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## Introduction: Memories like Twinkling Stars

Since late 1970s, it has been widely assumed that Japan has been actively redefining the concept of a superpower. This perception has stemmed from the sustained and ever-growing global influence of cultural elements originating from Japan – despite the country's well-documented political and economic challenges. From popular music and consumer technology to architecture, fashion, and cuisine, Japan has seemingly flourished as a cultural superpower, particularly from mid-2000s onward, even surpassing the influence it wielded during the 1980s when it was perceived as an economic superpower (Drucker, 1981). Yet, amid this celebration of Japan's remarkable cultural expansion, a persistent question has lingered among those who remain cautious about unreservedly embracing such a narrative: Is it truly feasible for Japan to extend its cultural missionarism globally, leveraging its unprecedented dominance over cultural media? A possibly affirmative answer to this question may well be found in the domain of Japanese animation.

Like popular music, consumer technology, architecture, fashion, and cuisine, animation represents a distinctive mode of communication in modern Japan. Since the release of Japan's first animated production in 1917, what is now recognized as "Japanese animation" has undergone continuous evolution, emerging as a highly captivating medium which mirrors the complex and intricate interactions between state ideologues, technocrats, artists, and audiences (Kelts, 2006). In this regard, animation productions share a resemblance with high-value publications in the realm of "serious" literature, as they uniformly rely on the creative vision of individual artists and emerge from a rigorous editing and decision-making process. The ultimate goal of such productions is to consistently reach the market according to demanding schedules. At the same time, however, they intrinsically reflect the tension inherent in commercially driven publications, such as newspapers and journals.

Over the past four decades, Studio Ghibli has materialized as a symbolic icon within the international animation landscape, representing a harmonious blend of aesthetic-ideological vision and consumption-driven compromise. As the quintessential cultural enterprise engaged in the production of cultural assets – specifically animation works (commonly referred to as *anime* アニメ, the Japanese adaptation of cartoons) – Studio Ghibli's creations stand out for their powerful messages conveyed through rich visual story-telling (Kamijima, 2004; Kiridoshi, 2001). These productions not only aesthetically mirror reality but also ideologically engage with pressing issues such as environmental degradation, social discrimination, the challenges of growing up, historical accountability, the significance and value of life, and love as a multifaceted emotional construct.

Founded in 1985 and based in Higashi-Koganei, Western Tokyo, Studio Ghibli has evolved over the decades into an emblematic institution within the Japanese entertainment industry. Although the name most commonly associated with the studio is that of Miyazaki Hayao 宮崎駿 (born in 1941), he is, in fact, only one member of what may be termed the "Ghibli Quartet" (Grajdan, 2008). This core group consists of Miyazaki Hayao, Takahata Isao 高畑勲 (1935-2018), Suzuki Toshio 鈴木敏夫 (born in 1948), and Hisaishi Joe 久石譲 (born in 1950, real name Fujisawa Mamoru 藤澤守). The founding quartet originally included Takahata Isao, Miyazaki Hayao, Suzuki Toshio, and Tokuma Yasuyoshi 徳間康快 (1921-2000), with the latter two serving as producer and manager, respectively. Composer Hisaishi Joe later joined the Studio Ghibli team after being discovered by Takahata and Miyazaki at Tokuma's recommendation in 1983 to create an image album for Miyazaki's animated movie *Nausicaä from the Valleys of the Winds* (1984).

Today, Studio Ghibli has developed into a multifaceted cultural enterprise, often described as the expanding "Ghibli corporation". The Ghibli Museum, established in 2001 and located in Mitaka, Tokyo, was designed and built under the supervision of Miyazaki Gorō 宮崎五郎 (born in 1967), the eldest

son of Miyazaki Hayao. Additionally, a life-size replica of Satsuki & Mei's House from the animation movie *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) was constructed on the site of EXPO 2005 in Nagakute, Aichi Prefecture, likewise under Miyazaki Gorō's direction (Miyazaki, 2004; Miyazaki, 2012). Most recently, the long-anticipated Ghibli Theme Park in Aichi Prefecture opened to the public in late November 2022, further cementing the studio's legacy as a cultural phenomenon.

The unexpected passing of Takahata Isao in April 2018, along with the subdued response it garnered both domestically and internationally, reignited speculation regarding a purported and increasingly bitter rivalry between the two towering figures of the Studio Ghibli phenomenon: the so-called Takahata-Miyazaki duo. As will be demonstrated below, I contend that despite their markedly divergent approaches to life and art, both directors shared a profound and enduring empathy for the human condition – particularly the innate desire to love and be loved. This fundamental sentiment permeates their entire body of animation work and significantly shapes the ideological and aesthetic framework of the animated worlds crafted by Studio Ghibli.

The widely debated rivalry, as suggested by tabloids and even media analysts, may stem from the fundamentally distinct ways in which Takahata and Miyazaki addressed the thematic content of their works (Miyazaki, 2008; Takahata, 2013). Their ideological perspectives centered on substantial themes such as environmental destruction, warfare, social inequality, individual growth, historical responsibility and repeatability, the sanctity and worth of life, the multilayered essence of love as both an emotional experience and a cognitive trajectory. Aesthetic inspiration, however, drew deeply from the long-standing tradition of classical Japanese visual arts, including *emaki-mono* 絵巻物 (handscroll paintings dating back to Nara period, 710-794) and *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 (woodblock prints of the Tokugawa period, 1603-1868).

This foundational aesthetic was further enriched by substantial influences from early Walt Disney works (up to Disney's death in 1966), which shaped

their representation of animated reality, as well as from Yuri Norstein's (born 1941) innovative concept of animation as a two-dimensional simulation of reality. Additionally, Jacques Prévert's (1900-1977) approach to re-imagining myths and legends through creative adaptation, exemplified by his collaboration with Paul Grimault (1905-1994) on *Le Roi et l'Oiseau* (1980) – a work translated and analyzed by Takahata in 2007 – exerted a notable impact.

Furthermore, several significant cinematic movements left an indelible mark on Studio Ghibli's visual story-telling: German Expressionism (mid-1910s to early 1930s), with its rejection of plain realism and use of stark distortions to convey profound emotional truths, contributed to the dark, moody atmosphere of certain productions. Italian Neorealism (mid-1940s to early 1950s), with its unflinching portrayal of poverty and social injustice, and the French New Wave (late 1950s to late 1960s), with its near-documentary realism and exploration of ambiguity, additionally influenced the studio's aesthetic sensibilities. Ultimately, this ideological and aesthetic amalgamation reflects a deeply optimistic pursuit of human universality, manifesting in animated masterpieces which affirm a fundamental truth: at our core, we all yearn for love – to give it and to receive it.

Indeed, few movie-makers have left as profound and enduring an impact on global cinema as Miyazaki Hayao. Revered as one of the most influential animation directors of our times, Miyazaki's works transcend cultural and generational boundaries, captivating audiences with their vivid worlds, complex characters, and enduring themes. From the lush, enchanted forests of *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) to the war-torn skies of *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), his animation movies inspire viewers to reflect on their own lives and the world around them. Beyond their artistic merit, Miyazaki's movies carry powerful messages about human responsibility, self-actualization, freedom, kindness, and courage – values which resonate universally, regardless of one's background or upbringing.

The primary objective of this book is to introduce students and general readers to Miyazaki Hayao's animated works without the academic jargon and dense theoretical frameworks which often accompany scholarly publications on his work. While many analyses focus on postmodernism, eco-criticism, or psychoanalytic theory, this book aims to make Miyazaki's animation movies accessible to all by presenting theoretical elements as tools for personal growth and understanding, rather than as abstract intellectual exercises. In doing so, the book bridges the gap between academia and popular appreciation, allowing readers to delve more profoundly into the philosophical and moral dimensions of Miyazaki's story-telling.

At its core, the current investigation challenges the notion that education must be financially burdensome or intellectually exclusive. As a scholar and educator specializing in media studies – both Japanese and global –, I am passionately committed to making knowledge accessible to everyone. My teaching philosophy is rooted in the belief that education should empower individuals to think critically and compassionately, fostering a sense of responsibility and agency. By creating a textbook which remains free of charge and open to diverse audiences, I aim to honor this principle and share the beauty of Miyazaki's worlds without imposing financial or intellectual barriers.

This book sets out the following objectives:

1. To introduce Miyazaki Hayao's body of work to students and general readers in an engaging and accessible manner;
2. To explore the themes of freedom, courage, kindness, and individual responsibility which pervade his animation movies, demonstrating the ways in which they contribute to personal and social growth;
3. To present theoretical concepts in a way that is clear and relatable, without sacrificing analytical depth or scholarly insight;

4. To promote media literacy and critical engagement with animation as a powerful medium for cultural expression and personal transformation;
5. To encourage free thinking, joyful exploration of and cheerful experimentation on humankind's grand themes without forgetting our own intrinsic humanness.

Ultimately, this book seeks to inspire readers not only to appreciate Miyazaki's artistry but also to reflect on the moral and philosophical questions his movies pose. In a world increasingly defined by disconnection and uncertainty, Miyazaki's stories remind us of the importance of courage, compassion, and a steadfast commitment to one's values. By guiding readers through these narratives with an open and thoughtful approach, I hope to foster a genuine and lasting appreciation of both the movies and the life lessons they impart.

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"Ghibli" (written, in fact, "gibli") means in Italian "hot desert wind" and was supposed to have the effect of a fresh wind re-invigorating the framework of Japanese animation. Studio Ghibli was grounded in the year 1985 by Takahata Isao 高畑勲 and Miyazaki Hayao 宮崎駿. Both grounders had already gathered experience in the field of animation and of the Japanese animation industry, which they subsequently employed in developing their own animation production company. Together with the so-called Takahata-Miyazaki combination, two more persons have been accompanying the Ghibli enterprise since its beginning and have been contributing to its astonishing success: the producer Suzuki Toshio 鈴木利男 and the composer Hisaishi Joe/Jō 久石譲.

Born on 19. August 1948 in Nagoya (Aichi prefecture), Suzuki Toshio is the producer of Studio Ghibli and stands in Japan for one of the most powerful

and influential producers. Miyazaki Hayao declared in an interview that without Suzuki, there would probably not be a Studio Ghibli to speak of (Miyazaki, 1996). Following his activity as chief-in-editor at the animation journal *Animage*, he moved in 1989 to Studio Ghibli and produced all animation movies released by Studio Ghibli ever since (Suzuki, 2018). Additionally, Suzuki co-produced the animation movie *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*, which was co-financed by Studio Ghibli.

Born on 6. December 1950 in Nagano, Hisaishi Joe (real name Fujisawa Mamoru 藤澤守) had started his career as a composer of serial-minimalist music during his undergraduate study at Kunitachi Music Academy in Tokyo. After the release of his first album *Information* (1982), he was proposed as the composer for the image album of *Nausicaä from the Valley of the Winds*. Miyazaki and Takahata (as producer) were deeply impressed, so that they required Hisaishi the composition of the entire soundtrack for the animation movie (Grajdian, 2008). Subsequently, Hisaishi delivered the musical soundtracks for all Miyazaki's animated cinema features released ever since as well as for Takahata Isao's last animation work from 2013 *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*. Additionally, Hisaishi is active outside of Studio Ghibli with his own individual compositional projects, events, musical enterprises throughout Asia.

Nonetheless, within the "Ghibli Quartet", Miyazaki Hayao has been the one who has gotten most of, if not all, laurels throughout the years. Born in Tokyo on 5. January 1941 as the second son out of a total of four children, Miyazaki Hayao is regarded as one of the most successful and prolific animation directors of the world. After graduating from Gakushūin University in Tokyo with a degree in economics, Miyazaki started his career in 1963 as frame-animator at Tōei Dōga Studio. In 1971, he moved together with Takahata Isao to Nippon Animation, and in 1978, he released his first television animation series *Future Boy Conan* 『将来の少年コナン』. One year later, in 1979, Miyazaki moved once again to Tokyo Movie Shinsha, where he directed his first animation

movie: *Lupin the Third: The Castle of Cagliostro* 『ルパン三世: カリオストロの城』 (Clements, 2018; Fujimori, 2004; Grajdan, 2008). Six years later, in friendship and cooperation with Takahata Isao, Miyazaki founded Studio Ghibli: all animation movies directed by Miyazaki and released by Studio Ghibli have been extremely successful, both in Japan and worldwide, enchanting critics and general audiences alike while resulting in huge revenues at box-offices.

The real engine inside Studio Ghibli and the one who had initially discovered Miyazaki, who had influenced him decisively both as an artist and as a human being, and who, eventually, taught him the value and importance of social responsibility, was by all means, admittedly, Takahata Isao. A way more profound life experience, inner authority, insight into the human nature, diverse relationships, tireless perseverance, unbreakable assertiveness, goal-oriented persistence and a very particular type of genius which enabled him to recognize the genius in others, are elements which impose Takahata Isao not only as the elder colleague and main catalyst of Miyazaki Hayao as well as the co-founder of the Ghibli enterprise, but also as the one who, far more than Miyazaki, has been actively witnessing the history of modern animation and cartoons and tremendously impacted it aesthetically and ideologically while profoundly helping shape it through a huge corpus of animated works (Fujitsu, 2004b; Grajdan, 2021; Odell/Le Blanc, 2009). It is equally true, though, that Takahata Isao remains virtually unknown outside of animation circles; nevertheless, without him and his immense contribution, Studio Ghibli would not be what it is today – and possibly the worldwide animation phenomenon, as such.

Born as the youngest son of a nine-members family on 29. October 1935 in Ujijamada (nowadays Ise), in Mie prefecture, Takahata, unlike Miyazaki, started his career from the very beginning as an animation director: in 1959, after the graduation from the most reputable Japanese university, the University of Tokyo, where he had majored in French Literature, Takahata

joined the newly grounded animation studio Tōei Dōga (later Tōei Animation Studio, one of the most important names within Japan's animation industry), which was planning for the first time the production of animation movies. Triggered by the massive flop of Takahata's directorial debut *The Prince of Sun: Horus' Great Adventure* (『太陽の王子: ホルスの大冒険』, 1968), regarded presently as one of the most impactful examples of Japanese animation, but also financially the biggest failure in the entire history of Tōei Dōga Animation, Takahata was compelled to leave the studio. Miyazaki worked as animator for this movie and contributed with numerous ideas to the enhancement of the project, which made Takahata notice him as a promising, and highly ambitious, young man. Takahata and Miyazaki became friends when they joined the animators' union at Tōei Dōga Animation, where Takahata was vice-chairman and Miyazaki was chairman. During the next several years, he directed three television animation series – *Heidi, the Girl from the Alps* (『アルプスの少女ハイジ』, 1974), *3,000 Miles in Search of Mother* (『母をたずねて三千里』, 1976), *Red-Haired Anne* (『赤毛のアン』, better known as “Anne of Green Gables”, 1979) – and four short animated movies – *Panda, Little Panda* (『パンダコパンダ』, 1972), *Panda, Little Panda: The Circus during Rainy Days* (『パンダ・コパンダ・雨降りサーカス』, 1973), *Jarinko Chie* (『じゃりン子チエ』, 1981), *Gauche, the Cellist* (『ゼロ弾きのゴーシュ』, 1982): In these works, Takahata tackled a topic which would accompany him throughout his entire life – namely, the destiny of parentless children and orphans (Fujitsu, 2004a; Inoue, 2004a). In 1984, Takahata served as producer for Miyazaki's animation movie *Nausicaä from the Valley of the Winds* 『風の谷のナウシカ』, which turned into an immense success and financially allowed both of them to establish the new animation studio, Studio Ghibli.

Takahata Isao took over various occupations throughout his life: writer, producer, composer, scriptwriter, storyboard creator. But his main preoccupation was the direction of animation movies. His second major

animated feature, *The Grave of the Fireflies* (『火垂るの墓』, 1988), released by Studio Ghibli, has come to be regarded worldwide as one of the most impressive animation productions of all times, marking, simultaneously, a decisive stage in the history of universal animation – transcending the overall framework of the war narrative. In 1991, Takahata's intimist-naturalist animation movie *Memories like Raindrops* (『おもひでぼろぼろ』, better known as "Only Yesterday") delivered a profound tale of social critique orchestrated under the disguise of romantic drama. The realistic epos with an ironic ecological substrate *Ponpoko: The Tanuki Heisei War* (『平成狸合戦ぽんぽこ』, 1994) became Japan's best movie of the release year 1994 as well as Japan's nomination for the category Best Foreign Movie at the Oscars. Takahata's next work produced by Studio Ghibli was the family comedy *Hōhokeyyo: My Neighbours, the Yamadas* (『ホーホケキョ: となりの山田君』, 1999) which opened the pathway for digital animation mediating serious contents. Eventually, Takahata's last work, the masterpiece *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* 『かぐや姫の物語』 from 2013 before his departure from this world for a better one on 5. April 2018, was based on the oldest Japanese folk-legend *The Tale of the Bamboo-Cutter* 『竹取物語』 or *Taketori Monogatari* from 11<sup>th</sup> century: *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* came into existence both as the final draw of an overwhelmingly enriching legacy and as the starting point for future animators, as it creatively combines digital technologies of design with very specific, intensely emotional layouts.

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Miyazaki Hayao, one of Japan's most influential animators and directors, has carved out a unique niche in global cinema through his distinctive blend of aesthetic vision and ideological depth. His animation works are marked by a signature style which harmoniously intertwines lush animation, a deep reverence for nature, and a subtle critique of modernity. In what follows, I

discuss the key elements of Miyazaki's aesthetics and ideology, emphasizing both their consistency and their evolution over time.

One of the most immediately striking aspects of Miyazaki's animation is his unwavering commitment to the classic, hand-drawn style. In an age increasingly dominated by digital animation, his dedication to meticulous craftsmanship remains a hallmark of his work. This aesthetic commitment is more than mere nostalgia; it represents a profound respect for the traditional craft of animation, as well as an intention to capture the "bright side of life" with extraordinary care and vibrancy (Inoue, 2004; see Köhn, 2005). Miyazaki's use of color, in particular, transcends the mundane and beautifies reality, offering a vision which softens the harshness and ugliness of everyday life. By doing so, he creates a sense of wonder and enchantment, while maintaining a nuanced representation of reality which never feels artificially idealized.

A further notable feature of Miyazaki's aesthetic philosophy is his reliance on young animators as in-betweeners, who devote immense effort to delivering intricate details in their *e-kontes* or storyboards. This dedication imbues each frame with soulful passion, contributing to the animation's distinctive sense of joy and vitality. Moreover, Miyazaki's animation works bear the unmistakable influence of Tezuka Osamu's aesthetics, with a focus on cuteness and charm characteristic of Japanese animation. However, unlike the gratuitous fan service common in other animated productions, these elements are purposeful and never exploitative, as Miyazaki consciously rejects the notion of *otaku* audiences as his primary consumer base, refusing to cater to mere entertainment or fetishization (McCarthy, 1999; see Kusanagi, 2003). Instead, his characters and stories resonate with a broader, more universal sensibility, aiming to move beyond superficial appeals and connect on an authentic emotional level.

While Miyazaki's aesthetic style remains relatively consistent across his oeuvre, his ideological framework has evolved significantly over the decades. Initially, his animation movies embraced what could be described as