

Culture

Perfection Animated – an Introduction to Studio Ghibli



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Foreword

Studio Ghibli is a producer of Japanese animation at its best. Even a quick search on the Internet will deliver volumes on Ghibli Studio and its productions, to sift through which would take far more than quickness. In the paragraphs that follow, I shall attempt to present in a nutshell what is it that defines Ghibli's uniqueness and in what way is it different from other outstanding animation from across the world.

My Entry

On a Friday evening a few years ago, my eyes wandered to the TV channel my adult son had switched on. A Japanese animation movie was on, and it caught my fancy. The film was a production of Studio Ghibli – a name that I had heard of so often, but I had never watched any of its works. I soon got mesmerised by what was unfolding on the screen. The movie was a re-run of what I was to learn was one of the most popular and iconic of Ghibli classics – *My Neighbor, Totoro* (Japanese title: *Tonari no Totoro*).

I have had an ongoing fascination for animation since childhood and that interest has never died. It had only grown from the television cartoon of the 1960s, *Casper the Friendly Ghost* – my favorite as a 6-year-old – to the world of Pixar and Dreamworks. My inflight movie

preferences on long flights would invariably settle on a comedy, a documentary, or an animated movie. Thus, getting attracted to an animation per se was not difficult. However, *My Neighbor, Totoro* was providing something well beyond that. I felt deeply involved in the daily lives of the characters, as though I was also right there in that location, in their midst. I was enjoying the lush greenery of the forest, the blue sky, and the fresh vegetables. I felt as though I could smell the unpolluted forest air. The movie had a realistic, simple story with a strong foundation in Japanese tradition including behavior, commitment, hard work, subtlety, and warmth. The magical overlays – with *Totoro* and the *Catbus* becoming all time Ghibli favourites – were magnificent and would be fine grist for any child's innocent fantasy. Food, of course, had an important place. Traditional food made with seasonal and fresh vegetables by the affectionate local granny were vividly shown, accompanied by perfectly natural expressions of delight from the characters who savoured them (*Photos 1 & 2*).

This entire mosaic of location, food, atmosphere, story, and characters had been portrayed in amazing detail to unimaginable perfection – right up to the folds of the clothes the characters wore and the muscle movements when riding a bicycle. The voice selections for each character could not have been better and the natural sounds – of leaves moving in the breeze, of birds chirping or insects buzzing – well, everything was just right.

The magic of Ghibli unfolded on the same TV channel on a few consecutive Friday nights. To my tiny repertoire, I added *From Up on Poppy Hill* (*Kokuriko-zaka Kara*), *The Wind Rises* (*Kaze Tachinu*), *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke-hime*) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (*Hauru no Ugoku Shiro*) – the last mentioned becoming my favourite, aside of course from the all-time *My Neighbour, Totoro*. I found a common thread in all of these – the importance given to commitment, hard work, industry, nature, self-sacrifice, and warmth.

Miyazaki Hayao

While doing some generic searches on



Catbus



Favorite recipes from *My Neighbor, Totoro*

Photo 3: Author



Replica of Nausicaä, the flying machine, at Ghibli Park

world animation which I could use for my students, I chanced upon a short video clip on *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which led me to the man who co-founded Studio Ghibli and was the heart and soul behind its every production: Miyazaki Hayao.

Miyazaki's childhood has influenced many of his movies. He was born during the war in 1941 and his childhood was during the extremely difficult years of sheer hard work and discipline that followed the war's end. His father, Miyazaki Katsuji, was the founder-director of

Miyazaki Airplane, a company that produced components for the Mitsubishi Zero fighter planes. This resulted in the young Hayao developing a long-lasting fascination for flying objects. Almost all his movies have something to do with flying and several portray interesting and highly imaginative contraptions that fly (Photo 3). In *The Wind Rises*, the theme is linked without any ambiguity to the development of the Mitsubishi Zero.

For reasons similar to the above, Miyazaki was also impacted in his childhood by the trauma of war. Many of his productions carry the theme of war, and underlying the battles that are fought in these creations there is a strong yearning for peace. His latest movie, *The Boy and the Heron* (*Kimitachi wa Dou Ikiru ka?*), relates the story of a boy, Mahito, whose mother dies in the fire-bombing during World War II. His father marries his deceased wife's younger sister who has an estate in remote country and Mahito moves in to live with his aunt-stepmother and be taken care of by her. Magic unfolds in the remote countryside. Like other productions, Mahito goes beyond his personal trauma to rescue those in need and the story has both poignancy and warmth. As in all Ghibli productions, the locale, the colour palette used, names of characters, the folds and design of the clothes, the sounds – well, not a single detail, however minor it may be – is left out.

The Meaning of Color

I mentioned above that it was thanks to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that I chanced upon the great animator's name. The video I saw was entitled "Miyazaki Hayao: The Meaning of Colour" and it dwells upon the careful thought with which Miyazaki selects his color palette. While I had missed this point during my first few TV viewings of Ghibli productions, upon subsequent reflection it dawned upon me that color, amongst many other factors, had been given considerable attention. Color preferences vary from culture to culture. For Japan-themed creations, Miyazaki selected his colors based upon period and traditions, and added that touch of imagination necessary to give the animation a sense of magic, wonder and vibrancy.

The Impact of Location

While most of Miyazaki's creations have a Japanese locale and feel, there are some which depict Western architecture and townscapes. Among the films that I have watched, *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Kiki's Delivery Service* (*Majo no Takkyuubin*) come to mind. The rapid advance of industrialisation in the West had had a deep impact on thinking in Japan and was an integral part of the Meiji Era (1868-1912) policy of "catching up with West". This continued through the subsequent Taisho and early Showa years. Could this have influenced Miyazaki's thinking? Besides or perhaps in addition to this, typical Western gothic architecture with steeples, chimneys, gabled roofs, and brickwork lends itself well to wonder and fantasizing, and could have been an inspiration for the animator.

Most of the Ghibli productions with Japanese themes have been based upon one or more actual locations in Japan which had an impact on Miyazaki. The locale of *Spirited Away* is bang from the famous Dogo hot spring in Matsuyama, in Shikoku. *Princess Mononoke* is based on the small island of Yakushima – an ecological wonder and preserve - in southwestern Japan.

To my delight, I discovered that much closer to Tokyo, the hilly woods of Sayama in the Tokorozawa area of Saitama Prefecture are supposed to have been an inspiration for *My Neighbor, Totoro*. I have been here a few times, but alas, Totoro was unknown to me then. I visited again and spent some hours reliving the magic of Totoro.

The Totoro Foundation & Kurosuke no Ie

Note: Miyazaki's *Totoro* is a large, furry, and cute imaginary creature who lives in the woods. Along with its forest friends, notably the wide-eyed, cute little black face-like creatures Kurosuke, it helps people – especially children – through difficulty and scary moments. *Totoro* is the mascot of Ghibli Studio and its stylised image is their logo.

Forests need care, especially given the possibility of man's negative impact, either directly through encroachment or unbridled tourism, or indirectly through climate-destructive activity. The Sayama hills, being close to the greater Tokyo Metropolitan area, are even more susceptible to such destruction. Regrettably, over the past many decades, a large area of the wetlands and woods including small crackling streams have disappeared as a result. One of the volunteer organizations that provides support to the conservation of the Sayama hills is The Totoro Foundation based on the fringes of the Sayama forest near the residential township of Kotesashi. The aim of the organization is to raise funds needed for maintaining the Sayama woods. They do this by receiving donations into a Trust from citizens who appreciate the organization's aims. The funds are used for buying and adopting patches of the forest, which were so close to Miyazaki's heart, and renaming these as Totoro's forests (*Totoro no Mori*). Over 40 such locations have been adopted to date, starting with the first *Totoro no Mori* in 1991, and with love, care and effort, nature which had vanished has gradually returned. The organization has made its base in a vacant old wooden Japanese house, renovated, and refurbished to maintain its traditional look and feel, and has patterned it after traditional houses that appeared in the film. In different places



Kurosuke and Kurosuke no Ie, including Totoro (far left)

of the house including hidden nooks and corners, Totoro's tiny friends – the little black face-like creatures, Kurosuke, also known as *soot sprites* – have been created. The grounds include a shrine dedicated to their guardian deity, *Inari Sama*. Known as “Kurosuke’s House” (*Kurosuke no Ie*), it accepts visitors three times a week for a few hours by prior reservation for a nominal entry fee (Photo 4). Novelty items are available for sale, with the profit from these also going to the Totoro Fund. The Totoro Foundation promotes volunteering, especially by local children, the importance of forest conservation being subtly and willingly impressed upon the young minds through the magic of Totoro. The organization strictly adheres to Ghibli’s code for maintaining the image it has created of Totoro and its forests. For more information on The Totoro Foundation: <https://www.totoro.or.jp>

The Box Office

Several Ghibli productions have made it to the global box office hit charts. The highest of these to date was *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*) in 2001, with a worldwide gross of almost US\$400 million followed by *Howl’s Moving Castle* at \$240 million and another four that grossed over \$100 million. The Table shows the most popular Ghibli movies in chronological order of release. While the box office worldwide gross of *My Friend Totoro* is estimated under \$50 million, the licensed merchandise that has been sold skyrocketed to over half a billion dollars. Some reports say that Ghibli has been seriously concerned about over-commercializing the characters as it may damage their image and has considered capping sales at \$100 million.

Ghibli sells Totoro merchandise through specialty shops known as *Donguri no Kyowakoku* (“Acorn Republic”), of which there are about 40 shops across Japan and an online shop at <https://www.donguri-sora.com/>

Theme Parks

Ghibli ventures in Japan deliver joy to thousands of fans, young and old, who can try to physically be part of the magic that they were enraptured by on the screen. The Ghibli Museum in Mitaka in western Tokyo where it all began carries Miyazaki’s signature effects. Its location at one end of the verdant Inokashira Park is also just right. The museum, in addition to displaying Ghibli through the ages, has some iconic exhibits, including a towering statue of the affectionate

Photo 4: Author



robot of Laputa of the movie *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (*Tenkuu Shiro no Rapyuta*). Ghibli also produced several short films of equally outstanding quality. These are screened in turn at the museum.

I visited this museum in the company of my friend, Teppei Minezaki, an ardent Ghibli fan himself. He later lent me his complete collection of Ghibli DVDs to view at leisure at home. My Ghibli repertoire increased as a result, albeit with many yet waiting to be viewed.

If the museum in Mitaka can be described as Ghibli in a nutshell, the Ghibli Park, 300 kilometers to the southwest on the outskirts of Nagoya, can be called a veritable sanctuary. It is spread out in a vast area inside the sprawling meadows and hills of the Aichi Commemoration Park (which hosted the 2005 World Expo). Ghibli Park has created various artefacts representing memorable pieces of Ghibli productions, including “The House of Satsuki and Mei” (from *My Neighbor, Totoro*) in amazing detail – right up to Satsuki and Mei’s school books and their father’s study. Every item is as depicted in the movies, delivering an intensely immersive experience for fans. Indeed, if something was not specified in the

TABLE

Ghibli movies released till date in chronological order

MOVIE TITLE

S.No.	Year	English Title - for worldwide audiences	Original Japanese Title
1	1984	Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind	風の谷のナウシカ
2	1986	Laputa: Castle in the Sky	天空のラピュタ
3	1988	Grave of the Fireflies	火垂るの墓
4	1988	My Neighbor Totoro	となりのトトロ
5	1989	Kiki’s Delivery Service	魔女の宅急便
6	1991	Only Yesterday	おもひでぽろぽろ
7	1992	Porco Rosso	紅の豚
8	1993	Ocean Waves	海がきこえる
9	1994	Pom Poko	平成狸合戦ぽんぽこ
10	1995	Whisper of the Heart	耳をすませば
11	1997	Princess Mononoke	もののけ姫
12	1999	My Neighbors the Yamadas	ホーホケキョ となりの山田くん
13	2001	Spirited Away	千と千尋の神隠し
14	2002	The Cat Returns	猫の恩返し
15	2004	Howl’s Moving Castle	ハウルの動く城
16	2008	Ponyo	崖の上のポニョ
17	2010	The Secret World of Arrietty	借りぐらしのアリエッティ
18	2011	From Up on Poppy Hill	コクリコ坂から
16	2012	Tales from Earthsea	ゲド戦記
19	2013	The Wind Rises	風立ちぬ
20	2013	The Tale of the Princess Kaguya	かぐや姫の物語
21	2014	When Marnie Was There	思い出のマーニー
22	2016	The Red Turtle	レッドタートル ある島の物語
23	2020	Earwig and the Witch	アーヤと魔女
24	2023	The Boy and the Heron	君たちはどう生きるか

Source: <https://movieweb.com/highest-grossing-anime-movies-all-time/>

movie, it has been done here. Eateries serve food which appeared in the productions. Woods and greens have been made to replicate those in the movies. There is a tiny Japanese tea shop facing the green near Satsuki and Mei's house, where savouring green tea one can let one's imagination flow. Characters from Ghibli can be found strolling in the central promenade much to the delight of fans eager to secure a photo shot with them. Like the museum in Mitaka, Ghibli's short films are screened in rotation here.

Ghibli Park was ready to receive the public at the end of 2022, but due to the pandemic-related restrictions at the time, entry had to be highly regulated with strict capacity and social distancing rules in place. With restrictions removed this year, regular entry has been restored. To ensure no over-crowding, advance reservations – which can be done online – are required. It may typically take a few months – especially to get space on weekends and holidays – to reserve a slot. Such is the demand and the popularity. The park continues to develop new areas of attraction. Immediately on the anvil, are the “Village of Princess Mononoke” and “Valley of the Witches”.

Ghibli Park is in, so to say, “Toyota territory”. The great automobile maker is headquartered in Toyoda in Aichi Prefecture and the whole region with the metropolis of Nagoya included is looked upon as its base. With Toyota's commitment to reducing its carbon footprint and with Ghibli's legacy involvement with nature, it is appropriate that Toyota is going to manufacture an all-electric “catbus” for Ghibli, so that visitors may be ferried between attractions in the vast park. A prototype of the catbus, which will seat five passengers in addition to the driver, was showcased by Ghibli at a press conference.

While Disney theme parks, in particular the rides, can be casually enjoyed by the uninitiated as well as by fans, I guess Ghibli Park and museum is most savoured by connoisseurs of detail and of course by fans, of whom there is a wide age group. While children even without any prior initiation into the creations of Ghibli will undoubtedly be fascinated, my confidence with adults is less. My recommendation would be to view a few of Miyazaki's productions before an actual visit to Ghibli Park.

The Past

My article so far may seem to imply that the best of Japanese animation started with Miyazaki. But this is not so. One can safely say that the excellence of Japanese animation, which itself has been famous for decades, goes back centuries earlier. The Japanese have loved machines. The love is so strong that their passion pushes them to develop machines that behave ever more like human beings, displaying identical gestures and emotions. Timothy Hornyak, in his book *Loving the Machine – The Art and Science of Japanese Robots*, has with extensive research and insight fascinatingly described the Japanese love for automatons and humanoid robots, starting with the centuries-old *Karakuri* dolls. He begins the preface to his book by noting that “Japan stands out for its long love affair with humanoid robots.” The book is a must read for anyone who wishes to understand the Japanese passion for perfection, meticulousness and mechanization. And so it is with animation.

Miyazaki began his career with the founding studio of modern Japanese animation, Toei Studios, located in northwestern Tokyo in

the Oizumi area of Nerima Ward, which has to its credit many notable characters, creations, and productions. Adjoining the north exit of Oizumi-Gakuen station on the Seibu-Ikebukuro railway line, is the “Oizumi Anime Gate”, a cute tribute to Toei Studios. Statues of iconic anime characters, including *Astro Boy* created by Japanese animator Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989) and characters of the famous animation *Galaxy Express 999* created by the Oizumi area's own home-grown animator Matsumoto Leiji (1938-2023), adorn the spot.

Suffice it to say that there have been a multitude of Japanese animators each with their own unique themes and ideas but ubiquitous in their commitment and dedication to their passion. They have brought – and continue to bring – joy to millions, old and young alike, by their amazing creations.

The Future

Just as the excellence of Japanese animation has continued – indeed grown – across the centuries, one can have faith that it will do so in the future too. A famous present-day animator and Ghibli fan, Shinkai Makoto, produced *Your Name* (Japanese title: *Kimi no Na wa*) in 2016. By 2019 it had broken worldwide box office records including that of *Spirited Away*.

With Miyazaki Hayao now in his eighties, many fans are genuinely concerned about the future of the studio they love. There were reports that Miyazaki would retire after the launch of his latest movie. However, he has not clearly revealed his plans, so there is a lingering hope that he may continue delivering his skills. Having said that, life has its truths that may not always be easy to come to terms with. According to recent news, Nippon TV (a major Japanese television channel, also known as Channel-4) will buy a majority stake in Ghibli Studios, with whom it has had a long relationship and has been airing their productions. With its strong financial base and essential Japanese-ness, one can confidently say that the magic of Ghibli will continue forever, adhering to the craftsmanship its founder has nurtured through the years.

Conclusion

I have mentioned a few times about the underlying warmth in Miyazaki's productions. Embracing humanity and being non-judgemental is a cornerstone of his creations. It is not the *Tom and Jerry* type of “bad guy and good guy” story. A band of pirates led by a witch can actually be very kind people (*Laputa: Castle in the Sky*). In several of the films, seemingly bad witches or wizards who curse, actually turn out to be fairly sweet people who get a warm hug from the non-judgemental young girl or boy in the movie.

Life is about navigating through the grey zones. The importance of being non-judgemental, kind, unselfish and caring for humans, nature, and the environment we live in, while doing one's duties with enthusiasm and commitment, repeatedly reverberate in Ghibli's creations.

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