans so, hopefully, readers will receive the book in a positive way.



Photo from *Loop* (2020), dir. Erica Milsom

# LOOPING FORWARD TOGETHER: ANIMATING AUTISM IN



Two children sit together in a canoe in the middle of a lake. They are at an impasse. To move forward, they must try to communicate with each other, “to see the world through each other’s eyes” (Pixar). Such is the central premise of Erin Milsom’s short animated film, *Loop* (2020), which follows Marcus (Christiano “Chachi” Delgado), a chatty young boy, and Renee (Madison Bandy), a non-verbal autistic girl, as they complete their ‘loop’ of a lake after being thrown together by a camp counsellor. In situating its story around the relationship of an autistic and allistic[1] character, *Loop* replicates a pairing that has defined films about autism since Raymond and Charlie in *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson 1988). More than thirty years later, cinema still continues to shape societal understandings of disability, profoundly impacting the way the autistic body is storied (Heath 2). Yet, *Loop*, an ‘indie’ work from Pixar, created in consultation with the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, also works to push the form and content of films on autism into new waters (so to speak). Through animation, *Loop* foregrounds Renee’s aural and visual perspective, in the process foregrounding the significant role of sound and image in crafting autistic representations that extend beyond old tropes. The story of Renee and Marcus and their day on the lake is also a story of the major stakes and creative possibilities of animated storytelling. *Loop* demonstrates the inherent possibilities and affordances of animation to experiment and play with film form, imagining new ways of storying autism together.[2]

Since Charlie Babbit (Tom Cruise) first kidnapped his autistic brother Raymond (allistic actor Dustin Hoffman) and

**Gabrielle Berry** is a PhD candidate in *Cinema and Media studies* at the University of British Columbia. She holds a BA (Honors) in Film and English from Queen’s University, Ontario, and an MA in Film Studies from UBC. Her research focuses on the intersections of Sound, Deaf and Disability studies. She is a recipient of the SSHRC and Killam doctoral awards and is a member of the Public Scholars Initiative program at UBC. Her work has received the Claudia Gorbman Graduate Student Writing Award, and appears in *The Soundtrack*, and *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*.

hit the road in a quest to steal back his half of the inheritance in 1988, narratives built around autism have frequently appeared in film and television (Murray 12-13). While disability has been a mainstay of the cinematic form (think, the evil villain codified as such by a facial difference or hooked hand; or the sweet-hearted angel with crutches and an endless love for the world in spite of or perhaps precisely because of his limp, stereotypes outlined by Paul K. Longmore and Martin F. Norden in their work), autism has been an object of cultural fascination precisely because it is often not so easily visualized. In response to the invisibility and variability of autism, certain storytelling conventions have emerged. As Stuart Murray explains in *Representing Autism*, in a bid to emphasize the autistic character’s difference, a system of foils is almost always used, with the autistic character directly contrasted and paired with an allistic character (13). To emphasize the difference between the two, the autistic character is often a savant with an ‘inhuman’ ability. In *Rain Man*, Raymond counts six decks worth of cards, an act the security guards of the casino argue is impossible. This savant ability—a visualization of an otherwise potentially unseen disability through the spectacle of intellect and preternatural ability—is presented in film and television as a typical manifestation of autism, with fictional autistic characters presenting savant-like abilities at a much higher rate than estimates in real autistic individuals (Murray 13-14; Nordahl-Hansen et al 352).

[1] Allism is “a community term often preferred to nonautistic or neurotypical,” which arose from a desire to “mark the nonautistic and to theorize able-bodied defaults more robustly than the mere absence of autism” (Yergeau 219n41).

[2] As an allistic scholar, in writing on the storying of autism by allistic society, I tread carefully and with intention, drawing upon the work and interventions of autistic scholars and scholars with a relationship to autism (see O’Toole 2013).

With this emphasis on marking contrasts between the allistic character and their seemingly 'inhuman' counterpart, autistic characters often ultimately function as a plot device, offering an unchanging point from which to chart the allistic's transformation. For example, in *Rain Man*, Erin Heath argues that Raymond merely serves to motivate Charlie's journey of self-discovery (49). Both men go on the road trip, but only one emerges transformed, while the other is summarily returned to the institution after fulfilling his narrative purpose. Raymond is not a story, but a function of the plot, an object contained within the narrative of other characters. Heath explains that such framing of the autistic character presumes an allistic audience, who are given a moderately complex, able-bodied character to connect and engage with (49). The autistic character is used to allow the allistic audience and the allistic character to (re)consider what it means to be human, autism encapsulating "the allure of potentially unquantifiable human difference and the nightmare of not somehow being 'fully' human" (Murray 5). While representations of autism have arguably become more nuanced since 1988, with recent series such as *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* (Josh Thomas, 2020-2021) and *Heartbreak High* (Hannah Carroll Chapman, 2022-2025) notable for their inclusion of autistic creatives both on and off-screen; popular works such as *The Good Doctor* (David Shore, 2017-2024), and *Atypical* (Robia Rashid 2017-2021) have been critiqued for an adherence to stereotypes, casting decisions, and lack of autistic consultants (Kurchak). In this way, many media representations of autism still largely function, as Murry argues, to "create an idea of autism rather than try to reflect one" (Murray 4, emphasis original), the image of autism on screen more indicative of societal conceptions of the disability than the disability itself.

These representations of autism on-screen have real and far-reaching consequences. How autism is understood and how autistic individuals are storied matters, particularly when autistic individuals are so often conceived as lacking narrative capabilities. In *The Social Construction of What?*, Ian Hacking examines the interactions between individuals and medical classifications, which exhibit "a looping effect, that is, that have to be revised because the people classified in a certain way change in response to being classified" (123). One example he offers is autism, noting the looping relationship between contemporaneous conceptions of autism, both in science and general society, and the experience of autism by families and individuals. This is a looping that goes beyond a conscious awareness of media representations of autism, Hacking writing "by interaction I do not mean only the self-conscious reaction of a single individual to how she is classified. I mean to the consequences of being so classified for a whole class of individuals and other people with whom they are intimately connected" (115). This storying of the autistic body through diagnosis and wider media narratives, and the rhetorical implication of this storying is central to Remi Yergeau's *Authoring Autism*. Opening with Yergeau's mother's tale of the author as a shit smearing baby, Yergeau writes that

What autism provided was a discursive framework, a lens through which others could story my life...My very being became a story, a text in dire need of professional analysis. This, my body, this was autism—and suddenly,

[3] Self-stimulation, also known as stimming, encompasses a wide array of behaviours, and "might take shape as finger flicking, full-body rocking, knitting, nose picking, vocalizations, ritualistic sniffing, hand waving, rapid eyeblinking, or banging one's head against an object or surface" (Yergeau 201). Stimming is often negatively interpreted by allistic society, which violently seeks to suppress such behaviours, stimming perceived as a particularly visible manifestation of autism which must be suppressed (Bascom). Autistic advocates and scholars affirm the significance of stimming for emotional and personal expression, autistic scholars Jason Nolan and Melanie McBride arguing that stimming constitutes "an expression of embodied autistic semiosis that communicates sensory significations otherwise pathologized within neurotypical semiotic domains" (1070). Stims and tics are generally differentiated through the degree of compulsion, with tics likened by autistic blogger Kirsten Lindsmith to a sneeze and stims compared to an itch, "if that itch never went away, and kept increasing with time, like a mosquito with its nose in your flesh that refuses to leave."

with the neuropsychologist's signature on my diagnostic papers, I was no longer my body's author. (1)

Autism is so often presented as a lack—of intentionality, of personhood, of narrative and persuasive abilities, seized upon by both academia and the media as a productive foil for setting the boundaries of rhetoric (a Raymond for Charlie) (Yergeau 7, 11). This denial of autistic rhetoricity is simultaneously a denial of humanity, an act that has bred violence against autistic bodies, such as a rate of infanticide so unthinkable as to lead one autistic run organization to publish a manual on how *not* to murder one's autistic child (Yergeau 79). In the face of a system where the autistic body is so often storied by others, "where our shit holds more rhetorical power than we do" (Yergeau 3), Yergeau calls for a recognition of a rhetoric beyond rhetoric, of the meaning of autistic rhetoric, even and especially in non-verbal autistic voices, in rhetoric that "fucks with rhetoricity itself" (186) as it stims[3] and tics into new futures.

It is here that I turn to *Loop*, and its use of the particular affordances of the animated medium in its portrayal of the story of a young, non-verbal autistic girl. While previous analyses of autism in film have largely focused upon the construction and narrational representation of autism (Murray 129), *Loop* provides an opportunity to examine both the content and form of autism on-screen. Here, I especially focus upon the role of sound and the 'voice,' a formal dimension of film often overlooked in both animation and disability studies. While the voice is both a sonic phenomenon and an illustrative metaphor (to have a voice is to have power, agency, authority, etc.), it is often understood in verbal, non-disabled terms (Weidman 232). Through its non-verbal autistic protagonist, *Loop* offers a voice beyond allistic definitions of the voice, emphasizing meaning beyond the borders of the spoken word.

Directed by Erica Milsom, whose previous credits include a live-action short film on Down Syndrome, *So Much Yellow* (2017), *Loop* is a product of Pixar's SparkShorts Program. Described in a promotional video as "indie filmmaking, inside Pixar," SparkShorts provides a platform and resources to a Pixar employee to create a short film in six months. The program is particularly dedicated to promoting the work of women and minority animators who are encouraged to create personal works and experiment with the form. Alongside *Loop*'s direct exploration of autism and communication, *Float* (dir. Bobby Rubio, 2019) utilizes the magical metaphor of flight to symbolize Rubio's own relationship with his son's autism. Both *Loop* and *Float* notably feature autistic children of colour, a break from common media representations, while focusing on groups under-diagnosed compared to white, middle-class peers (Matthews 58; Yergeau 157).

Other films in the SparkShorts series tackle similar personal stories and weighty issues such as sexism in the workplace (*Purl*, dir. Kristen Lester, 2019), animal abuse (*Kitbull*, dir. Rosana Sullivan, 2019), immigration and sacrifice (*Wind*, dir. Edwin Chang), and coming out (*Out*, dir. Steven Clay Hunter, 2020). SparkShorts push beyond the boundaries of conventional Pixar fare in both content and form, with Oscar-nominated *Burrow* (dir. Madeline Sharafian, 2020) utilizing labour intensive 2D animation to tell its story of the importance of seeking help. The most recent short of the program, *Self* (dir. Searit Huluf, 2024) vividly utilizes an inventive blending of stop motion and

digital animation, following a physical wooden puppet slowly replacing each part of herself with a digital limb in a desperate and self-destructive bid to fit in with the glossy city around her.

In comparison to the more fantastical or experimental works in the series, *Loop* is in a sense more ‘realistic,’ focusing on human characters and utilizing the familiar digital stylized realism of the Pixar aesthetic. The narrative of the short is similarly grounded in reality, as two children, an allistic boy and an autistic girl, at an urban canoe camp overcome miscommunication to complete their loop of a lake. Together they experience Renee’s love of reeds trailing over her skin and the echoing peace of Marcus’s concrete tunnel, until the sudden sonic intrusion of a motorboat results in a sensory overload, and the two are forced to bridge their communication divide to make their way home. With Renee and Marcus, *Loop* plays with *Rain Man*’s classic pairing, though Renee’s autism is never explicitly addressed in the short film. Marcus only knows her as “the girl who doesn’t talk.” Throughout the eight minute short, there is never a moment when autism is broken down into diagnostic parts, yet the framing of the exclusive film on Disney+ explicitly notes that it “breaks new ground by featuring Pixar’s first non-verbal autistic character.” This labelling in turn invites a reading of Renee’s vocalizations, tics, stims, and meltdown as signals of her autism by the audio-viewer, potentially encouraging a diagnostic gaze while simultaneously upholding the significance of this rare instance of representation.

Like other media featuring disability, *Loop* also gestures towards Renee’s autism by placing the audio-viewer into an imagined construction of her visual and auditory perspective. Similar efforts can be found in films about deafness (*CODA*, *A Quiet Place*, etc.), blindness (*Notes on Blindness*) as well as other works on autism (*Temple Grandin*, *The Good Doctor*, *Heartbreak High*, etc.), though *Loop* is notable for its frequency, creative collaboration and its manner of presentation in its rendering of Renee’s point of view (POV) and point of audition (POA). The auditory equivalent of the POV shot, Rick Altman’s definition of POA stresses its function as a tool of an almost uncanny means of connection, writing that POA asks the audio-viewer “not to hear, but to identify with someone who will hear for us...this technique places us in a very specific place—the body of a character who hears for us” (60-61). Creative renditions of disability sensory ‘experiences’ are often exclusively mobilized in ways which intensify their perceived difference from a ‘normal’ audio-viewer—the sudden silence of a deaf family’s POA during an important school recital (a reoccurring scene in *CODA* and its previous incarnations, see Berry 2021), or a flood of images and screeching sounds during a scene of autistic sensory overload (*Adam* etc).

In comparison, *Loop* opens with Renee’s perspective and repeatedly returns to it throughout the film. Following the digital stylized realism of its setting, the rendering of Renee’s auditory and visual perspective is grounded in the reality of the film’s autistic consultants. In the accompanying behind the scenes documentary, director Erica Milsom stresses the way Renee’s perspective crucially shapes the visual form of the film, stating “the camera, when you’re in Renee’s point of view, oftentimes, is not making eye contact with Marcus, because that’s just something that’s not comfortable for her.” Crafted in consultation with the Autism Self-Advocacy Network, the edges of the frame in Renee’s perspective are fuzzy and indistinct, signalling Renee’s singular focus on objects and people directly in front of her. Without the constrictions of ‘real’ live-action images or sounds, every element of the animated form is

constructed, created and carefully selected. This fact of the animated medium allowed a careful tailoring of the minute details of Renee’s perspective in accordance with feedback from autistic consultants, such as the lighting and colour of the short (Lopez).

Renee’s point of audition reveals both her love of sound, and the ways in which aural elements might also easily slip into overwhelming experiences. Before there is even image, the audio-viewer is presented with Renee’s ringtone chiming *Woof, Woof, Woof!*, a gleeful auditory stim that Renee plays again and again throughout the film. Renee experiences sound loudly and vividly, which is reflected in the sound design of the film throughout her POA, the *Woof, Woof, Woof!* loud and persistent. Marcus, seeing Renee’s delight over her ringtone, says he knows a place “where that would sound really cool,” bringing her to the concrete tunnel he admits is his own sensory escape from the outside world. When this attempt at a shared sensory experience shatters, a high pitched hum of a motor intruding upon the echoing quiet and transforming into a chaotic onslaught of image and sound, it is not a singular jump into Renee’s perspective during a moment of vulnerability, but a return to an established POV/POA, and a culmination of the film’s themes of communication and its attendant difficulties. Without suggesting that any disability simulation can truly reveal the reality of disabled lived experience (Titchkosky et al 3), Slava Greenberg argues that animated presentations of disability provide the opportunity to disrupt traditional animation conventions and introduce new forms of spectatorship, noting:

the subversiveness of animated films about disability relies on the ways they challenge not only physical but also political reality—through both their content and form. In addition to content that criticizes the ableist gaze, the formal alternative of this type of animation gives way to expressing the disavowal of ableist cinematic conventions and providing a peek into a world that operates on other terms. This alternative offers its spectators a sensory experience that forces them to reflexively observe their world and the social rules by which it works. (10)

The continual return to Renee’s perspective challenges the conception of the ‘correct’ way in which to frame the animated image, sliding away from eye-contact and finding auditory delight in looping repetition as the film asserts the significance of her perspective to its overall form. This formal subversiveness of *Loop* is further embodied in its approach to communication and the voice.

Alongside workshopping the film with autistic consultants, *Loop* also utilizes the essential attributes of the animated format to imagine new forms of collaboration and accessibility. Madison Bandy, a mostly non-verbal autistic young woman voices Renee, the character’s vocalizations and behaviours shaped by Bandy’s performance. In the behind-the-scenes documentary, the filmmakers detailed the way in which they shaped the vocal recording process around Bandy’s comfort, moving from the studio to a more relaxed recording session in her home. In this way, *Loop* demonstrates the possibilities of animation (a form in which image and sound are so tenuously bound) to provide flexibility, to create an environment that actually allows disability participation by simply accommodating the needs of the disabled performer. In her study of disabled individuals transforming media spaces, Beth A. Haller highlights *Loop* as an example of the way close and committed collaborations result in authentic representation celebrated by autistic audiences (43). *Loop*’s



vocal casting also offers a notable subversion and reorientation of Pixar's traditional vocalization practices. While Pixar's original theatrical shorts typically contain no spoken language at all (with the exemption of shorts such as *Day & Night* [Teddy Newton, 2010] and *Lava* [James Ford Murphy, 2014]), and the SparkShorts exist as another category altogether, as Colleen Montgomery notes, star vocal performances crucially structure the studio's texts and paratexts (4). *Loop's* focus on a non-verbal autistic character, and its authentic casting for the role, disrupts the conventional conception of the Pixar voice, and expands the idea of what the animated voice can be and who can speak it.

Yet, the significance of *Loop's* reorientation of the affordances of the animated format is not limited to conventional understandings of the voice. While Renee is Pixar's first official non-verbal autistic character, she is far from the first character to communicate meaning non-verbally. From the studio's first short of a little lamp playing with a ball, sound design and music has crucially "sold" the digital image, sound and image working together to create the emotional core of the films beyond the limitations of verbal speech (Whittington 368; Goldmark). The interplay of sound and image is similarly key in Pixar's feature films, such as the extended speechless montage in *Up* which carries Carl and Ellie through their love story to her death, establishing a heart wrenching leitmotif ("Married Life") that recurs throughout the film (Goldmark). Non-verbal communication is not a rarity, but rather a defining quality of many of the studio's works, serving what William Whittington writes as both a nod to the history of animation, and a symbol of the evocative possibilities of sound and the animated image in the digital age. Animation, particularly from a major studio such as Pixar, is thus especially primed to realize the importance of meaning-making beyond language.

In the animated short *Loop*, an autistic and allistic child must learn to communicate with each other. The role and value of non-verbal communication is made explicit in the film, from the emphasis upon understanding through shared sensory experiences, to Marcus's exclamation of "Okay, okay, I hear you!" at Renee's rocking of the canoe to signal her displeasure at the suggestion they simply return to the dock. This appreciation of non-verbal meaning informs the film's formal emphasis upon Renee's auditory and visual perspective. Value and meaning are derived not from what the character says, but how she exists within the world. Yet, *Loop* arguably extends the potentialities of the animated form even further, into an almost approximation of Yergeau's autistic rhetoric beyond rhetoric. Every image and sound within this animated film is the result of a specific choice, a series of decisions that led to this tilt of the head, this twitching of the fingers, this colour palette. The inclusion of Renee's stims and vocalizations, her repeated repetition of the tinny ringtone *Woof, Woof, Woof!* within the short film asserts its significance and its meaning—to Renee, to the audio-viewer and the overall message of the film—even if it is a meaning beyond intent. As Yergeau writes, "an autistic may not fully intend to wave her arms or repeat licence plate numbers, and yet an embodied intentionality inheres in these moments, creating meaning and harnessing energy of a not-



Photo from *Loop* (2020), dir. Erica Milson

entirely-meant-performance" (65). *Loop* lingers with both Renee's sensory experiences and her own form of stimulating, embodied meaning, the animated form privileging emotion that coalesces not only around the voice, but the complex interplay of sight and sound, like flapping fingers dancing over rippling waves.

In its tale of a boy and a girl on a lake, *Loop* subverts and reorients traditional conceptions of the animated form, dreaming new ways of collaborating, voicing and making meaning. In their review of the film, autistic video essay creator Willow praises *Loop*, though concludes by asking, "Am I so grateful for this film because of how great it is? Or is it that my expectations have been so low?" While the very existence of the film may be indicative of larger cultural shifts surrounding the representation of autism on-screen, it is just a beginning. The SparkShorts program in which it emerged, a program offering the support and audience of a major studio, is perhaps of even greater note. *Loop* is a testament to the necessity of the continued support and platforming for minority creatives and experimental works, to ensure the accessible creation of complex and nuanced sounds and images of autism on-screen. And so, to move forward, it must be together, looping into the future.

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[4] By 'original short' I refer to Pixar short films that are unaffiliated with feature length films, unlike shorts such as *Carl's Date* (Bob Peterson, 2023) or *Party Central* (Kelsey Mann, 2013) which utilize the characters and star voice cast of *Up* (Pete Docter, 2009) and *Monsters, Inc.* (Pete Docter, 2001)/*Monsters University* (Dan Scanlon, 2013) respectfully.

[5] While Renee may be Pixar's first official autistic character, autistic audiences have long read characters such as Lilo as autistic (in Pixar's parent company's feature film, *Lilo & Stitch* [Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois, 2002]), finding complexity and connection in characters unhindered by expectations of a specific performance of disability (Mintz).



Loop (2020), dir. Erica Milsom

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A Letter from the Editor:

# Animation as Art, as Transformation, as Life

Jenny Yang  
Co-Editor in Chief

Animation is all about life. It is an inherent, important part of its definition—the idea that not only can you be lively and animated, you can also *give* life to something in the world. Specifically, to your own creation! And that is what makes animation, the visual-centric storytelling medium, so exciting to me. Whether it is done in a traditional 2D style or 3D CGI or stop-motion or a combination of them all, there are so many possibilities regarding it. Even more so when you take into account that everyone will have different ideas, and then will animate those different ideas differently. It is such a varied medium in that regard, full of so much possibility, which makes sense for something so subjective and creatively-based. When you view it in such a way, I almost cannot imagine *not* being intrigued by animation and all its potential, as well as the wide selection of existing animations people have worked on, from large studio-backed films to indie projects to even just short clips of an artist's original character—which makes it a medium I myself feel like I will always be engaging with and learning from.

In that way, many of us associate animation with magic. It is not hard to see why. When you discuss people's favourite animations with them, it is rare not to find someone who has fond, meaningful memories of playful cartoons like *Scooby Doo* or *SpongeBob*, or who have felt swept away by the visual beauty and powerful storytelling of a Disney, Pixar, or Studio Ghibli film. These often seem almost like an endeared, necessary part of their youth, imagination, and development. And yet because of this, there is this expectation that animation is simple and something to be grown out of—a frustrating sentiment that leaves me wondering: what attracts some to animation...and what causes others to dismiss it? It is a very broad question that has arguably been discussed to death, and honestly, when I started off writing this reflection on animation, I was not entirely sure how I would organize my thoughts. Certainly, it is easy to glean the basics of what many assume: that animation is still seen as merely for children, and children's media is merely entertainment, rather than real or meaningful media. This idea is pretty ironic to me, considering the history of cinema itself. Erwin Panofsky first wrote of animation—specifically Disney animation—as demonstrating the highest potential of cinema. In this, he suggests it pushes the magic and possibility of cinema and its imagination to its extremes by its very *defiance* of reality. He praised Disney's impossible, cartoony squash and stretch motions of Mickey and friends in the *Silly Symphonies* (1929-1939) shorts, which firmly asserts that animation is born from creativity. This contrasts Panofsky's claims about live-action cinema, which he argues in "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures" as being



Image Credit:  
kukuandkookie,  
kuku88

born from technology, suggesting there is a kind of pure creativity inherent to animation that is unique from the work of a camera filming a real human, living thing, or object. Instead, animation becomes magic...or, as the theme of this volume of *Cinephile* suggests, "alchemical."

I would argue this alchemy in animation is a little more complicated than these statements of Panofsky's appear to be on the surface, which is also why animation is still worthy of further study and discussion—and why that discussion can be as diverse as animation itself.



Snow White and the  
Seven Dwarfs,  
dir. David Hand et al.

Part of that is due to Panofsky's other arguments. He came to criticize Disney for trying to capture the human form in animation, as seen in films like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), which not only featured a realistically proportioned young girl, but also rotoscoping—done via the tracing of live-action footage, a technique developed by the Fleischer brothers. Yet I do not find it surprising. Panofsky has described how people compared cinema to theatre, seeing cinema as a lesser art form even as it both reflected theatre and attempted techniques unique from theatre. This was thus a juxtaposition Panofsky rebuked. When it comes to animation, however, I find it important to keep live-action in mind. What I mean by that is while animation should be judged on its own merits, its evolution is in tandem with live-action. If you believe that animation demonstrates the very *possibility* of cinema, stretched to its very limits, it would naturally seek to occasionally *evoke* live-action cinema as well—especially when animation is now seen as a lesser form of entertainment, or a cinema's cinema (which makes the name of the cartoon-based television channel Nickelodeon, based on early vaudeville "entertainment for the masses" nickelodeons, extra fitting). Meanwhile, ironically enough, live-action film has grown increasingly animated, as seen in special effects, with Lev Manovich proposing that the kino-brush has replaced the kino-eye, returning film to painting—and moving it away from the

technology Panofsky believed informed the development of film itself.

But even that is not so simple, as art has always informed what humans create. There is a reason Manovich states that film is *returning* to painting, as he discusses how techniques such as painting film stock was always a part of the filming process. Even if technology informed the development of the film camera, it is not the sole thing that informs how people chose to use it. Animation as a medium for the creative expression of movement can be found in film as early as the stop-motion of Georges Méliès' trick films...but animation itself predates that by even earlier—earlier than anyone may expect. Essentially, the earliest forms of art, cave paintings, involved animation, as shown in the research of Andy Needham, an archaeologist in the University of York. This involved the use of firelight and perhaps even musical instruments to make art of animals on cave walls “move.” The fascination humans have always held for art and storytelling, then, applies to putting such art in motion as well, (re)creating life and creating expression.



Image Credit:  
Norbert Aujoulat  
(2003)

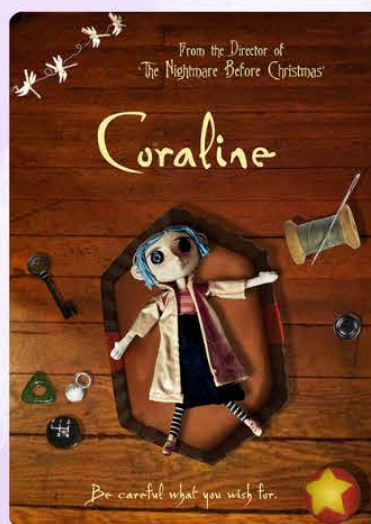
Animation is naturally art. Such a statement would not seem controversial on the surface, especially when in the assumption that animation involves drawing, yet the dismissal of animation and even art is a growing one. Despite animators such as Disney attempting to prove that animation falls under the category of fine art by moving toward more realistic styles after the 1940s, or how Chinese artists like Te Wei renamed animation from *katong* (cartoon) to *meishu* (fine art) and tried to draw on traditional art in the 1950s-1960s, animation today faces new challenges. This includes the rise of so-called “artificial intelligence,” A.I., which has become a plague for both artists and animators. Controversies include a cartoon adaptation of Winnie the Pooh, to be released on Amazon Prime, that uses A.I. A clip using the LumaLabs Dream Machine A.I. that was trained on different CGI-animated films also became viral for its semblance to Pixar. To add insult to injury, Mira Murati, a CTO for OpenAI recently said in an interview that “some creative jobs maybe will go away, but maybe they shouldn't have been there in the first place.” With A.I. now being such a huge threat to the Earth's environment in its water usage; A.I. being used by companies seeking shortcuts to avoid paying artists; and social media like Meta or software programs like Adobe allowing for A.I.-scraping of artists' work; artists have faced an increasingly uphill battle. Even more so when witnessing how animated films can be cancelled at will for tax write-offs (*Coyote vs. Acme* is one such example, being said to have been cut for a \$30 million tax write-off by Warner Bros.). Even Cartoon Network, a cable television channel under Warner Bros. and Discovery that was once seen as a “haven” for creativity has been deemed “dead” due to growing unemployment and poor treatment of animators. This has led to the movement #RIPCartoonNetwork and, as more animators protest work conditions and do their best to rally, #StandWithAnimation on Twitter and other social media platforms in July to August 2024 during The Animation Guild

(TAG)'s negotiations with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). When thinking of animators struggling to find work all while A.I. spreads despite the copyright issues surrounding generative images, A.I.'s evolutions—including fake “sketch process videos” like those now pushed by GitHub—mean a rising sense of crisis. Many artists have rallied around programs such as Glaze and NightShade, which have been created to *counter* A.I. They protect artists' work by adding “noise” to the image that disrupts data collection, but it is sad artists may find it necessary at all to add these countermeasures to any art—sketched or finished—just so they can continue sharing art on social media. And evidently, these protections are not yet as applicable to animation.



*Fantastic Planet*, dir.  
René Laloux

With that being said, animation itself is a very difficult process and is truly hard to replicate, and A.I. often cannot capture the level of detail and care of real, human animators. That is part of what I love about animation. As a hobbyist artist, I *know* how tedious it is. That, alongside the possibility and fun art styles, means I relish every scene I watch, especially when they are well-animated. I even rewind when I feel like I did not pay enough attention. I enjoy studying the techniques and movements employed by animators and exploring the frame for details. Animation, after all, means almost *every* detail has been carefully determined. A house's content in a live-action film may be arranged, but may also have elements to it, like toothbrush cups or toothpaste, that are there by coincidence or convenience. But animation involves much more crafting of those elements. Some animations will emphasize certain factors over others—like the painterly surrealism of *Fantastic Planet* (*La Planète sauvage*, René Laloux, 1973) or the cartoony, soft sketchiness of *My Neighbours the Yamadas* (*Hôhokekyo Tonari no Yamada-kun*, Isao Takahata, 1999). Yet every unique style is a demonstration of choice, of the animation crew's skills, of the film's sense of self. That is what makes it so compelling to me! It means that animation is a marvel within itself (what do you mean *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009) took 144,000 pictures to



*Coraline*, dir. Henry  
Selick

make 144,000 frames using 6,333 printed faces for 207,000 possible facial expressions with puppets that took 3-4 months to craft?). Like live-action films, animation takes a lot of effort, but it is full of details—including ones unique to animation—that I think deserve to be celebrated.

Now that is not to say animation is wholly undermined by the world. As mentioned, creators such as Disney worked hard to establish animation as an art form and himself as artist. The latter goal has been fully achieved. To fans and even casual filmgoers, Disney, Pixar, and Studio Ghibli all have recognizable, iconic art styles that many associate with the studios' main figureheads. Even studios often criticized like Illumination are similarly said to have instantly recognizable visuals. But for Disney, it is more than just “a style”—there is heavy emphasis placed on a magic that cannot be disrupted. The appeal of animation to children is something embraced by The Walt Disney Studios—or rather, the mass media conglomerate behind it, The Walt Disney Company. This is something Disney has even faced criticism for, as some view their adaptations of classic fairytales to be mindless sanitizations. There is some truth to that; *Pinocchio* (1940) had a moralistic nature to it even as it censored details of the already moralistic 1883 novel it was adapting, *The Adventures of Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi. In softening the characters and the story, it helped cement a trend for future Disney films. That kind of “goodness” and artistry meant Disney was praised by reviewers like Frank S. Nugent right after *Pinocchio*'s release. This boosted him as a hardworking artist, marketed his human side as a wholesome middle-class American, and established his role as a corporate mogul by introducing merchandising to audiences. Such a delicate balancing act of these different identities is indeed impressive. But even then, corporations do not bode well with the idea of wholesomeness.



*Pinocchio*,  
dir. David Hand Ben  
Sharpsteen  
Hamilton Luske et al.

Disney especially has been suffering on this front despite the legacy Walt Disney sought to leave behind. Fans currently criticize the live-action remakes of classic animated films as cash-grabs, even when they attempt to be a bit darker or more adult. This is most interesting when considering that something like the 2019 remake of *The Lion King* is entirely animated, even if its animation uses hyperrealism to market itself as realism (again pointing to misconceptions people can have of something that looks live-action somehow being more “serious” than what looks like animation). And of course, as a conglomerate, Disney has proven relentless in its buying and pushing of franchises and products. For many fans, this is not helped by current CEO of The Walt Disney Company, Bob Iger, claiming that Disney is not doing as well due to it focusing on telling “messages” over being “entertainment.” Even Pixar, often seen as a better Disney, has been faced with lukewarm responses after box office failures like *Lightyear* (2022) or *Strange World* (2022). Pete Docter, the chief creative officer at Pixar and a director himself, has gone on the record to suggest what Pixar will learn from these losses is to focus less on personal stories and to go for more universal ones, which many have interpreted in disappointment as getting more sequels



*The Lion King*, dir. Jon Favreau and *Turning Red*, dir. Domee Shi

and less of the culture-tinged stories of *Turning Red* (2022) and *Elemental* (2023). For me, it does feel somewhat like a loss. As a Canadian-born Chinese who grew up in the 2000s, I do find Mei's experiences in *Turning Red* relatable, even if our experiences do not exactly line up. Seeing the diversity in Disney can be meaningful, especially when it reaches so many children. It may occasionally be controversial (as seen in Disney attempting to trademark the term “Dia de los Muertos,” the Day of the Dead, for *Coco*'s title before eventually backing down and changing it to *Coco*), but that meaningfulness still applies. Yet that is not even addressing the attempts to boycott or at least put pressure on Disney due to it donating \$2 million and contributing other initiatives to support Israel in the heavy, contentious genocide of Palestinians. Because of this, I would like to take a moment to recommend *Fatenah* (2009), a Palestinian animated film (and for more Palestinian films, look for a number of live-action films like *Ave Maria* (2015) and *Bonbone* (2017) on Netflix!).

As the previous paragraph may show, there is indeed a level of adult cynicism that I feel when I look at Disney now. It is a global powerhouse in its soft power, but the veneer of magic the animation studio is meant to maintain is not as perfect as it was when we were children—or even just years ago, whether you were a child or an adult during the so-called “Disney Renaissance” (1989-1999)—as even the 2000s direct-to-DVD sequel craze hardly compares to Disney's seemingly all-encompassing conglomerate presence today. This level of capitalistic product overload and the lack of faith in animation it produces feels like an undermining of that Disney magic, even if Walt Disney himself was not always the most saintly of creators. We celebrate him now because in becoming a true artist in the eyes of moviegoers, Disney became an auteur. This means he was seen as the sole author of his work, which was fed into by the title cards of films such as *Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, and *Bambi* (1942)... But that careful illusion of a singular master artist meant he often did not credit his fellow creators for their help on films. As beautiful as many of the Disney films are, Disney himself guarded this magic fiercely, as if knowing what goes



Image Credit:  
Walt Disney  
Archives - D23

into animation would somehow destroy that magic (even though he did sometimes film and explain the animation process). Analyses of Disney by authors such as Janet Wasko help break down that illusion, but it is a poignant one in the world of animation nonetheless. Animation, as a result, seems particularly susceptible to the idea of the auteur.

To move onto brighter observations on animation again, one such auteur is Miyazaki Hayao, the famous director and founder of Studio Ghibli, another major animation powerhouse. Ghibli has often proven a well of inspiration for artists themselves, which will be clear in some of the interviews conducted for this very volume of *Cinephile!* It makes sense—the thematic depth, gorgeous landscapes, and even rich soundscapes (as seen in films like *Ponyo* (2008)), create a world that is so *unique*. It is escapism in its truest sense of the word, being so far removed from our reality. When a character such as Chihiro steps into a fantastical world in *Spirited Away* (*Hepburn: Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*, 2001), we follow and discover creatures and rules so foreign they draw us in even as the use of animation should technically remind us of how this is all “fake.” But that distance from realism is what makes it such effective escapism and romanticism of reality. It may sound a little silly, but I think all the GIFs of Studio Ghibli food really emphasize that. And it is not just unique in terms of being an all-new world, because technically speaking, that world *does* eventually grow familiar to us. You can see it in the way people discuss a “Ghibli style,” and *that* kind of stylistic “signature” is something I will discuss more later. But many times the ideas of this style can be found even in works that are *not* from Ghibli, because...well, animation has always been about animators and artists inspiring one another, as all art is.



*Spirited Away*,  
dir. Hayao Miyazaki

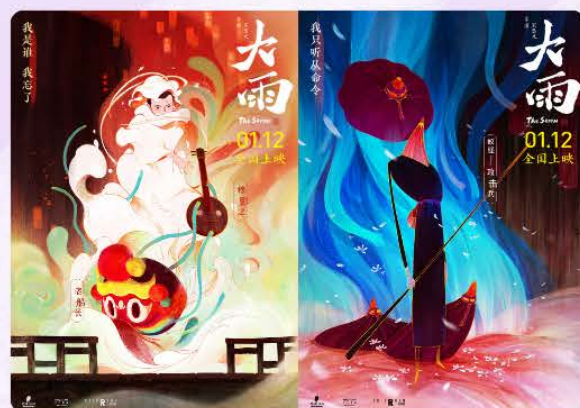
When you realize that idea that artists inspire one another in endless cycles, you can see how animation is not—and should not be regarded as—*just* an industry, but a creative communication in numerous ways. As mentioned, Ghibli has inspired countless animators, established or aspiring. But if we trace it back even further, you have the history of animation itself and how recognizable “styles” of animation have been built on top of one another. Their actual art styles may have had differences from each other, but studios such as the Fleischer Studios and Walt Disney Productions all perpetuated the iconic rubber hose style associated with the 1920s, and Disney itself grew to eventually inspire Tezuka Osamu, the creator of *Astro Boy* and the “godfather” of anime himself. Yet Tezuka was not inspired by solely Disney. He likewise found inspiration in the work of the Wan brothers from China, including their film *Princess Iron Fan* (*Tieshan gongzhu*, 1941), the first animated feature-length film in Asia. The legend it is based on is one of the first stories Tezuka adapted in manga format, and it was even referenced by him in his autobiographical animated film, *Tezuka Osamu Story: I am Son-goku* (*Tezuka Osamu Monogatari: Boku wa Son Gokuu*, 1989). This is especially compelling when you consider the fact that *Princess Iron Fan*

was made during wartime after Japan invaded China and is thus often analyzed as holding anti-Japanese messaging, yet it could still touch someone from an “enemy” nation. It was actually decently popular in Japan and inspired the navy to commission a propaganda film that went on to become Japan’s own first animated feature-length film, known as *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors* (*Momotarō: Umi no Shinpei*, 1945). Likewise, *Princess Iron Fan* was inspired by American animation and incorporated both the rubber hose style and rotoscoping. These kinds of twists and turns point to the ways in which animation influences other artists and even people and history itself. Scholar Daisy Yan Du covers this specific case in much more detail in her book, *Animated Encounters*, along with the importance of the idea of national style to Chinese animation.



*Princess Iron Fan*,  
dir. Wan Guchan and  
Wan Laiming

The concept of national style is quite fascinating to me. Animation is extremely personal, and yet it is also a very effective way to convey a nation’s culture, and Chinese animation has been especially enthusiastic of this possibility. Directors such as Te Wei draw on traditional art forms like ink-wash painting and paper-cutting to try and communicate a very “essence” of China. As *Princess Iron Fan* demonstrates, many of these films adapt established mythology as part of that national style, as seen in the Wan brothers’ *Uproar in Heaven* (*Danao tiangong*, 1961-1964). While national style is ultimately a very vague notion—even more so when we have already established that animation in different countries can always influence one another—there has still been a recent resurgence in this belief in national style, as seen in films such as the record-breaking *Nezha* (*Nezha zhi motong jiangshi*, 2019), *The Storm* (*Dayu*, 2024), the *New Gods* series of films by Light Chaser Animations, or *Umbrella Girl* (*San shaonü*), which just came out in July 2024. This is admittedly my special interest within animation and film studies itself. Part of it *is* due to the representation it provides, and as a Canadian-born Chinese, I have had a lot of fun discovering aspects of my family’s culture through Chinese animation, even as I have critiqued national style in some of my own academic work. But that is because the recent growth of Chinese animation and it becoming known globally as *donghua* has been a whole new, exciting world of exploration for me, and we still see more of that cycle of influence and inspiration, with many modern *donghua* drawing from anime, even as some series adopt styles with unique traits.



*The Storm*,  
dir. Yang  
Zhigang

And on uniqueness, beyond the possibility of cultural representation, animation additionally works as *personal* representation. Every year I look forward to the theses shorts animated by students attending schools from Sheridan to CalArts, and I enjoy seeing the creative styles and inspirations that form their work. Sometimes you find something you would never see animated by a large studio online, and the creator may stick with you that way. But even when an animation presents something you may not relate to or may even find “alienating” (perhaps even more than any live-action film could ever be due to the unfamiliarity of certain art styles), the emotions it may invoke in you are as personal to you as the work is to the creator behind it. This kind of personal experience is much like what you feel when gazing at art, even when you do not understand it, and it informs the connection you form with the creator and their work. That is part of what makes animation so “alchemical” to me. And like alchemy, it is transformative even when it is mythical.



Link Click (LAN Studio) and Scissor Seven (Sharefun Studio)

In spite of its fantastical nature, none of this means that animation is completely alienating or unrelatable. Cultural and personal stories can resonate with people outside those experiences, even if Pixar may appear to now believe otherwise. Part of my enjoyment of *donghua* does come from my cultural background, but the global success of series like *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (*Mo Dao Zu Shi*, 2018–2021), *Heaven Official's Blessing* (*Tian Guan Ci Fu*, 2020–), *Scissor Seven* (*Cike Wuliu Qj*, 2018–), *Link Click* (*Shiguang Dailiren*, 2021–), and many others prove that as much as Chinese animators now may emphasize culture, audiences can handle it. And animation itself can be cultural yet still universal! *Scissor Seven's* success is thanks in large part to its action and humour. And of course, *donghua* can hardly compare right now to the global power of anime, which has proven itself as appealing to the international masses even when absolutely steeped in Japanese culture, visible in the success of *Spirited Away*, *Your Name* (*Kimi no nawa*, 2016), *A Silent Voice* (*Eiga Koe no Katachi*, 2016), *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* (*Kimetsu no Yaiba*, 2019–), and many more. What we find are not just gorgeous visuals, but also resonant themes and stories that bridge any potential gaps in culture or experience.

Perhaps that level of change is part of what I hope you may take away from my reflection on animation. As you can see by how large this piece has grown, there are so many possible topics to cover when it comes to animation. This is why I have always classified it as a medium rather than a genre. It is a place of exploration. And this is a message I was happy to hear famed director Guillermo del Toro push himself during his BAFTA Film Awards acceptance speech for his highly successful stop-motion film, *Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio* (2021), which—ironically enough—once again adapted Pinocchio's story. And yet unlike



Your Name, dir. Makoto Shinkai and A Silent Voice, dir. Naoko Yamada

the poorly received 2022 live-action version of Disney's *Pinocchio*, Guillermo del Toro's *Pinocchio* proved to capture that magic of animation for adults that so many assume is only for children. It is this magic and complexity and potential that made me intimidated to begin writing this reflection. There is truly so much to discuss...but that is exactly what makes it so exploratory and worthy of discussion.

Similarly, while my tone may come across as pessimistic at times, I find all of this important to the consideration of animation—and part of that is to stay educated, as well as to build hope. Animators deserve just as much respect as any other artist for their hard work. Contrary to Disney's belief that knowing the identities and experiences of animators may affect the magic of animation, I think it adds to it. Like all artists right now, they display an indomitable spirit in continuing to push back against those that attempt to devalue their work. This is even more important to remember when considering how draining animation as a process truly is, and how exploitative the industry can be—the anime industry is unfortunately especially infamous in this regard, from insane crunch times, overworking, and low wages. But artists can speak up now with social media. You can see it in how far #StandWithAnimation



Image Credit: kaseywllms and Union Yaoi Zine, CynDavilaChase

has come—how people have not only posted in support of animation, they have even turned to drawing the people in animated ads for the hashtag as gay lovers—as “union yaoi”!—to further celebrate the message. There is even a fan zine in production now. It has been zany and a little bit whacky, but it has also been playful, fun, creative, and most of all, it has *breathed life into the movement*—and that is what animation is all about. In animating life, it takes so much to create so little, but all the things animators are capable of making, whether it is a tiny GIF, a rough animatic, a scuffed short film, or a full-blown feature, *all* of it offers a lot. It offers much of the artists themselves. In that way, the medium itself is indeed alchemical and magical, capable of changing and evolving and so many other possibilities, dependent on the artist and even the background, culture, and more behind the work—as well as the audience. It can even change artists working on projects by allowing them to express themselves. And in all that, it means animation is alchemy and magic in another way, because animation is *affective*—it can also change you and I.

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# ARTIST INTERVIEWS



# MEET THE ARTISTS!



## Ryan Hanretta

Ryan is a real-time visual effects artist at *Undertone FX*. His work features in a range of games from smaller fantasy titles to *Netherrealm's* most recent *Mortal Kombat 1*.

## YOjevika

Yo the Gardener is a freelance artist active in the adoptable community online, creating character designs and animated works inspired by flora and fauna.



## Lynn Fong

Based in New York, Lynn is an artist and animator whose broad range of work reflects on their experiences as a queer Chinese-American.



## Ru

Ru is a freelance artist who returns to art through the lens of healing, hence their cozy theme. They currently take commissions, including for animation, on VGen.



## Chia

Chia is an Australian-based artist working in design for digital technologies, and has worked in animation for personal projects.



## Sharlene Yap

Sharlene Yap is a Filipino-Chinese web developer and artist whose commissioned, original, and fan animations can be found on her various artist platforms.



## Attending to the transformative possibilities of *Alchemical Animations*, how would you interpret this issue's theme?

In a way, all filmmaking is animation because it's making still pictures appear to move by presenting them sequentially at a high speed. I love how mainstream animation has been incorporating more experimental elements and I think there are many more possibilities in blending the different genres of animation (hand drawn, stop motion, CG) to create new aesthetics and forms.



If I were to cite a project that I feel fit this theme a lot, at the top of my head, it would be the works of indie artists such as *Blue Turtle*. They make playlists with royalty-free music, and have a set of animated sequences. The visuals feature their fantasy world and their original character, essentially telling their story in the age of new media. I personally feel that this is a great showcase of two forms of art, transforming into one narrative.



I associate alchemy with science and magic — a systematic approach toward a supernatural or even paranormal goal. Animation techniques and principles often refer to physics, mathematics, and geometry, yet the goal of it all is to create an art piece. Both alchemy and animation imply an orderly process to create something extraordinary; be it magic or art.



I like to think of it as the vast number of mediums you can use to produce animated media works. We often see traditional, digital, and stop-motion work, but they're all so varied and flavored in different styles. From painterly traditional animation to skillfully rigged cartoons, stop-motion done with clay, figurines, or LEGOs — animation can be procured from so many different things, and it always brings about a different feeling and experience. Alchemy is definitely a really endearing way to put it—how you can turn several different little things into gold.



## What are some facets of working within your field that have been surprising (or appalling) to you?

Something that's surprised me about working in animation is that it really is a job. It's often interesting and fun, but working in the industry can also be tedious and frustrating like with any other job. I definitely enjoy the work but there's a huge distinction between drawing for fun and drawing for money, and it can be a challenge to make time for my own art when I'm working.



My field is design for digital technologies, so there are a lot of things that I surprisingly have to master. Animation is one of them — especially animation via coding (in website and app design).



Even now, it is extremely surprising for me how much time animation actually takes. I've learned to work really quickly, but I still always underestimate how much time something is going to take me. For example, when my partner asks me how much time I need to finish a commission—they multiply my answer by 3! And I don't notice the time pass by either, it's like I'm possessed by the process! After I "wake up" from my animation hypnosis, I'm always left with severe thirst, hunger, and, thankfully, a finished piece.

And since even I, the creator, don't have a steady grasp on the time needed to create something as meticulous as animation—my clients are sometimes even more oblivious than me, and expect a fully animated 4 minute music video to be done within a month. That is partially the reason why I switched from working with music artists to doing art commissions for people mostly within the art community, since they generally have more understanding about the difficulty of my creative process.



## What are some facets of working within your field that have been surprising (or appalling) to you? (cont'd)

One somewhat sad thing I've noticed along the various games I've been on is that the larger the team and project, the less enthusiasm each individual seems to have for it. I've been on several projects where coming into a meeting with a chipper and enthusiastic attitude is a welcome change of pace. It seems like people can get really bogged down in the day to day or things that aren't working or need adjustment and talk to each other with an energy that seems to forget that we all work on freaking video games for a living! It's something I try to remind myself of whenever I sign on for the day, and though I'm not always as successful as I'd like at reminding myself, I take a lot of pride in knowing I'm doing exactly what my 10 year old self wanted to do. One trend I've noticed is that on smaller more indie projects, a lot of this childlike excitement and passion is still there. I think that it's when things are bogged down in a massive undertaking by a hierarchy of often conflicting opinions that some of that magic can get obscured.



A pleasant surprise for me was the accessibility of artistic communities. Be it digital communities like those from Discord and Reddit or physical art communities with events and workshops — It can take a while to find a place to share and to get advice from, and not every place can be welcoming, but just having this much option is great, personally. I don't share a lot in bigger communities but I love discovering other artists through it, and making connections.



I think my initial concern with animation was its financial viability. It takes a portfolio and a lot of luck to get good contract work, and sometimes a degree to break into the industry. I started my journey with animation around the time I started practicing my field in computer science professionally — I've never really had the time or budget to study art, and I had to value financial security for my family.

Ultimately, it was a daily routine of thoughts that asked if I wanted to work on something I really enjoyed doing, or if I wanted to have a financially stable job in the industry I had a degree in. A lot of people asked me "how I was able to do both," but I'm no superhero, and I honestly didn't have time to focus on both at the same time. It was always sacrificing one over the other (or sleep), taking delays/leaves for one over the other—stuff like that. At some point, I was able to finally start earning around the same amount I earned with art/animation as I did with my full-stack web developer job and took the plunge from there. I'm still always very grateful and feel very lucky to be working in a field I genuinely enjoy being in.



## Which projects are you most proud to have been a part of?

I'd say my short D&D animation that features characters from my campaign with friends is probably one of my recent favourites. I had a lot of fun drawing my friends' and my characters in it, and it was a from-the-heart kind of original work. I kept it a secret from my friends while working on it, and they really loved the surprise! I enjoyed making it, and I love seeing my friends happy.



I'm very proud of the indie film I'm currently a part of, called *ASALI: Power of The Pollinators!*



I am the most proud to be the producer of my very own fan-game, *A Hint of Osmanthus*. There aren't any hand-drawn or 3D animations, but I've added little animations in the game to improve the overall experience (hover animations, ending cards) — something I am proud of regardless.



## Which projects are you most proud to have been a part of?

I'd say there are two projects that I'm most proud of and for very different reasons. One is a music video I made for *Pyramid Park*. It has recently been selected for an animation festival that I will be attending this July. This is probably my most successful project in terms of popularity and definitely my biggest animation by length! It took me 7 months to create:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O\\_u8XIMYhvM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_u8XIMYhvM)

The second is my own personal project called "Grow Your Own," in which my clients can water a plant that "grows" into human characters! Depending on the watering option they pick, the aesthetics of the character changes. I'm really proud of this project because it is entirely self-made, has been going steady for 2 years now, and has given me some financial stability:

<https://yothegardener.carrd.co/#growyourown>



Image Credit: Nica Petrova

## Can you speak to the challenging technical aspects of animation, and how you work around these issues?

Some of my favorite times have been those where I'm presented with a challenge that no one really knows how you're gonna pull off. You make some wild shots and see what sticks, but the refinement all comes from peer feedback. Most of my fx wouldn't be half as good as they ended up if I didn't have extra pairs of eyes to point me in better directions. And even better is when you get a back and forth going with a concept artist. "Your thing looks awesome, but how cool would it be if it *also* did this!" It gets really exciting when you get to iterate on core visuals and mechanics like that in a way that really makes you feel like you have a voice and impact on the game at large.

Since my animation is code-based within to my field, a challenge I face is how codes can be a little fussy. A little mistake and the code will refuse to do anything — or the things that I'm animating will fly all over the place. So far, I seek out help from my project partner when checking through my work.



Image Credit: Nica Petrova

I think the most technically difficult thing for me when I was starting out was just figuring out how the process worked. I knew from animation studios that they had storyboards and keyframes and colours, but that was about it — and I knew there were a lot more steps in between that I didn't know about. The concept of making my own animated short was so intimidating and I had no idea how people were able to keep things consistent and colour things with highlights and shadows so well. Eventually, I just kept at it and figured things out my own way — probably not the industry standard way if I'm being honest, but a way that works really well for me! If I could've had a mentor while I was learning, would I? I definitely would! Even to this day, I still think there's a lot of things I can improve on, especially in terms of composition and VFX. But it wasn't something accessible to me back then, and meeting new people can be a little intimidating for me. I'll get there eventually!

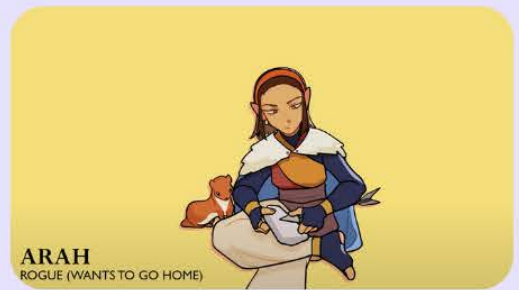
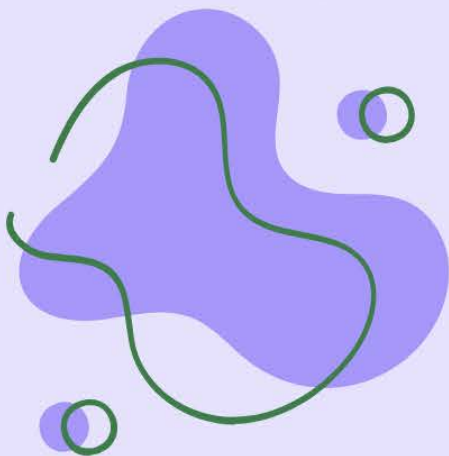


Image Credit: yapsharlene



Image Credit: Nica Petrova



The most challenging or maybe just annoying technical aspect of animation for me is layer and file management. The work I create involves the usage of hundreds of layers in one project and sometimes it is pretty easy to get lost within the software or to forget to color in a certain object. Other times the project simply crashes because of the overload and leads to progress being lost. I work around these issues by sorting out layers into groups, frequently saving my work, and sometimes consciously limiting the amount of layers I'm using and being mindful about what to include or leave out.

This also plays into being conscious about designing characters/scenes that lend themselves to being animated—animation is as much about details and movement as it actually is about simplicity and stillness.



## Are there any misconceptions about your line of work that you wish would be more clearly spelled out for aspiring artists?

The animation industry is fraught with exploitative labor practices and there are currently very few protections for animation workers outside of L.A. Artists new to the industry are especially vulnerable because they often lack knowledge on industry standards and labor rights. It's important to know your worth and avoid being sucked into severely underpaid (or unpaid) jobs, as they rarely create better opportunities but will almost certainly be damaging to your mental and physical health.

It's not easy. A lot of people think that it's easy work as long as you are creative, but personally, after studying for a long time, it's not an easy field. Moodboards, prototypes, timelines, and stylescapes already take a long time to create, and then you have the trial and error process (especially with codes). Also, I know this might sound privileged, but use good applications. I know that free applications are tempting to use—I also use free applications to make my personal projects; however, when making professional work, please use professional applications. It will make your life so much easier. There are professional applications that are free or cheap, and accessible as well.



It takes a lot of patience. For digital animation in particular, there's a lot of tedium involved that also requires a bit of nuance, and it's not something you learn overnight. When people ask me how long it took me to make something and I say "a week," it usually means "I've been working on this every day for 12 hours without a break," haha! It's not healthy, but sometimes you get into a zone that's hard to break out of (I'm currently practicing moderation...).

But yes, I've tried time and time again to start on animation while I was growing up, and I was never able to finish anything because I was never patient or motivated enough to see it through. I was only able to legitimately complete something a couple years ago, and once you're able to power through your first project, that's when you start being able to gauge how much you can do and how you can improve. It becomes exciting! Ultimately, it's fulfilling work, but it's not an easy job. And it pays you a normal wage more or less.



Image Credit: Sharlene Yap

## Was there a piece of work or a creator that inspired you to get into animation?

It's cliché but...Studio Ghibli films were my favourite as a kid and still are a huge inspiration to me!



I play visual novels a lot, and I am really amazed by the animation in the games even when they are minimal. These animations inspired me to dive into my field. Old school visual novels do not have the same live 2D capabilities, but are still able to showcase a little animation via transition and code, and that is something I always want to try making.



I love the storybook style of animation that Cartoon Saloon has been doing (*Song of the Sea*, *Wolfwalkers*) and that really brought me back to wanting to (re)learn animation, as it wasn't my focus when I was in college and when I worked. Another more recent inspiration for me is the Spider-verse franchise. I love how it boasts personality and style, and how they broke the rules of 3D animation by incorporating the rules of 2D animation in it. It's been a fun exercise for me to study and learn from it.

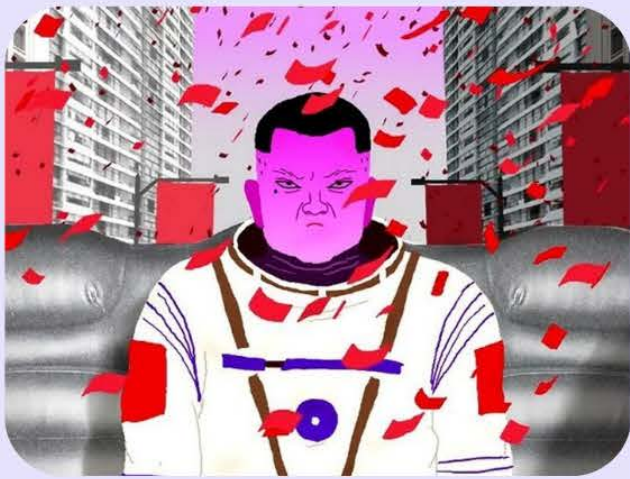


I'm a big fan of MMORPGs and adventure games. I always get so invested in the lore you find in fantasy media, and I just think that animation is such an incredible way to tell stories.

The works of Studio Ghibli (*Whisper of the Heart*) and Cartoon Saloon (*Song of the Sea*) have also undoubtedly been a big part of my love for the medium. I get the same feeling from watching their films as eating my favourite food. It's genuinely such a treat to see how human they can make their characters behave.

And in terms of web animation, I've always admired the works of Louie Zong, Joel Guerra (a.k.a Joel G.), QMENG, and Ian Worthington (a.k.a. Worthikids). Their works have always made animation feel so accessible for me — there's something about watching something made by one person in their own home and enjoy it as much as you probably would regular films made by large studios. I admire them a lot and they make me want to improve myself and create better animated work! If I could make a person feel the same way I feel about them, I would feel very happy about it.





Let's Go – Stuck In the Sound

I hadn't been inspired to become an animator before I actually tried it during a compulsory module at university. But I have a few pieces that inspired me throughout my journey of becoming an animator:

*Howl's Moving Castle* by Hayao Miyazaki

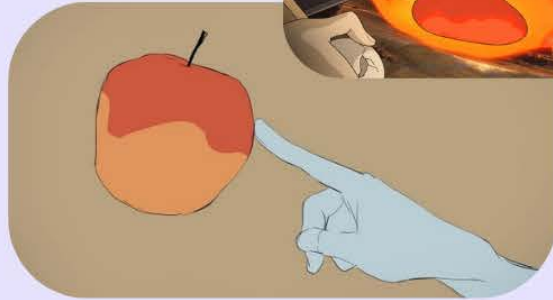
*Let's Go* by Stuck In the Sound

*Noclip 2013* by Eva Figueroa López

須田景凧 「veil」 MV by @avogado6



*Howl's Moving Castle*, dir. Hayao Miyazaki



須田景凧 バルーン @avogado6

One piece that I have always found inspiring every time I go back to it is *Arcane*. It wasn't the reason I started into games, but the raw, masterful creative energy that radiates from that show has inspired me to start many personal projects. As to whether I ever finish those projects is a different story. But when I watch *Arcane*, I am constantly in awe of the attention to detail and the carefully choreographed beats that perfectly play out in both the beautiful animation and gripping story telling.



## What got you into animation as a field, rather than looking at live-action or other creative fields?

I almost went into film early on in my college years. I studied film in high school for two years and with a passion for movies since I was a little kid, it made sense to push myself in that direction. But then I got to college and almost immediately found a group of friends that were all in game design. What tipped me over the edge was going to a game design club with them and watching them all work on a small project together. The aura of collaboration and excitement was unreal. I knew instantly that that was where I belonged. Part of a team. It took me a while to dial in visual effects as my specialty, but upon reflection it actually doesn't surprise me at all. I thought for a long time that I wanted to do environment art and make the map design and everything, but what I didn't notice at the time was that the things that always interested me the most were the little moving details like the rain splashing out of the gutter or the bugs crawling through a hole in the wall. The little details that bring a setting to life. It's my favorite part of the process and I can't believe I get the opportunity to wake up and work on it every day.



I love drawing! Despite the state of the industry currently, there are a lot of opportunities in animation as a career and I gradually fell into it. I actually also consider myself an illustrator and would probably be quite happy in that field too.



Image Credit: Lynn Fong



Image Credit: Ryan Hanretta



I actually got into animation without planning on it. I decided to major in illustration and animation for my BA, but only anticipated that animation would be a little extra skill I could put on my illustrator resume. But I was proved so, so wrong and fell in love with animation instead, just through the process of creating it. After properly trying it out, it felt like I was going towards this medium my whole life without realizing it. It suited my temperament and inclinations to do monotonous work as well as united my love for both visual (hand-drawn) art and music.



Image Credit: yapsharlene

## Have you ever tried to represent your own culture within animation?

There's something so heartwarming about being able to share your culture through a medium you love. I thoroughly enjoy being able to learn about different places and their traditions through animation, and there is genuinely nothing I'd want more than to explore my own culture in the media I make. Filipino culture is so diverse and incredibly underrepresented in media — a lot of older stories and legends are getting lost and forgotten in favour of more popular foreign concepts.

Sometimes I plan projects for it, but it sometimes feels so hard to figure out the best way to represent it. That's not to say I've given up — I'm hoping to one day make something that'll be able to show how beautiful the culture is, both traditional and modern. Maybe even tell stories of how I grew up in a Chinese-Filipino household. It's hard to commit the time to make something that'll be ultimately very personal to me, especially with so many different things going on in my life right now, but I want to be in the right time and place to create it one day.



## How has the rise of generative AI impacted the industry, and how might it transform the animation industry in the future? Furthermore, what are your opinions on the claim that AI makes animation and art more accessible, especially as someone who has evidently worked hard to study animation yourself?

AI has definitely had an impact on the availability of jobs at the moment as many companies are trying to cut corners on production time and staff. Many individual artists have also had their artwork scraped for AI by sites like Meta, leading to the dilemma of whether to post online for the visibility that may lead to a future job offer, or to take their images offline out of fear they'll be stolen. In my opinion, AI doesn't have the ability to completely replace animation workers in the long run, as anything generated by AI is always derivative and requires the input of artwork made by humans. However, it does feel like an alarming new aspect of the industry's devaluation of artists' labor that has made animation increasingly inhospitable and unsustainable as an industry. AI's proliferation in art and animation will almost certainly make the industry less accessible to artists, not to mention that the energy cost of generative AI poses a serious threat to all of us as humans. As an artist, it feels like a much more destructive equivalent of taking a screenshot of someone else's artwork and claiming it as your own.



As far as I can tell so far, AI hasn't touched games as much as other media yet. Character models, cohesive animations and 3D visual effects are a bit harder for it to create so far it seems, but I'm sure that day is not too far in the future. I've already seen some artists use it to generate textures for fx. It's a hard thing to answer right? Because on the one hand it's a tool like any other that can be used to make some truly unique and interesting stuff at breakneck speeds. But on the other hand it has taken all of the soul and intention out of the work. I find myself not wanting to engage with it as an artist both for moralistic reasons as it's built off of the stolen work of real people, and also more egoic artistic reasons as I don't want to become dependent on something to do the work for me. The sort of contradiction there is that I already do just that. I use a computer that has tools that allow me to do my job and I have no idea how those tools are made nor could I make them myself, let alone the computer. It might end up being naive of me to not engage with ai and maybe I'll get left in the dust because of it. But all I can really go on is my gut feeling and right now it doesn't feel right to use ai tools.

I think it's a beautiful notion that anyone and everyone can gain access to incredible artwork at their fingertips. It can be very limiting to have to choose a path for yourself in life and not be given enough time for artwork or to improve those kinds of talents. I think the misconception here is that when you use ai to generate an artwork, somehow that is YOUR artwork. If anything, it is the artwork of either the

Honestly AI isn't bad, as long as it's used properly. However, not a lot of people receive education on how to use AI properly. In my opinion, as long as AI is used as a reference or as an idea/inspiration generator, there is no reason not to use it. For example, I use it for art sometimes because I have times when I'll think, "I know what I want to draw but I don't know exactly what I want to draw." In that case, I will input prompts into an image generator and scroll through the images before coming across an image that would feel like "this is it," and then I draw based on the inspiration I received from that image (which tends to be completely different). Because my animation is code-based, having AI to help code or double check my code is helpful. However, as an artist, I do not agree if AI is being used to generate art or animation, especially when the person putting in the prompts claims it as their own work and does not modify and/or take inspiration from it.

people who designed the algorithm or the work of those the algorithm was trained on. In that sense, I don't think that it makes art more accessible for anyone. It's a simulation of artwork. And the only reason it's spreading in the artistic industries as much as it is because the non-artistic higher-ups in the industry like the idea of exponentially increasing their profits by cutting out as many artists and as much time and intention as they are able. My only hope is that when the day comes that the first fully AI show or game comes out, that people will recognize what it's lacking instinctually. That they'll be able to recognize the difference between a piece that is carefully crafted by creative people rather than cynically manufactured from emotionless machines. (I'll let you decide if I'm talking about the algorithm or the corporate elites 😊)



“

Generative AI has done a lot of damage on the creative side of things.

One—is about privacy and ownership as most of the time, artists’ works are being used as training data, without their consent. And it’s either you are given a choice to opt out (they automatically opt you in for some reason) or none at all (Meta’s Facebook and Instagram). It uses accessibility as a double-edged sword to target artists, and attempt to, in a way, replace them.

Two—generative AI brands art as something disposable, and cheap, especially to those who think so highly of this technology. It disregards the notion that creative works are great because they are a culmination of hours of study and practice, of planning and technique and style. This in turn leads to my third point:

Three—generative AI over-saturates an already saturated market. It competes with human artists and boasts itself to cost significantly lower than hiring humans for the role. If a novice artist has been worrying before how they will get noticed in a sea of other talented creatives, they need to account for the surge of “AI artists” who produce more ‘art’ in a very short amount of time, with a cheaper price tag. This has been seen everywhere, and most notably on DeviantArt and Etsy, both spaces formerly known as safe spaces for artists to share their work and profit off it. I have seen a lot of artists, mostly the new ones trying to break into the commissions scene, struggle with their worth and their pricing. With generative AI to add, it’s just harder to land a client/role. On the client side of it, there’s also this anxiety on hiring human artists.

Four—generative AI is taking over search results and it makes finding genuine references even more challenging.

From Google Images to idea catalogues like Pinterest, the surge of generative AI in search results are harder to brush off now as they usually appear on top of the results.

Lastly, for those generative AI enthusiasts, I would like to quote what Kyle T. Webster, renowned illustrator and brush whiz, wrote on his newsletter addressing his resignation from Adobe:

To this day, I find this duality part of what makes art so special to me, as somebody who actively creates it. Even though I’m conscious of, and highly focused on the decisions I make, and the order in which I make them, while drawing, it’s still magical to see the art materialize on the page.

Nothing, then something. Presto.

If you are a person using Midjourney, you might read those last few sentences and say, “Oh, that’s like me! I type something and then an image appears. Nothing, then something. It’s the same.”

You’d be wrong, though.

I have addressed how much I am happy about accessible tools and apps for creatives. Generative AI is different, though. I don’t view it as something useful to the artist or something that helps speed up the process of creating art. Inputting words and prompts is different from understanding how colors and shapes work to convey an idea and putting your own spin to it. It discounts why art is really special.

”



## Is there anything you'd like to say to other aspiring animators out there, either as advice or as encouragement?

Even though the industry might feel competitive, other artists are your friends and most people are more than happy to share advice, encouragement, and constructive criticism! It doesn't hurt to try reaching out to your peers and artists you admire.



A crude/awkward/bad finished animation is better than no animation! Having a lot of "less than perfect" artwork to look back on is actually a good thing because that's the only way you will be able to practice finishing your pieces and you'll have something to compare your growth to! Finish your work in any way you can and just post it online, submit it to that competition, or at least keep it safe. Any and all work you do now makes your skills that much better even if you can't feel it right now!



Starting and learning will always be overwhelming, but don't forget you are not alone in this. There are digital communities out there to help you improve or understand something you're stuck with and asking questions is a sign of you working on getting better.



Animation, like most other creative endeavours, is difficult! But it's never impossible. It never hurts to try, even if you feel like you're not in a position to, even if you feel like you're not skilled enough yet, and especially if it's something that makes you happy. Life is short! Make time for the things you love while you still have it.



Never give up! It will take a long time, but hard work will always be rewarded. Something else I'd like to say is, as much as instant gratification from the internet is nice, and I do like it as well, focus more on your personal growth and personal gratification. Internet gratification is not as worth it as you think. Take feedback and criticism to your brain, not your heart. You can do this!



## Can you tell everyone a little bit more about your work and/or your current project(s)? We'd love to hear about it!

The project I'm on currently is an independent short called *ASALI: Power of The Pollinators*. It's being executive produced by Viola Davis' production company and is set to come out this year! There are some pretty famous voices in the film such as Whoopi Goldberg and Ronen Rubinstein. The film is about an adorable honey bee and her pollinator friends, and it's made me personally both laugh out loud and cry while watching it. I'm very excited for people to see it! Also, I post personal work as @trianglerart on Instagram.



I am currently in the process of developing a mystery fan-game called *Crown of the Ark*. It is a *Genshin Impact* mystery fan-game which will feature a little bit of the code animation that I was talking about (although due to the weight of the work, my programmer friend will be the one coding while I'll only be providing the timeline and sketches). But look forward to it (there are no set release dates for the time-being)!

I've currently been working on improving my animation and game development skills! I've been working on making longer animated shorts and more original content, and I've been vlogging a bit on my creative endeavors as well. :)

There isn't anything concrete I can give away at the moment, but I have a lot of original work I've finally gathered the courage to try creating and I'm usually noisy on social media about it! Haha, thank you for asking!

One of my personal projects in the works for about a year now is an illustrated anthology and art roleplaying game about a coastal community of sea-borne faeries called Faerines. It's based on the German sailor folklore of klabautermanns (ship fairies) and combines themes of naval fantasy, ocean-punk and fairy-core.

I'm working on it alone, but will be hiring other artists once everything is set. Currently, it's still in the concept art phase while the writing is in its editing phase. It's still heavily a work in progress, slated for 2026, but will be free to play and non-profit.



Yes! I have started my animation journey creating music videos and it is still a big passion of mine even though I've taken a break to create other animated work! But I do have a YouTube channel with all of my animated shorts and whatnot!:

<https://youtube.com/@nicaklubnika?si=Zl038PK0J0yQZrT5>

But my current project is the "Grow Your Own" project that I've mentioned before! It is inspired by Tamagotchi, Pokémon, nature, and gardening!:

<https://yothegardener.carrd.co/#growyourown>

My clients can water plants that "grow" into humanized characters. Their designs are affected by the watering options my clients choose, but ultimately what they get is a mystery, and I think that is what is appealing to the people who buy my "sproutlings."

The watering option mechanic brings a bit of chaos that comes with mixing different aesthetics and themes together and it makes it a fun challenge for me.

To spice things up I create seasonal-themed watering options and offer different kinds of plants every month or so. All the characters have blinking animations and sometimes little animated effects to make them feel more lively!



# Editor's Reflection:



*Neon Genesis Evangelion* Ep. 16  
dir. Hideaki Anno

Episode 16 of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is titled “The Sickening Unto Death, and then...”, a reference to Kierkegaard’s 1849 book.

## Spirituality Through Animation

As students of cinema studies, the concept of mechanical reproduction of reality, whether through Benjamin or Bazin, is one of the first to which we are introduced. Cinema is inextricably tied to the advancements in photographic technology, so the emphasis placed here is understandable. On the other hand, the medium of animation is oftentimes relegated only to select chapters within a cinema studies curriculum. Which is a shame, really, as the medium transcends the very boundary of reality to express the fantastical, the abstract, and the spiritual.

In his books *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *The Sickness Unto Death*, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard explores the impossibility of comprehensively expressing one’s spiritual beliefs, let alone advocating them. As the father of existential philosophy, he believes that spirituality and faith are ultimately predicated on one’s personal choices. To Kierkegaard, a devout Christian, his relationship with God is beyond the mediation and understanding of an institution such as the church. However, such a relationship is a lonely one, Kierkegaard illustrated through a retelling of the Biblical parable: Binding of Isaac. In it, Abraham is tasked by God to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. While he ultimately goes through with the sacrifice, he fears what others will think of him. This story, considered one of the most challenging in the Bible, perplexed Kierkegaard in its grim depiction of faith. However, he is able to come to term with this story by appealing to the subjective nature of the human experience.

If the strength of photography lies in its ability to depict objective reality while minimizing interpretation, the strength of animation is to convey subjectivity and abstraction. Within the vast catalogue of animated arts, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (hereafter abbreviated as *EVA*) comes to mind as an apt candidate for a religious existentialist text. Created in 1995 by Hideaki Anno, this Japanese anime TV series is a subversion of the popular “mecha” genre. It shares similarities to anime such as *Mobile Suit Gundam* in that both features teen-operated giant mech suits, but it deviates from *Gundam* by placing greater emphasis on more realistic depictions of character psyche. As the title suggests, this series also places heavy emphasis on religious symbolism and themes. Philosophical questions, especially those raised by Kierkegaard, are also interrogated by Anno. All together, *EVA* is an entertaining yet profound text that made a lasting impact on the animation industry and fandom.

While the overarching plot and lore of *EVA* are complex, its premise is simple: a young boy (Shinji Akari) must choose whether to destroy mankind or perpetuate it. In destroying mankind, only the physical form would perish; the consciousness of every living person would merge into a singularity, freeing humanity from pain

and despair. To perpetuate humanity is to maintain the individuality of everyone; while this effectively upholds the status quo, humanity’s suffering from war, famine, diseases, and heartbreak would see no end in sight. Much like Abraham in Binding of Isaac, Shinji is faced with an impossible choice from which he is psychologically paralyzed, as either choice would lead to disapproval from those he cares about. However, Shinji finds solace in a pair of deities he meets. Adam and Lilith, disguised as humans, help Shinji come to terms with his responsibility for all mankind. While Shinji remains uncertain and fearful of an unknown future, his relationship with and faith in the pair of deities encourage him to prescribe meaning to his decisions.

In the final episodes of the series, when the psyche of each of the characters are interrogated front and center, animation’s ability to express the ethereal and subjective is put on full display. Dazzling watercolors morph into indescribable shapes around the characters as they experience delirium in the face of armageddon. Familiar faces and objects contort and fold into each other as the physical world loses its essence to an ethereal one. Shinji finds himself sitting in the void of space, reliving past memories and debating with other characters on what he should do for the betterment of mankind. The subjective experiences of the characters, while impossible to explain in words, and difficult to show through photographs, are expressed articulately via hand-drawn animation.

With the explosive rise in popularity of AI-generated art, many fear that animation as an industry and art form may be on the decline. However, when examining AI-generated content closely, something seems to be lacking, perhaps a sense of “soullessness.” While this a vague description, I nonetheless believe it to be an apt one. If we entertain this idea through an existentialist perspective, the lack of intention or choice, deprives the artwork of meaning. The subjective interpretation in the mind of the artist is not a deficiency to be rejected, but an essence to be cherished. To draw, to color, and to animate is akin to breathing life into where there is none, to connect the physical with the spiritual, to give soul to parchment and pigments.

David Wu  
Co-Editor in Chief

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Emilie Surette is a Tkaronto (Toronto)-based digital artist and recent Master's graduate from Queen's University (Kingston).

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