

Foreword

Japanese animation or the *anime* phenomenon has become a well-known cultural product that recalibrated the superpower status of Japanese pop-culture ranging from music, fashion, television, technology and cinema only to convey to a constantly growing audience messages regarding the sanctity of life, human condition, social discrimination, deep respect for nature, challenges of growing up, doubled by a vast array of emotions and rich aesthetic formulas. One of the keys to reaching such a significant milestone was marked, obviously, by the emergence of the Studio Ghibli in 1985. The vision of the founding quartet, originally including Takahata Isao, Miyazaki Hayao, Suzuki Toshio, and Tokuma Yasuyoshi, has soon evolved into a multifaceted cultural enterprise comprising the Ghibli Museum (2001), a life-size replica of Satsuki & Mei's House from the animation movie *My Neighbour Totoro*, built in Nagakute (2005), and the Ghibli Theme Park in Aichi Prefecture (2022).

To many Japanese animation and *anime* fans, Miyazaki Hayao (1941-), one of the most successful and prolific animation directors of the world, has always been the epitome of Studio Ghibli. His animation styles contribute massively to the distinctive sense of joy and vitality, while his stories bring about a more universal sensitivity that reflects the awareness of the interconnectedness between the human life and the natural balance. His overwhelming personality and his original artistic voice have inspired numerous researchers and scholars to write about his works. From this point of view, Maria Grajdian's approach is even more salutary since it provides accessible insights on the philosophical and moral dimensions of Miyazaki Hayao's works without the academic jargon and the dense theoretical frameworks that often discourage the general readers and the media students. The result of ten years' research on Miyazaki Hayao – and even more years

of empirical fieldwork on mass media –, the present book delves into the intrinsic diversity of the phenomenon of animation within Miyazaki's oeuvre, making use of an impressive bibliography in English, while trying to navigate though the contradictory and difficult to categorize undercurrents of the publications in Japanese language.

The author walks us through the fascinating world of Miyazaki Hayao's animation movies by choosing some of his most representative works: *Lupin the Third: The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979); *Nausicaä from the Valley of the Winds* (1984); *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986); *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988); *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1991); *Porco Rosso* (1992); *Princess Mononoke* (1997); *Spirited Away* (2001); *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004); *Ponyo on the Cliff* (2008); *The Wind Rises* (2013) and *The Boy and the Heron* (2023).

The first chapter, "Charismatic Thieves: *Lupin the Third: The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979)", focuses on Miyazaki's debut work in which Lupin, the main character and the grandson of Maurice Leblanc's (1864-1941) gentleman thief Arsène Lupin, experiences a series of funny adventures. His rogue behaviour exploits the tension between justice and freedom, on the one hand, and between freedom and wealth, on the other hand. Lupin's quest to save the damsel in distress becomes a personal journey of redemption because his moral code is different from that of ordinary villains. The animation movie shows Miyazaki's early interest in European-inspired settings, featuring luxurious landscapes and intricate architecture, which anticipate the world-building as a recurring motif in his later releases.

The second chapter, "Hopes of Redemption: *Nausicaä from the Valley of the Winds* (1984)", puts under the spotlight a post-apocalyptic world which is slowly reinvigorating after being devastated by human activity. In this dystopian universe, Nausicaä, the female protagonist, turns into a role-model and a symbol of hope amidst violent conflict, inviting us to reflect on the human condition, on the delicate balance between humanity and nature, and on the socio-political consequences of technological progress. Experimenting on

visual structure and the dramatic dynamics of the characters, the animation movie penetrates the layers of alternative realities, violence, war and peace, the clash between youth and age, and the tension between technological advancement and human alienation.

Imbued with steampunk vibes, *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986), is, as the third chapter shows, “a discrete jewel” centring on the innocence of youthfulness and the force of friendship, as well as a profound meditation on technology, human disaffection, and the relationship between humanity and nature. Warning us about the destructive potential of unchecked power, *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* has had a huge impact on Japanese popular culture, manifesting into the “Laputa Effect” which resulted in a subsequent wave of steampunk animation and comics productions.

In Japan, the release of *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) was accompanied by the so-called “Totoro-craze”, bringing forth the enthusiastic re-consideration of nature with its inhabitants, the re-visitation of “heritage trees”, seen as protectors and providers, the quest for the simplicity of life within nature as an escape from the over-sophisticated urban environment. The animation movie is an ode to nature as the main catalyst for unexpected encounters and life changing adventures to overcome fear and access fresh emotions. Cuteness becomes the pre-condition of a pure world which does not disappear when adulthood is attained. A direct extension of its original animated version in *My Neighbour Totoro*, Satsuki & Mei’s House on the former EXPO 2005 site fills the emotional space between honest remembrance and imagined nostalgia, as suggested in the fourth chapter, “Nostalgia and Resistance: *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988)”.

In “Femininity and Rites of Passage: *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (1991)”, the author unveils the female identity and its intricate connections with responsibility and growth. Kiki, the protagonist, makes a peaceful transition from pre-adolescence into young adulthood. Moreover, *Kiki’s Delivery Service* is a delicate and gentle movie, an unforgettable example of a serene journey

into womanhood. Its most stunning feature is that it becomes a full-fledged cinema product without any external conflict, unlike other classical plots which rely mainly on central strife. Cities are incredibly lovely and nature dominates Miyazaki's visual imagery. Inspired by Stockholm's architecture, Koriko is a glittering beautiful city, surrounded by deep-blue seas and light-blue skies, with brick-stone buildings and terracotta architecture, which create an atmosphere of continuity, strength, and vitality.

Miyazaki's fascination with flying, generously displayed in his previous animation works (*Nausicaä from the Valley of the Winds*; *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*; *Kiki's Delivery Service*) is reiterated in the movie *Porco Rosso* (1992) – the number-one movie on the Japanese market in 1992 and Miyazaki's biggest box-office success until *Princess Mononoke* (1997). It was originally designed as a short in-flight movie for Japan Airlines, but grew into a feature-length release. The enigmatic yet charismatic protagonist is associated with the archetype of the cynical middle-aged man who has lost his youthful optimism and can no longer imagine himself winning the race and getting the beautiful girl. In the chapter "Flying as Climactic Metaphor: *Porco Rosso* (1992)", the author suggests that this animation movie might be Miyazaki's most personal work.

A box-office success, *Princess Mononoke* launched Studio Ghibli on the worldwide stage, introducing it to a wider audience expanding beyond the already existing enthusiastic fan-base. Ashitaka's words, "Ikiro!" ("Live!"), become the central message of the story. The meaning of life is to be lived. Life is the most precious asset one possesses and could ever possess. The vulnerability of humans and the irreplaceability of non-humans are highlighted in the epic conflicts between them only to conclude that cooperation and co-existence – rather than competition – are the keys to achieve existential sustainability.

Next chapter, "The Nonconformist Family Saga: *Spirited Away* (2001)", is devoted to Miyazaki's blockbuster, one of the greatest animated movies of all

times, which won the Oscar Academy Award for Best Animated Feature at the 75th Academy Awards. *Spirited Away* creatively blends major themes like fantasy and supernaturalism, traditional Japanese culture and Western consumerism, and environmentalism, creating an incredible emotional and mental journey that both adults and children enjoy. Chihiro's growth is essentially about discovering who she really is when facing challenging circumstances, unexpected encounters and life-threatening events. At the end of her journey, Chihiro is wiser, more compassionate and better equipped to cope with the future and cherishing her past legacy as a source of courage, dedication, and inspiration. Set at the beginning of the new millennium, the movie transcends the classical concepts of family and primary community, heralding the "liquid societies" of late modernity.

As analysed in the chapter "The Turning-Point Experiment: *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004)", *Howl's Moving Castle* is one more animation movie in accordance with Miyazaki's favourite approach to flying as a metaphor for freedom and empowerment. The main themes of the original book, which centred on questioning gender and class conventions, have been changed in the animated adaptation, which focuses on love, loyalty, and the devastation caused by war. An unconventional feature is that old women are depicted as active characters and given a lot of room in the animated feature, which is uncommon in mainstream media both in Japan and in other countries. In 2013, Miyazaki stated that *Howl's Moving Castle* was his favorite creation perhaps precisely due to the fact that compassion as a self-aware ontological attitude adds to its complex orchestration of growing/being old.

Ponyo on the Cliff (2008) marks a turning point in the evolution of Studio Ghibli animation. Its plot combines various mythical and fantastic elements with everyday circumstances and dynamic character development. One intriguing aspect of *Ponyo on the Cliff* is how the sea itself takes center stage in the animation, rolling or lashing out in such an expressive manner that gives the animation a realistic, almost organic touch, while maintaining a

straightforward aesthetic. The author points out in “A New Direction: *Ponyo on the Cliff (2008)*” that the key to Miyazaki’s brand of fantasy lies in bringing the magical, the spiritual, and the fantastic into our real, detailed world.

Defined as a Japanese animated historical drama movie, *The Wind Rises* (2013) integrates the human condition into a broader historical framework using soft tones of emotional transcendence. Beyond economic and political pressures, nostalgia, ambivalence, and historical belonging seem to be major components in the process of re-imagining the past as a repository of emotional energy and sociocultural models. “War” is just another kind of “evil”, which brutally erases the temporal and spatial boundaries. *The Wind Rises* simply depicts the life of human beings who happen to live in times of war, thus sending an appeal to re-consider war as part of daily life. The animation movie does not make use of parables about the risk and responsibilities of immense power taken over by certain individuals, but tells the story of great dreams and the way they are swept away by the waves of history.

In addition to being a profound examination of grief, identity, and the human condition – themes central to Studio Ghibli’s oeuvre – *The Boy and the Heron* (2023) stands out for its unique blend of philosophical depth, inventive media use, and complex story-telling with powerful music and images. The narrative shifts easily between reality and an otherworldly realm. The main character, Mahito, embarks on a voyage of self-discovery and resilience. His interactions with the heron and other enigmatic creatures are but symbolical representations of his internal struggles and desires. As he makes his way through this bizarre world, Mahito has to face mysterious beings, and discover hidden secrets about his family, the life-death cycle, and his ability to heal. In the end, his journey serves as a metaphor for embracing loss in order to create a new sense of self.

Each chapter of the book offers in-depth analysis for each of the twelve selected animation movies in terms of their dominant motifs: the fascination for flying, the recovery from loss, ecological awareness, personal and social

growth, freedom and justice, friendship and compassion, nostalgia and nature, symbolical and real, alternative realities and fantastic visions, past versus future, life and its challenges. Moreover, the author has scrupulously tried to identify the interplay between Miyazaki's animation movies, on the one hand, and other Japanese animation works (particularly the ones released by Studio Ghibli) as well as other Disney productions, on the other hand. Besides the comprehensive interconnections between animation works, Maria Grajdian plunges into the world of literature in order to draw convincing comparisons between movies and books. For example, she refers to Paul Valéry's poem, *Le Cimetière marin* (*The Graveyard by the Sea*, 1920/1922), when she explains the title of the movie *The Wind Rises*, or she connects the powerful message of "Ikiri!" ("Live!") to Thomas Mann's masterpiece, *The Magic Mountain* (1924), to highlight the layers of philosophical meditation and the construction of the protagonist's life in *The Wind Rises*.

The author has a very strong background in musicology, complemented by her PhD in (ethno-)musicology from Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media. As a result, she has paid special attention to the music in each movie, examining the scores and their dramatic effect on the reception of the animated products. For instance, in *Lupin the Third: The Castle of Cagliostro*, Ohno's music elevates the sense of adventure and emotional depth, comfortably blending jazz, classical music; Hisaishi Joe's score for *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds* is a crucial dimension in shaping its atmosphere and emotional depth, with its oscillation between serene, ethereal melodies and more intense, dramatic compositions; in *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, traditional orchestral elements blend with electronic sounds, reflecting the animation movie's steampunk aesthetic and its exploration of the intersection between nature and technology; Hisaishi's music in *Princess Mononoke* employs familiar Western scales alongside with the pentatonic scale, as in the scene in which the *kodamas* lead Ashitaka through the forest; lastly, Hisaishi's contribution to the musical landscape in *The Boy and the Heron* reflects

Mahito's emotional journey and transforms the auditory experience into a critical element of the narrative.

Reflecting a deep commitment to craftsmanship and a reverence for the beauty of everyday life, the colour palette of the animation movies and the visual story-telling are additional indicators of Miyazaki's genius. His works are marked by a signature style that harmoniously intertwines lush animation, a profound reverence for nature, and a subtle critique of modernity. Maria Grajdian discusses in minute details the aesthetics of each animated work, as exemplified in this quotation referring to *Howl's Moving Castle*: "the movie is filled with images that are at the same time delightful and frightening: the Victorian-style, steam-driven cities, with their trains and mechanical cars, are supplemented by astounding flying vehicles – belching screeching animals of death. Huge battleships limp into port following defeat at sea and the skies are buzzing with their drones of war. Prowling the streets in the build-up to war are lecherous soldiers and blob men, sinister, dark shapes oozing from the walls and fulfilling the nefarious bidding of their mistress, the Witch of the Waste".

In a disconnected and uncertain world, Miyazaki's animation movies are a reminder of the importance of courage, compassion, and a steadfast commitment to one's values. One of the book's goals is to make Miyazaki's works accessible to a broader audience without compromising analytical depth – this is why the author chose to focus on artistic and thematic components. Through careful examination of his aesthetic and ideological contributions, the book sheds light on how Miyazaki's story-telling transcends cultural and generational boundaries while addressing timeless human concerns.

By presenting theoretical concepts in a clear and engaging manner, this book enables readers to examine the philosophical and moral aspects of Miyazaki's animation movies without being overtaken by the complex academic jargon or abstract intellectual exercises, and to contextualize Miyazaki's aesthetics without losing sight of their emotional and visual impact. By connecting Miyazaki's artistic vision with practical applications, future

research could broaden the scope of his influence from the realm of media analysis to tangible social impact.

At the heart of this research is a commitment to media literacy and the promotion of critical engagement with animation as a medium of cultural expression – that is why this book is a must read for all those who wish to find out how animated story-telling can serve as a powerful vehicle for introspection and social critique.

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