Hayao Miyazaki: An Introduction

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Visual Design 2006 supervised by Anton Ellens

April 11, 2006, Amsterdam
1 Introduction

For me, Japanese animator and director Hayao Miyazaki is a man who creates worlds. When I first saw *Princess Mononoke*, I was truly stunned. I could not describe why this movie made such an impression on me, but ever since, and seeing more of his work, I have wondered about this. Time and time again, he drew me into his curious and amazing worlds. Having to write an essay for the Visual Design course of 2006 at the Vrije Universiteit, I thankfully use this opportunity to explore and pass on my fascination for his work.

This essay will first give a short overview of Hayao Miyazaki’s career and work, after which the themes and characteristics of his work are described. Together with recurring themes, a theoretical thought Miyazaki has regarding popular Japanese animation, that of “loss of motives”, will be examined. Then the visual style Miyazaki uses will be described, along with another theory that is called “excessive expressionism”. After defining the use of computers in the production of his latest movies and the part Disney plays in distribution, I will shortly state my personal preferences within his collected works. Finally, a conclusion is drawn.

This paper is not intended to be a scientific paper of any kind. Its purposes are to extend my own knowledge and that of others about Hayao Miyazaki and his work, and to provide an introduction to those who are not acquainted with his work. For reasons of readability, I have used English titles and names wherever possible.

2 Hayao Miyazaki

2.1 Career

Hayao Miyazaki was born in Tokyo on January 5, 1941 [3]. He received a political science and economics degree from Gakushuin University, but even before that, after seeing the first full-length Japanese animated movie *Hakujaden*, Miyazaki knew he had to become an animator. Starting work as a novice animator at the animation studio Toei-Doga (which is now called Toei Animation) in 1963 [2], he was from then on involved in the production of the “early classics of Japanese animation” such as *The Adventures of Hols, Prince of the Sun* (1968) and *Panda! Go Panda!* (1972) [3]. “From the beginning, he commanded attention with his incredible ability to draw, and the seemingly-endless stream of movie ideas he proposed. [3]"

Together with his colleague Isao Takahata, who would also become a renowned director of animated movies, Miyazaki then moved to studio A Pro and later Tokyo Movie Shinsha, were he worked on scene design and scene organization for *Heidi* (1974) and then became director for *Future Boy Conan* (1978) and *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979) [2].

In 1984 Miyazaki released *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*, which he wrote and directed. It was primarily based on the manga (comic) series with the same title he started working on in 1982. Miyazaki always had the feeling that he would like to have more freedom in elaborating his own thoughts. With *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* becoming a great success, Miyazaki perceived this as a chance to start his own animation studio. The result was that, in 1985, he co-founded Studio Ghibli. Since then, he has directed, written and produced a range of increasingly successful animated feature films, to which I will now turn my attention.
2.2 Filmography

Hayao Miyazaki’s skill in drawing, storytelling and directing already became apparent during his time at Toei-Doga and A Pro. His work at Studio Ghibli can however be considered to show his true, and full, talent. Including the “pre-Ghibli” *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*, Miyazaki directed the following movies at Studio Ghibli:

- *Porco Rosso* (1992)
- *Princess Mononoke* (1997)
- *Spirited Away* (2001)

In many ways too short to credit Miyazaki’s storytelling abilities, I will however try to give a description of these movies. This material relies upon the excellent online compendium created at Nausicaa.Net [3].

Starting of, *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* tells us a story about a princess, Nausicaä, in a world that is tangled in war and destruction. In an adventurous struggle, Nausicaä tries to save this world and its last remnants of human population from self-destructing and from an alarming spread of a mysterious disease.

In *Laputa: The Castle in the Sky* a boy rescues an unconscious girl with a glowing pendant around here neck that he sees descending from the sky, and in doing so they embark on a dangerous journey to a kingdom on a floating island in the sky.

*My Neighbor Totoro* and *Kiki’s Delivery Service* seem to be made for a child audience especially, the former being about children encountering a forest spirit and becoming friends with it, the latter being about a 13 year old witch who has to learn how to live independently. “Made for a child audience” in Miyazaki’s case does not mean that these are exclusively interesting for children. Adults, mostly parents, seem to enjoy these movies for their near-perfect reflection of the behavior of children. “For the people who used to be 10 years old, and the people who are going to be 10 years old.” as Miyazaki said about one of his later movies, *Spirited Away* [3].

*Porco Rosso*, in contrast explores a mix of more serious themes, such as war and fascism, with Miyazaki’s fascination with pigs, as an Italian Air Force pilot leaves service due to the rise of fascism and becomes a bounty hunter. Losing faith in humanity and due to conflicts in his mind, the pilot becomes a pig. Miyazaki believes that “when a man becomes middle-aged, he becomes a pig” [3].

*Princess Mononoke* truly started the era of Miyazaki’s international fame. Being the most expensive animated movie in Japan at the time, the investment paid of as it became the number one movie of all time in Japan, both in attendance and in financial profit.

Set in Japan during the Muromachi Period (1333-1568) *Princess Mononoke* tells us the story of a boy, named Ashitaka, from a local tribe who gets cursed by killing a spirit. On his journey to lift this curse, he gets tangled up in a struggle between an iron-making community and Gods of the Forest. He wants both sides to co-exist peacefully. On the side of Gods of the Forest, Ashitaka meets a girl named San (Princess Mononoke), who is raised by wolves and with whom he shares a special bond (see Figure 1).
Next to creating concept art and storyboards, Miyazaki checks almost all keyframes (made by his team of animators at Studio Ghibli) of the movie he is working on and even redraws them if he thinks that is necessary. Usually this is done by a special technical director, not the director of the movie. Note: a frame is a still background image with an image on a transparent sheet (also called a “cell”, derived from celluloid, the material these sheets used to be made of) on top of it. The image is then replaced with a slightly different image to create animation. Having finished *Princess Mononoke*, after two years of continuous work, Miyazaki considered himself to be getting too old for his specific way of directing animated movies. He publicly declared that he would not be directing movies in this way any more, and that his career as an animator had ended [3].

What most people interpreted as the end of Miyazaki’s career, he himself did not. Although he formally quit working for Studio Ghibli in 1998, he was still planning to write and produce a movie to be directed by Studio Ghibli’s Yoshifumi Kondo. Sadly enough, Kondo passed away in 1998. In 1999 Miyazaki formally returned to Studio Ghibli, and started work on a movie inspired by the daughter of one of his friends.

Thus, in 2001, Miyazaki finished *Spirited Away*. Breaking all the box-office records he himself set with *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away* added definite international recognition to its list by winning a Golden Bear at the 2002 Berlin Film Festival, and the 2002 Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. This was the first Oscar awarded to a Japanese animation (anime) production [1].

In *Spirited Away*, a ten year-old Japanese girl name Chihiro gets trapped in a spirit world. Working in a bathing house for spirits that is led by a witch, she merely tries to survive by working and by gathering courage. During her stay at the bathing house, she is greatly helped by a mysterious boy who goes by the name of Haku.

After completing *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki announced that it was his last full-length movie for him as a director. True to his past, however, he returned to Ghibli to takeover the reigns of a new movie in the making, after the original director had suddenly left the project. This movie, *Howl’s Moving Castle*, was released in 2004.

Based on the novel by the British fantasy writer Diana Wynne Jones with the same title, it confirms the fascination that Miyazaki has always had for Western children’s literature. *Howl’s Moving Castle* is about a young girl who works at a hat making shop and in sudden contrast with her somewhat boring life, gets cursed with the body of an elderly lady. She finds her way to the wizard Howl, who is also cursed and lives in a strange mechanized moving home that resembles a castle. Together, they try to break their curse.
3 Themes and characteristics

Hayao Miyazaki is known to dislike interviews, therefore preferably avoiding them. From the few interviews available and from interviews with his colleagues, the observation can be made that Miyazaki is pessimistic about the future in general.

This is interesting, as his movies are not pessimistic at all. On the contrary, almost all of his movies offer a glimpse of hope. In Spirited Away, for example, Chihiro “survives” her ordeal by not complaining and getting on with it. In Howl’s Moving Castle the girl in the body of an elderly lady, Sophie, stays strong and in the end turns into herself again, not by becoming younger, but by accepting who she is and what she can do.

3.1 Turning pessimism into optimism

The optimism in Miyazaki’s movies can be traced back to the specific audience he wants to reach: Japanese children. Even though Miyazaki himself does not believe in the future being bright, he wants children to have hope, and to look at the positive things in the world.

Tradition, both Japanese and Western, is being obscured in children’s lives by technology and its “flimsy devices” [2], according to Miyazaki. He believes that tradition is an important part of one’s identity and ability to exist, and that movies can take on the challenge of informing children on the richness of the past.

3.2 On lead characters

The fact that Miyazaki makes his movies primarily for children, also in part explains why most of his lead characters are children. It is a matter of recognition. However, there is more to it, as most of these lead characters are girls.

Mostly waving off questions about his female lead characters by saying that he simply likes women, Miyazaki has the opinion that male characters in adventure stories tend to be too “cool” and that they demand an “Indiana Jones”-like story in which good and bad become stereotypical [4]. The example he gives is that of a character firing a gun: if it is a man it is just “his job”, but if it is a girl, it is “really something” [4]. He says that women as movie characters depend more on feeling and getting this feeling across. To accentuate this even more, Miyazaki tends to create what he calls “cute girls” and not the (typically Japanese) “Lolita”-type heroines.

Figure 2: A storyboard from Princess Mononoke
3.3 Motives and character evolution

Next to expressing feeling and emotion on typical occasions, Miyazaki wants his (main) characters to evolve. He wants them to create or gain motives from the experiences they have and evolve according to these motives throughout the entire movie. The boy from *Princess Mononoke*, Ashitaka, first sets out to lift his curse. Then getting thrown into the conflict between the mining community and the forest, he focuses on solving this conflict and almost seems to forget his initial motive.

This contrasts with the “loss of motives” in Japanese animation that Miyazaki has identified and expressed in an article in 1988 [5]. In short, Miyazaki believes that most Japanese animation has only a handful of stereotypical motives left, such as professionalism (“doing something because that is one’s job”, i.e. policemen catching criminals) and lust. For Miyazaki, understandably, these stereotyped motives are not enough to create the characters and storylines, or what he calls “the true emotion” [5], that he wants to create.

3.4 Fantasy and reality

With no exception, Miyazaki’s movies are a mix of fantasy and reality. The settings are often realistic, such as ancient Japan in *Princess Mononoke*, but with fantasy-like elements such as spirits and other mythical creatures. Miyazaki is a true master of creating and animating creatures, ranging from living lampposts to small forest spirits (the latter being called Kodama, which have gained cult status).

![Figures 3 and 4: Kodama and the Great Forest Spirit from Princess Mononoke](image)

Sometimes a transition from the real world into a fantasy world is made, for example in *Spirited Away*, where a clear distinction can be seen between reality and fantasy in the opening sequences of the movie. Chihiro, the main character, passes into a spiritual world first by a mysterious entrance, then by crossing a bridge. On other occasions one fantasy element is brought into reality, which happens with the forest spirit that is found by children in *My Neighbor Totoro*.

The grand mythical feeling that movies such as *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* can express, however beautiful, should not obscure the usage of realistic details. Inside the moving castle from *Howl’s Moving Castle* (and in the company of a wizard and a magical flame), for example, the main characters have a nice breakfast with crispy bacon and eggs, resulting in what is mostly called “the domestic feeling” that Miyazaki summons in a truly exceptional way [6]. One almost forgets that this reality was created from hand-made drawings.
Into his fantasy world, Miyazaki mixes features that he personally likes. His influences from Western children’s literature can directly be seen in the children’s novel-based *Howl’s Moving Castle*. *Spirited Away* in turn, can in many ways be linked to Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll.

### 3.5 Flying

The most recurring element, though, is that of flying. Miyazaki’s fascination for flying is said to be linked to his parents owning a company that produced wingtips for airplanes [3]. Typical flying scenes from his movies are Kiki from *Kiki’s Delivery Service* flying on her broomstick, the forest spirit Totoro carrying his human friends into the air in *My Neighbor Totoro* and the main character from *Spirited Away*, Chihiro, being carried by her friend Haku in dragon-form [1].

### 3.6 Beyond good and evil

Another trait of Miyazaki’s movies is that there is no strict good and evil. This can be seen in the characters from these movies: there are no stereotypically good or evil characters. The most prominent example is that of Lady Eboshi from *Princess Mononoke*: she leads a community that mines the forests for their resources, and in doing so opposes the other characters in the movie [1]. The main character, Ashitaka, discovers that this community is build up of lepers and former prostitutes, and that Lady Eboshi has her own reasons for mining the forests, one of these reasons being that she wants to support and protect her community. In both *Spirited Away* and *Howl’s Moving Castle* similar discoveries are made, as the lead characters (and the audience) get the opportunity to get acquainted with the underlying motives of other characters.

### 4 Visual style

Looking at a Miyazaki movie without regarding the themes or character motivations, what makes such a movie so special?

Even though I am fairly accustomed to different types of animation, the introductory scene from *Princess Mononoke* sent shivers of excitement through my body. This was not a scene of a movie I was watching; this was the creation of a world in front of my own eyes. The forest landscapes and mountain ranges invited me to think about hiking there when I would ever get the chance to go to Japan. The music was not music in itself, as is so often the case in Japanese animation (in my opinion); it complemented the scenery and motion. The characters I saw were by no means cool samurai battling evil in ancient Japan like the ones so often encountered in animation (i.e. *Ninja Scroll* and *Samurai Champloo*). They moved and expressed their feelings just like I did before entering the cinema. They did not flinch in between frames. They were not still images on transparent celluloid that merely moved their lower jaws when ordered to do so. They were real people.

#### 4.1 Excessive expressionism

Only now, about six years later, I found out about Miyazaki’s underlying thoughts on this matter. In an article he wrote in 1988, Miyazaki described what he called “excessive expressionism” in Japanese animation. He described how Japanese animation had pushed itself into a spiral of ever decreasing motion (with focus on still shots) and grossly deformed character features, such as the well-known, huge, anime eyes. Some characters couldn’t even talk normally because their facial features were extremely fixed. Characters had to be “very cool, cute or powerful” [5]. All this was the result of the majority of the anime industry wanting to please audiences with declining resources (time and money) [5]. Most anime makers focused on making TV series and so-called OVA’s (Original Video Animation, directly released to retail sale), that relied on increasingly tight schedules and budgets. For
Miyazaki, this was pure absurdity. He wanted his movies to express true feeling, not excessively deformed interpretations of it. The characters and visuals he created were the ones he believed in himself, both in expressions and in movement. Audiences should be able to connect with these characters and their surroundings in order to pass on real feelings.

Figures 5 and 6: Excessive expressionism contrast; to the left Chihiro from Spirited Away, to the right a typical popular anime character.

Not only his characters’ expressions and movement are magnificently detailed, the backgrounds are too. These are painted by backgrounds artists, who sometimes even specialize in specific backgrounds (such as forests or rural areas). Miyazaki is one of the only directors of animated movies who regularly shows, and can permit to show, still shots of backgrounds.

4.2 Examples

The amount of details, or in some specific cases the lack of it, is not only meant to stun the audience; more often then not, it is filled with meaning. In *Spirited Away*, for example, the bathhouse for spirits is magnificently styled after traditional Japanese bathing houses, in colors (mainly a pure red and touches of black on wood), materials and architecture. The interior of the room that the witch Yubaba resides in, however, is completely European in styling. Miyazaki stated that this is done to create the feeling that one enters a totally different world upon entering this room (and of course it can be linked to him wanting to represent both Japanese and European traditions) [2].

Another example, now in purposeful lack of detail, is the train trip the main character Chihiro, accompanied by the spirit No-Face takes in *Spirited Away*. During this scene, almost no shots are used in which the view from inside the train towards the outside is shown. From within the train, we only see a thinking Chihiro and an almost expressionless No-Face (see Figure 7); through the windows we see a landscape that is totally flooded with water. In this scene, Miyazaki wanted to express the feeling a person has when traveling to a partly unknown destination, of which he or she is anxious about. Continuously thinking about this destination, one is so drenched in thought that one totally forgets the surrounding landscape.
The final result is an on-screen world in which a willing audience (both children and adults) can be totally absorbed. Random shots from any of his movies are postcards in themselves, showing amazing detail, composition and use of colors (see for example the screenshots of the train scene from *Spirited Away* that is described above).

### 5 Computer Generated Illustrations

One can imagine the enormous amount of work that is needed to create such worlds. Miyazaki first considered the use of computers in animated movie making to cause a decrease in quality and a loss of the “hand-made feel” that is so important in his works. Some of his animators took up the challenge of convincing him that this was not always the case, and succeeded in doing so. This resulted in *Princess Mononoke* being the first Miyazaki movie to be mastered digitally, as opposed to the traditional method of photographing frames and then manually sequencing them. Studio Ghibli got a separate Computer Generated Illustrations (CGI) department, and CGI would gradually be used as a tool for more specific tasks too, but never without the loss of the hand-made identity (as separate frames are being made by hand).

Examples of the use of CGI in Miyazaki’s movies are the computer generated water and steam in *Spirited Away*. A typical note on the steam is that its boundaries were drawn by hand, in order to give it a less realistic and (thus) more hand-made look. CGI is mostly used for things such as resizing backgrounds or toning a specific color. This is mainly to prevent artists from having to repaint or redraw a whole piece because of minor changes in requirements. As with key frames, Miyazaki always gives the final “go” or “no go” on every piece of CGI [2].

### 6 Disney

As an important prelude to international success, even though criticized at the time (fuelled by Miyazaki’s dislike of Disney movies), international distribution of Miyazaki’s movies from *Princess Mononoke* on, was done by Disney (and its subdivisions such as Miramax). Having had *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* badly cut up for foreign distribution by another company, a very strict deal was made with Disney. This deal stated that Disney could not cut Miyazaki’s movies in any way, and would just focus on distribution and (partial) dubbing.
7 My “time of viewing”

This being a personal essay, I have to state that *Princess Mononoke* is my favourite Miyazaki movie. It is the first of his movies that I have seen, and I was fortunate enough to see it in a small local cinema. At the time, *Princess Mononoke* was only shown in a very limited number of Dutch local cinemas. Major branches of cinemas did not yet foresee the increasing international popularity of this movie, thus deciding not to screen it.

Miyazaki believes that not only the movie should be perfect in a sense, but that the “time of viewing” (in a very broad sense) is essential to the audience’s experience. For me, this was exactly the case. Even though I have always had a fascination for animation and Japanese comics and animation in particular, looking back, I saw *Princess Mononoke* at the right time in my life, making it more than “just a movie” for me (although I can hardly believe that it can be “just a movie” for anyone).

![Figure 8: A scene from Princess Mononoke](image)

I could write an essay in itself about the meaning that both *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* have established in my life, *Princess Mononoke* reflecting a very special time I experienced until it was tragically interrupted, and *Spirited Away* at the middle of my time of grief that resulted from this sudden change and loss in my life. This being an introduction to Miyazaki and his work, however personal, make me leave this as it is (for now).

8 Conclusion

In this essay, first an introduction to Miyazaki as a person was given, summarizing his career as an animator and director and giving his filmography. Then, the attention turned to the themes that are mostly encountered in Miyazaki’s movies, such as children as lead characters, the mix of fantasy and reality and there being no strict distinction between good and evil. After that, his visual style and underlying thoughts were discussed. Finally, the increasingly important role of CGI was discussed, but with the note that the use of CGI did not make any of the movies use their typical hand-made, “Miyazakian” identity.

I personally do not feel the need to draw a formal conclusion, because I believe that everyone will need to do so for him- or herself, during the process of viewing a movie such as *Princess Mononoke* or *Spirited Away*. No matter how much words or images I spend on elaborating my own thoughts and conclusions, the movies speak for themselves. I merely hope that this essay has given an overview of Hayao Miyazaki’s exceptional work and related thoughts that will encourage the reader to explore the fascinating worlds that Miyazaki creates.
References


