

Miyazaki Hayao by Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc



In July 2008, Japan waited in anticipation for the screen event of the year, the release of *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (*Gake no ue no Ponyo*). Preview information had been decidedly scarce and the film's veil of secrecy was seemingly impenetrable. The main reason behind this strategy was that the film's creator wanted his audience to see it as freshly as possible, with eyes unencumbered by the baggage of preconception. For most studios, this marketing approach would be dangerous. But when the film is from Studio Ghibli and the director is Miyazaki Hayao, it's a whole different ball game. Miyazaki is Japan's most renowned animator; his films are revered for their breathtaking artistry and engaging storylines. Not only huge box office hits worldwide (Studio Ghibli films are amongst the most financially successful non-English-language films of all time) they are also critically acclaimed, and with good reason. Miyazaki is uncompromising when it comes to realising his artistic vision; flights of glorious fantasy mix with a worldview that is childlike in its quest for wonder and discovery

but never childish or patronising. His films are popular globally but many are distinctive in the way they blend the environmental aspects of Japan's indigenous Shinto religion into strong narratives.

Early Years

Miyazaki Hayao was born in Tokyo on 5 January 1941, the second of four brothers. He grew up in turbulent and difficult times, during Japan's slow recovery under US occupation, following the end of the Second World War. The young Miyazaki took a great interest in his father's work for Miyazaki Airplane, a company owned by his uncle. The flying machines fascinated the boy and triggered a lifelong passion for aviation, which would fuel the vertiginous flying scenes in his films and also lead him to design his own vehicles for other projects and hobbyist magazines. Miyazaki's mother was an independent-minded intellectual who suffered from a form of spinal tuberculosis that meant the family frequently had to move home to facilitate her treatment. Like many growing up in the post-war years, Miyazaki became interested in manga, Japanese comics that had been popularised by the artist Tezuka Osamu. He gradually began to develop his drawing skills. The manga industry had an associated spin-off, anime, kickstarted in 1958 by Hakujo (The Tale of the White Serpent), often credited as Japan's first feature-length colour anime. Studios soon expanded to fulfill a new appetite for animation, particularly on television. The largest of these was, and still is, Tōei (formerly Tōei Dōga). Miyazaki began working for them in 1963, after graduating in political science and economics from Gakushuin University. Tōei ran its animation wing like a factory, and the artists formed a strong, radicalised union. Miyazaki was eager to become involved and it was through union

activities that he met fellow animator Takahata Isao. The two would collaborate on many projects before co-founding Studio Ghibli. The most notable early example of these was Takahata's socialist fantasy, *Horusu: Prince of the Sun* (1968) on which Miyazaki worked as a key animator and designer. Eventually Miyazaki and Takahata left Tōei to pursue projects elsewhere, including the TV series *Lupin III* (1971). In 1972 the pair worked on the first of two *Panda Kopanda* films from a script by Miyazaki, a charming fantasy about a girl and her friendship with a panda and his cub. Back on the small screen, a series of productions for World Masterpiece Theater, including versions of *Heidi* and *Anne of Green Gables*, honed their skills to perfection and, through production visits to Europe, informed much of Miyazaki's later work. It was on the series *Future Boy Conan* (1978) that Miyazaki's talent really began to shine. He designed and directed nearly all 26 episodes, revelling in scenes of flying and adventure as young Conan, survivor of a near-apocalyptic war, embarks on an epic quest to save Lana, the potential saviour of his people, from the clutches of an evil military regime.

Miyazaki's big break came when he was asked to direct *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979), a feature film spin-off from the TV series. Arsène Lupin III, the roguish hero, accompanied by an assortment of hilarious sidekicks, attempts to break into a virtually impregnable castle to locate the source behind forged banknotes. As if the Grand Duke of Cagliostro's deadly guards and booby traps were not enough, Lupin has to shake off Inspector Zenigata of Interpol, who is desperate to see the lovable larcenist behind bars. He also has to rescue the delectable Princess Clarisse, awaiting a forced marriage to the ruthless Duke. The combination of slapstick comedy and fast-paced action is exhilarating; its perfectly exaggerated characterisation matched by an acute attention to detail. The opening car chase is one of cinema's finest and funniest. Although *The Castle of Cagliostro* was a success Miyazaki returned to working

for television, filling the time between projects producing a science fiction manga, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, on an ad hoc basis for *Animage* magazine. The comic proved immensely popular and eventually *Animage's* parent company agreed to finance a feature film based on the incomplete work.



Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984) is set 1,000 years in the future, where humans are struggling to emerge from the devastation of their industrial past. Princess Nausicaä's studies into the toxins that render most of the world uninhabitable without protective equipment are put on hold when the Tolmekians take over her village, kill her father and set about resurrecting a god of destruction to eradicate the giant insects that roam the polluted lands. *Nausicaä* is a sweeping epic about the effect of humankind on its environment, of the conflict between technology and nature, themes that run throughout Miyazaki's work. Central to the film is the battle between the environmentally aware Princess Nausicaä and Princess Kushana's dictator. Miyazaki's eye for action set-pieces elegantly contrasts with the overriding argument about harmony with nature and the need for community. Even without considering the limitations of Miyazaki's resources, *Nausicaä* is an astonishing and complex eco-fable filled with imaginative design.

The Fledgling Studio Ghibli

Nausicaä's success led Miyazaki and Takahata to form an animation company of their own,

which could free them from the artistic constraints that other companies had placed on them, and to nurture future animation talent. Studio Ghibli was born.

Laputa: Castle in the Sky (1986) was Ghibli's first feature, an energetic fantasy tangentially informed by Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Set in a Welsh mining town at the close of an alternative nineteenth century it is partly informed by reconnaissance trips to Wales around the time of the miners' strikes. 'I admired the way they battled to save their way of life, just as the coal miners in Japan did,' Miyazaki said. Young Pazu's world is changed forever when a girl, Sheeta, literally falls from the sky and floats into his arms. Sheeta holds the key to unlocking the secrets of Laputa – a floating island of immeasurable power. Would-be dictator Colonel Muska abducts Sheeta in order to find Laputa, forcing Pazu to form an uneasy alliance with a clan of sky pirates, led by the feisty Mama Dola.



Laputa: Castle in the Sky

In Laputa: Castle in the Sky, there is always room for the redemption of even the most hardened of criminals, provided they have a sense of community. What is perhaps surprising is the way Miyazaki elicits emotional attachment in unlikely areas. When a giant Laputa robot is first reanimated, we witness it administering impressive laser destruction, but later one is shown tending a grave with flowers, quietly servile and serene. It is in these contrasts that Miyazaki creates genuinely touching scenes against the backdrop of a rip-roaring adventure.

Miyazaki followed Laputa with *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), a film for which Studio Ghibli struggled to find financing because the proposal seemed too childish for investors. To obtain funding, it was released alongside Takahata's devastatingly powerful war film *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988). It is hard to imagine a more incongruous double bill. *My Neighbour Totoro* is a delightful, whimsical triumph of imagination. The story is simple – Mei and Satsuki move to a home in the countryside with their father while their mother is convalescing in hospital. There, under the imposing shadow of an ancient camphor tree, they encounter strange woodland spirits, the most commanding of which is Totoro, a huge bellowing furry creature, and his associate, an enormous cat.

My Neighbour Totoro is the perfect example of Miyazaki's inquisitive, unprejudiced and childlike view of the world – a film that is as captivating to five-year-olds as it is to 85-year-olds. It has an honesty devoid of the saccharine cynicism often associated with family films and sees its young heroines respecting their surroundings and interacting with them in a way that is harmonious with Shinto beliefs. They are rewarded for their courtesy with increasingly fanciful encounters with the forest spirits, from totoros of various sizes to the wonderful grinning nekobasu – a many-legged cat with headlights for eyes, who provides a flying bus service. The film was not a success on initial release but subsequently



My Neighbour Totoro

became one of Ghibli's most beloved films, with a bewildering amount of merchandise available. Totoro in his various guises became part of the company's identity and Totoro's profile announces the start of every Ghibli film.



Kiki's Delivery Service

Based upon a popular children's book by Kadono Eiko, *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) is a captivating story about growing up. The independent and eternally cheerful Kiki, one of Miyazaki's many plucky young heroines, has left home with her talking cat, Jiji, to embark upon her induction into witchdom. Realising that her potion skills aren't up to much, she plays to her strong card – flying on her broom. Landing at a port town, Kiki and Jiji find lodgings in the attic of a friendly baker and set about earning their keep through Kiki's business, a broom-based parcel delivery service. Naturally, things don't always go smoothly, but the pair endear themselves to the townsfolk, especially to the young Tombo, who is in awe of Kiki's ability to fly.

On the surface, *Kiki's Delivery Service* is Miyazaki's most conventional film, but this belies his elegant narrative skills. For all the action in the film's daring flying sequences, the true art of Miyazaki's direction lies in the details of the narrative: the awkwardness of growing up and becoming socially aware; Jiji losing his voice, which marks our heroine's puberty; and a heart-stopping moment of suspense at the film's climax.

Flying Success

The highest box office earner of its year, *Porco Rosso* (1992) began life as a commissioned in-flight short movie for JAL (Japan Airlines) before Miyazaki's ambitions and enthusiasm for what was a very personal project meant additional funds were required to make it feature length. Captain Marco Pagot is a loner, a free-spirited man who roams the skies in his distinctive red plane. He's also a bipedal pig, unique in a world that's currently on the brink of war. Marco spends his days rescuing schoolchildren from pirates and drowning his sorrows in Gina's Flying Club bar. But that all changes when Curtis, an arrogant American pilot and all-round scallywag, becomes his nemesis, gunning him down and leaving him for dead. With the aid of plucky engineer Fio, Marco repairs his plane and patches himself up, ready to face Curtis and save his secret love, Gina.



Porco Rosso

Porco Rosso is a celebration of aviation. Its multitude of aircraft, all bar one (Curtis') designed by Miyazaki but completely in keeping with its 1920/1930s aesthetic, are lovingly detailed and exquisitely animated, and the way that Miyazaki plays with an apparently 3D space is liberating and intoxicating. Although the story is slight, there are serious messages about the rise of fascism in Italy and the ultimate lack of humanity possessed by the bulk of humankind. *Porco Rosso* is a spirited blend of *Hemingway*, *Wings* (1927), *Casablanca* (1942) and *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939). But with a pig.

Scripting as well as directing a short but stunning sequence in the enchanting coming-of-age drama, *Whisper of the Heart* (1995), Miyazaki returned to full-time director duties with *Princess Mononoke* (1997), briefly Japan's biggest box office hit. Ashitaka saves his village from destruction at the tusks of a rampaging boar god, driven insane by poison. But Ashitaka becomes tainted in the process and faces certain death unless he can travel to find the root of the blight that is ravaging the land. His journey takes him through sacred forests overseen by the deer god and he catches glimpses of demi-god Princess Mononoke, a feral girl who runs with the wolves. Mononoke is running a campaign to rid the land of Lady Eboshi, owner of an iron factory fortress that manufactures increasingly deadly weapons, who is eradicating the sacred forests in her insatiable need to smelt metal and obtain further earthly riches.



Princess Mononoke

An epic on a scale comparable to Kurosawa's finest work, *Princess Mononoke* is so much more than an adventure story. It is an eco-fable steeped heavily in the culture and spirituality of Japan; a companion piece to *Nausicaä*, which looks at the origins of industrialism during the transition from feudalism. This is an age where the gods roam among the people, visible and revered. Miyazaki's gods and spirits range from the hordes of tiny white kodomo, eerily clicking their heads around in rapt concentration, to the mountain-sized majesty and dreadful awe of the Nightwalker unleashing his wrath. But among these scenes of wonder and threatened Götterdämmerung, Miyazaki constructs a complex political picture

of the times, which gives the film a sense of existing on a far broader canvas.

Surpassing *Princess Mononoke's* formidable box office clout and scooping an Academy Award for Best Animated Film, *Spirited Away* (2001) is a whirlwind of imagination and inventiveness. Plucky teenager Chihiro faces an uncertain and dangerous future when her parents are transformed into gorging swine, after they tuck into a cursed feast they happen upon in an apparently disused amusement park. Chihiro is plunged into a chaotic spirit world of menace and dread, overseen by cackling bird-witch Yubaba. Working to survive, our resourceful heroine faces the loss not only of her identity, but also of her life.

In many ways the flip-side to *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Spirited Away* shows the malevolent aspects of the spirit world, a world that has now all but shunned mankind and is brutal to those who dare to stumble into it. Chihiro faces a bleak fate, cleaning out filthy baths or dealing with Yubaba's elephantine-sized mewling offspring. Miyazaki's menagerie of creatures – dragons, masked ghosts, sootbunnies and all manner of grotesque or quirky denizens – vie for space in a dangerous land. Chihiro confronts this adversity with aplomb but the palpable sense of threat is genuine. She represents a vision of hope for the future of Japan, passing the baton from the current generation, who are viewed as selfish, materialistic and shallow, on to a youth who must learn to respect their heritage and environment.



Spirited Away



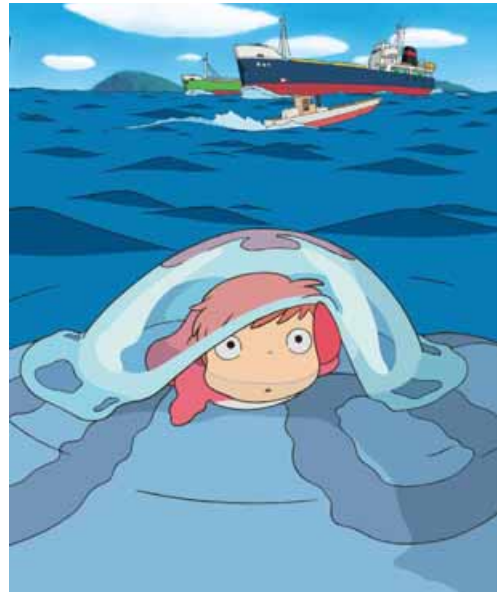
Howl's Moving Castle

Miyazaki has vowed to retire from directing on a number of occasions, as a result of the pressures inherent in realising his exacting visions, but somehow he has always been persuaded to continue animating. *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), adapted from the book by Diana Wynne Jones, tells the tale of cheerful but self-deprecating milliner Sophie who, following a brief encounter with Howl, a narcissistic free-roaming shape-shifting wizard, is turned into an old woman by the Witch of the Waste. Howl lives in a ramshackle castle on legs, powered by an irrepressible fire demon that huffs and puffs its way around a world facing a terrible and futile war.

Like *Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle* is a film about identity and humanity, about what it is to be human and how the choices we make affect our communities. Howl's narcissism and cowardice give way to a nobler self when Sophie comes into his chaotic life and he realises that beauty is not a matter for the eyes, but for the heart. *Howl's Moving Castle* tempers its pessimism regarding mankind's propensity for war with the redemptive nature of the human spirit.

Miyazaki's latest film, *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (2008), is aimed squarely at a younger audience, but nevertheless contains many of the themes that pervade his work. A young girl-fish escapes the clutches of her father, submarine-bound experimenter Fujimoto, but he sends sinister aqua fish to find her. Meanwhile, the girl-fish has found herself in the company of perky schoolboy Sōsuke, who keeps her alive in a bucket of water and names

her Ponyo. Ponyo wants to become human, but could her attempts to realise her aim cause a catastrophe? Completely devoid of CGI, *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* delights in a hand-crafted aesthetic that suits its narrative. The opening scenes of sub-aquatic life and Ponyo's uncountable sisters are breathtaking in the number of animated elements expertly rendered, while some of the action sequences are as exhilarating as *The Castle of Cagliostro*. Once again, Miyazaki delivers a fantasy world amidst our own, where strange creatures and demi-gods contrast with the realities of day-to-day living. A feel-good adventure of discovery, *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* is also graced with an infectious end-credit song, dutifully sung with gusto by children enamoured of Ponyo's considerable charms.



Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea

Miyazaki's films show inherent artistry and honesty, exploring the conflicts between humankind, nature and technology, often within a fantasy context. He is comfortable showing us both fantastical wonders and horrifying consequences in worlds that are truly believable. The dangers are genuine but there is always a chance of redemption. Throughout, his heroes show personal

fortitude and a pronounced sense of community. His use of the traditional cell animation technique gives his films an organic quality that is timeless. That his films are so popular, given that his vision as a director is never compromised, demonstrates a rare merging of art and commerce.

COLIN ODELL and MICHELLE LE BLANC

are authors, broadcasters and film journalists. They have written on David Lynch, Tim Burton, John Carpenter and horror and vampire films, among others. Their latest book, the Studio Ghibli Kamera Book (2009), explores the films of Miyazaki and Takahata Isao.

Miyazaki Hayao filmography

[feature-film directing credits only]

1979

RUPAN SANSEI:

**KARIOSUTORO NO SHIRO
(The Castle of Cagliostro)**

Script: Miyazaki Hayao.

Photography: Takahashi Hirokata.

Art Direction: Shichirō Kobayashi.

Editing: Tsurubuchi Mitsutoshi.

Players: Yamada Yasuo (Lupin),

Kobayashi Kiyoshi (Jigen),

Masuyama Eiko (Fujiko), Naya

Gorō (Zenigata), Shimamoto Sumi

(Clarisse). Produced by Katayama

Tetsuo. 100 mins

1984

**KAZE NO TANI NO NAUSHIKA
(Nausicaä of the Valley of the
Wind)**

Script: Miyazaki Hayao.

Photography: Kyonen Hideshi.

Art Direction: Nakamura Mitsuki

(Nakamura Mitsuyoshi). Editing:

Kaneko Naoki, Kida Tomoko, Sakai

Shōji. Players: Shimamoto Sumi

(Nausicaä), Naya Gorō (Yupa),

Sakakibara Yoshiko (Kushana).

Produced by Takahata Isao.

116 mins

1986

**TENKŪ NO SHIRO ROPYUTA
(Laputa: Castle in the Sky)**

Script: Miyazaki Hayao. Art

Direction: Nozaki Toshio, Yamamoto

Nizō. Editing: Kasahara Yoshihiro,

Seyama Takeshi. Players: Tanaka

Mayumi (Pazu), Yokozawa Keiko

(Sheeta), Terada Minoru (Muska).

Produced by Takahata Isao.

124 mins

1988

**TONARI NO TOTORO
(My Neighbour Totoro)**

Script: Miyazaki Hayao.

Photography: Shirai Hisao. Art

Direction: Oga Kazuo. Editing:

Seyama Takeshi. Players: Sakamoto

Chika (Mei), Hidaka Noriko

(Satsuki), Takagi Hitoshi (Totoro),

Itoi Shigesato (Tatsuo). Produced by

Hara Toru. 86 mins

1989

**MAJO NO TAKKYŪBIN
(Kiki's Delivery Service)**

Script: Miyazaki Hayao.

Photography: Sugimura Shigeo. Art

Direction: Ono Hiroshi. Editing:

Seyama Takeshi. Players: Takayama

Minami (Kiki), Sakuma Rei (Jiji),

Yamaguchi Kappei (Tombo).

Produced by Miyazaki Hayao, Hara

Toru. 102 mins

1992

**KURENAI NO BUTA
(Porco Rosso)**

Script: Miyazaki Hayao.

Photography: Okui Atsushi. Art

Direction: Hisamura Katsu. Editing:

Seyama Takeshi. Players: Moriyama

Shūichirō (Marco), Kato Tokiko

(Jina), Okamura Akemi (Fio).

Produced by Suzuki Toshio. 94 mins

1997

**MONONOKE HIME
(Princess Mononoke)**

Script: Miyazaki Hayao.

Photography: Okui Atsushi. Art

Direction: Kuroda Satoshi, Oga

Kazuo, Takeshige Yōji, Tanaka

Naoya, Yamamoto Nizō. Editing:

Seyama Takeshi. Players: Matsuda

Yōji (Ashitaka), Tanaka Yūko

(Eboshi), Ishida Yuriko (San),

Kobayashi Kaoru (Jiko). Produced

by Suzuki Toshio. 134 mins

2001

**SEN TO CHIHIRO NO
KAMIKAKUSHI
(Spirited Away)**

Script: Miyazaki Hayao.

Photography: Okui Atsushi. Art

Direction: Takeshige Yōji. Editing:

Seyama Takeshi. Players: Hiiragi

Rumi (Chihiro), Irino Miyu (Haku),

Natsuki Mari (Yubaba). Produced by

Suzuki Toshio. 125 mins

2004

**HAURU NO UGOKU SHIRO
(Howl's Moving Castle)**

Script: Miyazaki Hayao.

Photography: Okui Atsushi. Art

Direction: Takeshige Yōji, Yoshida

Noboru. Editing: Seyama Takeshi.

Players: Baishō Chieko (Sophie),

Kimura Takuya (Howl). Produced

by Suzuki Toshio. 118 mins

2008

**GAKE NO UE NO PONYO
(Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea)**

Script: Miyazaki Hayao.

Photography: Okui Atsushi. Art

Direction: Yoshida Noboru. Editing:

Seyama Takeshi. Players: Nara

Yuria (Ponyo), Doi Hiroki (Sōsuke),

Tokoro Jōji (Fujimoto). Produced by

Suzuki Toshio. 108 mins