

Miyazaki Hayao's *Kaze Tachinu* (The Wind Rises) 宮崎駿「風立ちぬ」

Matthew Penney

Miyazaki Hayao's new film *Kaze Tachinu* (The Wind Rises) premiered on July 20 and is on pace to become one of the most successful, if not the most successful, Japanese films of 2013. Miyazaki tells the story of Horikoshi Jiro, the designer of the "Zero Fighter", which was a terrifyingly effective weapon deployed against China, the United States, and its allies in the early war years, but was soon doomed to become the antique target of "turkey shoots" and the funeral pyre of *kamikaze* pilots as Japan's empire crumbled and its cities burned.

Kaze Tachinu is a film about war but it is not a war film. There are many scenes of flight but we never see the Zero in action. In a turn that is indicative of the film's complexity and difficulty to pigeonhole, the only real "action sequence" is a momentary flash of the desperate stand by Chinese defenders against Japanese bombers raining death on Shanghai. What Miyazaki offers is a layered look at how Horikoshi's passion for flight was captured by capital and militarism, and the implications of this for thinking about the history of technology and the "long 20th century".

This is a review with full "spoilers". One of the strengths of *Kaze Tachinu*, however, is that it is not a film special for what it is about, but rather *how* it is about it, and this review should in no way "spoil" a first watching. Every aerial sequence is either exhilarating or horrifying. The Studio Ghibli background artwork is incredibly evocative of what is more and more

discussed as a "lost Japan" of unspoiled green and the bare aesthetic of low wooden cities. With Horikoshi, Miyazaki achieves a range of facial expressions that he has never approached before, and particular scenes, such as the devastation of the 1923 earthquake, will not lose their power, even after repeated viewings.

Kaze Tachinu begins with a childhood dream. Horikoshi launches a baroque aircraft from the roof of his family's farmhouse. In flight, we see a panorama of rural Japan's beautiful green. Fingers of light come with the dawn. The dream quickly turns to nightmare, however, as a dark mass appears above. A steel airship, combining elements of the monstrous fliers in *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* with those of *Howl's Moving Castle*, drops bombs carrying ghoulish shades that batter Horikoshi's dream plane to pieces and send him hurtling to earth. Dream sequences, some joyous and liberatory, some dark forebodings of the smoke-streaked skies that are the eventual destination of Horikoshi's Zeros, punctuate the film.



At school, the young Horikoshi borrows an English airplane magazine from a teacher. The

volume tells the story of Caproni, an eccentric Italian airplane designer who becomes the boy's idol and advisor through a series of dream dialogues, exhorting Horikoshi to give his all to airplane design. Caproni's story reflects Horikoshi's eventual path - the Italian built bombers during World War I, while dreaming of constructing a massive trans-Atlantic plane in peacetime. The tragedy of engineers who married their design ambitions to military production is at the heart of *Kaze Tachinu*.



Horikoshi and Caproni

Now a young man, Horikoshi heads to Tokyo to study. On the way he meets a girl, Nahoko. They are caught in the 1923 earthquake which leveled much of Tokyo and Yokohama, killing well over 100,000 people, mostly in the fires that raged in the quake's wake. Horikoshi helps Nahoko and her injured maid home before quickly vanishing to help save the books of the library of Tokyo Imperial University from the conflagration. The earthquake sequence is harrowing, merciless even. Miyazaki is uncompromising here, even in the wake of controversies over TV broadcast of his earlier film *Ponyo* which evoked fears that its images of waves and flooding might bring back the shock of the 2011 tsunami.

The 1923 earthquake becomes something of a prophecy. As the fires begin to burn, Horikoshi sees a flash in the sky. It is an image from his

dreams, one of Caproni's bombers, and for a moment, Horikoshi sees in the post-earthquake firestorms the ruin from the skies that would be wrought by all sides in the 20th century's World Wars. This is not a prophecy that Horikoshi heeds as he throws himself into his studies and then into design work for a company with military ties, but rather a phantasm, half-remembered.

Miyazaki draws Horikoshi as passionate but incurious. In Germany on a study-tour, he sees the thought police chasing down a dissenter in the streets but pays the incident little mind. He ignores other flashes of context. An airplane part is delivered wrapped in a newspaper detailing the 1932 "Shanghai Incident", but none of this interrupts his simple, naïve enthusiasm for design.



Horikoshi standing before a shattered test plane

Vacationing in Karuizawa, Horikoshi meets a German expatriate, Castorp, whose name is shared with the protagonist of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. The text is referenced in the film's dialogue, solidifying the allusion. Mann's Castorp is witness to the full sweep of the problems and pathologies tied up with industrial modernity and nationalism in a novel that ends with him lumbering off to likely death on the battlefields of World War I. Miyazaki's Castorp seems to be that character revived with wisdom and experience intact, warning

Horikoshi that Germany and Japan are walking a shared path to ruin. At the beautiful mountain resort, in a tone that hints that he definitely *cannot* forget, Castorp suggests, “here we can forget Manchuria, forget leaving the League of Nations, forget making enemies of the world”, and finally forget the coming “annihilation”. Castorp also reveals that Dr. Hugo Junkers, an admired engineer whom Horikoshi met briefly in Germany, has fallen afoul of “the government”. “Do you mean Mr. Hitler’s government?”, a somewhat confused Horikoshi asks. Castorp adds that Junkers will be “annihilated” and in reality, the German airplane pioneer died under house arrest after fighting unsuccessfully to keep his technology out of Nazi hands. The contrast between Junkers and Horikoshi, as well as the lack of easy choices as industry and invention are increasingly indivisible from totalitarian militarism, become evident as the story develops. Like his earlier vision of Caproni’s bomber, however, these are prophecies that haunt Horikoshi, but ones that he does not heed. It is notable that in the short manga about the development of the Zero which ran in *Model Graphics* magazine in 2009 and 2010 and led to Studio Ghibli’s decision to take up the *Kaze Tachinu* film project, Miyazaki depicts Horikoshi and the other designers as pigs - his visual shorthand for people who are selfish and myopic, having given up on working for the public good.¹



Horikoshi testing carrier fighters for the

Imperial Japanese Navy

At the Karuizawa resort, Horikoshi has a chance reunion with Nahoko. The pair confess their love after a short courtship. Nahoko, however, has advanced tuberculosis. They marry despite the knowledge that she will not likely survive.



Nahoko at Karuizawa

It is far easier to call Horikoshi a fascinating character than a fully likable one. His sister asks in tears why he leaves his dying wife alone while working obsessively on his planes. In one touching scene Horikoshi and Nahoko hold hands as he works away into the night. There is an element of sweetness and sacrifice evoked, but 21st Century viewers, knowing the fate of Horikoshi’s designs, are likely to be left asking whether his passion may have had a dark side of obsession. Nahoko is briefly committed to a remote hospital in hope that the mountain air will slow the progress of her disease. She leaves to be with Horikoshi. There is never any question as to whether Horikoshi will give up his dreams to be with her. Nahoko’s father praises him, saying “A man’s place is with his work”, but many viewers will no doubt be left wondering about the value of Horikoshi’s long workdays which drew Nahoko down from her mountain sanatorium and effectively to her death as he charged along his dream path, a

line that essentially paralleled Japan’s descent toward war and the destruction of self and others.



Horikoshi throwing himself into work

On the day that Horikoshi’s Zero is ready to fly, Nahoko departs without a word and returns to the mountain to die. Horikoshi, in his moment of triumph as the Zero soars, seems to realize that his wife is gone. He cannot celebrate his achievement, his place in aviation history. Horikoshi’s face at this moment strikes me as being partway between confusion and loss but there is certainly no trace of triumph, of justified sacrifice. Horikoshi looks inland and then toward the ruined future. Back in the dream realm with Caproni, he walks amid the blackened skeletons of Japan’s WWII era aircraft, the ruins, in effect of empire and industrial modernity. Here Miyazaki returns the viewer to one of the most striking images and powerful questions in his canon. In the 1993 film *Porco Rosso*, the title character tells the story of a World War I dogfight in which his best friend, newly married, was shot down and killed. Porco himself blacked out and came to, flying atop a sea of silver cloud. Around him, friends and foes alike ascended in silence, drifting in their planes. Far above is another cloud made up of the countless planes of the pilots who died in that war, maybe in all wars to come as well. Was it heaven in that cloud, or was it hell, the film asks? Horikoshi and

Caproni pose a similar question. There is no answer. Caproni is clear, however, that the Zero was not destroyed alongside Japan but that it was the Zero that *destroyed* Japan. Nahoko’s spirit implores Horikoshi to live and he walks off into the future, which of course is our future, a time in which the airplane has by no means been freed from the curse of warfare.



Porco’s friends rise to join the countless dead

Throughout the film Caproni refers to the airplane as a “cursed” existence. Tied up with it are humankind’s ancient desire for flight and the passions and ambitions of countless engineers and aviators. In the end, however, it was war priorities that catalyzed the rapid development of airplane technology from the beginning of World War I, and *Kaze Tachinu* never loses sight of this. Nearly every significant development was tied in some way to what we now call the “military-industrial complex”, and Horikoshi’s dream plane was no different.

In the pristine countryside, small factories, and workshops of *Kaze Tachinu*, however, Miyazaki provides suggestions, flashes of another possible world in which the “beautiful planes” that Horikoshi and Caproni speak of with such passion are not captured and used for war, in which the future is not another blind stagger into “Rich Country, Strong Army” ideology.²

Miyazaki remarks in the film pamphlet that he has imagined the years leading up to Japan's wars as a "world the color of ashes". *Kaze Tachinu*, with its disease and disaster and warfare, does not discard this imaginary. It adds to it, however, the earnestness and ambition of Horikoshi, traits that drive the film forward, but do not result in a happy ending or contentment for the protagonist. There are revealed, however, other possibilities that fit with Miyazaki's body of work.

Horikoshi's dream ends at a place he describes as "hell". The path of Japan's imperial modernism, its violence and fire, is the same. There is hope, however, hinted at through Horikoshi's passion for flight and the film's green visions, of creative possibility unbound by nationalism, militarism, and the flows of capital. I will turn here to Miyazaki's dream for Japan as expressed in Studio Ghibli's *Neppu* magazine - a vision of a Japan with a population of around thirty million, with an economy that has been de-nuclearized and promotes shared prosperity, grounded understanding of how goods make it from farm, field, or factory to a consumer's hands, and environmental sustainability. If a mass market for animation no longer exists in such a country, Miyazaki adds, so be it. Passions could always be turned to drawing or short films or, indeed, airplane design without the scale but also maybe without the curse.

We see a similar horizon in *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* in the title character's secret laboratory, her botanical experiments to help society purge the poisoned world, or at least stay out of the way of nature's healing. It is there in *Princess Mononoke* in Eboshi's collective, one vision of freedom from the samurai system, albeit one that could not easily coexist with primordial nature and instead reshaped the land.³

In *Porco Rosso*, Fio succeeds in turning her family workshop into a civilian jet company. In

Kiki's Delivery Service we have mutual help and a barter economy and the free lifestyle of the independent artist Ursula. This strand of community and creativity outside of the often brutal instrumentalization of capital goes all the way back to the joyous communal fishing of the unbowed Ainu-inspired community in *Taiyo no Ouji Horus No Daiboken* (The Adventures of Horus Prince of the Sun) from 1968.⁴ In *Pom Poko*, Miyazaki's close collaborator Takahata Isao showed tanuki, shape-shifting raccoon dogs, driven out of their natural habitat by development and eventually surrendering in human form to workaholicism and long commutes, but managing to hold onto an "outside", recreating on an empty golf course the raucous carnivals they celebrated freely before the coming of the bankers and the bulldozers.



Celebrating the first catch in Horus' village

In his "plan" for the work included at the beginning of the film pamphlet, Miyazaki indicates that he wanted to cut out the sorts of scenes of company meetings and committees determining an individual worker's fate which are staples of Japanese filmmaking. There is wishful thinking in this taking the individual out of corporate and bureaucratic structure,

but therein lies the film's major line of fantasy. In an interview in the film pamphlet, Miyazaki links the decision to go ahead with a darker and more realistic film extending to the 2008 financial crisis. This is a film that reflects as much on the ways that we choose to think about economic organization as the ways that we think about war and militarism.

The film is not without problems. There are inconsistencies in tone. Given how much time is devoted to Horikoshi's drive and philosophy of plane-making, the romance with Nahoko seems rushed. Chance meetings and a somewhat silly scene with paper airplanes that nevertheless does not hit the right note of light relief in what is a lengthy and not infrequently dark feature, is followed directly by pledges of love and promise of marriage. Then Horikoshi flies back to work, spending precious few scenes with Nahoko as she dies of tuberculosis. This side of the story fits thematically. It must be said, however, that Miyazaki, renowned for his creation of forthright and powerful young heroines, gives viewers a rare adult male protagonist in the form of Horikoshi, but winds up reducing Nahoko to something of a half-developed prop.

The German sequence is layered with discussion of how far Japanese technology lags behind that of Europe. This theme of "catching up" through brilliance or pluck and despite material inferiority is a common one in Japanese pop culture. The NHK series *Project X* exploited it in nearly every episode, and it remains a major dimension of the nostalgia framing of the high growth period and even the prewar. Horikoshi himself has frequently been captured by this narrative. A *Horikoshi Jiro to Zero-sen* (Horikoshi Jiro and the Zero Fighter) one-shot magazine turned out this month to cash in on the buzz surrounding Miyazaki's film bills Horikoshi as "the man who made the eternal, the unconquerable 'Made in Japan' [Zero Fighter]". In *Kaze Tachinu*, this rhetoric falls into the background with Horikoshi's

return to Japan, but the odor of technological nationalism lingers. In addition, the "curse" of airplane technology is universalized, a choice played up by Caproni's frequent appearances as Horikoshi's spirit guide, but viewers looking for more criticism of Japan's particular application of technology of the type offered in *Neppu* and Miyazaki's frequent media appearances, may be disappointed.

In the end, however, this is one of Miyazaki's most ambitious and thought-provoking visions as well as one of his most beautifully realized visual projects. In a *Bungei Shunju* interview with historian Hando Kazutoshi, Miyazaki said, "Without illustrating [Horikoshi], I thought that I wouldn't be able to illustrate how messed-up this country was." He also adds that he wished to "... take back the Zero fighter from the hands of the military technology nuts and military fantasy novels." He succeeds on both counts. Miyazaki manages to capture the contradictions of the development state and explore linkages between militarism, industry, and the pervasive image of inventor-as-hero. It is a thought-provoking film that ranks among Studio Ghibli's finest.

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Notes

¹ Miyazaki often draws *himself* as a pig, especially when he presents an image of himself as a selfish taskmaster berating employees. Porco Rosso would famously “rather be a pig than a fascist” in interwar Italy, but his response to the rise of fascism is to withdraw from society, not to resist.

² In Germany at the sprawling, high modern Junkers factory, Horikoshi and his fellow designers wax nostalgic about their tiny factory, surrounded by endless rice paddies and with ox-drawn carts to move the test planes to the airstrip.

³ In written works, Miyazaki expresses an awareness that Japan’s “nature” is, in many ways, an environment shaped by human society. His ideal seems to be found more in the rice paddies and carefully pruned hinterlands of the Edo period than the untouched old growth woods of prehistory.

⁴ This film was directed by Miyazaki’s close Studio Ghibli collaborator Takahata Isao but Miyazaki is said to have played a leading role in both the animation and the development of the plot and setting.