

The Auteur of Anime

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The building that houses the Ghibli Museum would be unusual anywhere, but in greater Tokyo, where architectural exuberance usually takes an angular, modernist form—black glass cubes, busy geometries of neon—it is particularly so. From the outside, the museum resembles an oversized adobe house, with slightly melted edges; its exterior walls are painted in saltwater-taffy shades of pink, green, and yellow. Inside, the museum looks like a child’s fantasy of Old Europe submitted to a rigorous Arts and Crafts sensibility. The floors are dark polished wood; stained-glass windows cast candy-colored light on whitewashed walls; a spiral stairway climbs—inside what looks like a giant Victorian birdcage—to a rooftop garden of world grasses, over which a hammered-metal robot soldier stands guard. In the central hall, beneath a high ceiling, a web of balconies and bridges suggests a dream vision of a nineteenth-century factory. Wrought-iron railings contain balls of colored glass, and leaded-glass lanterns are attached to the walls by wrought-iron vines. In the entryway, a fresco on the ceiling depicts a sky of Fra Angelico blue and a smiling sun wreathed in fruits and vegetables.

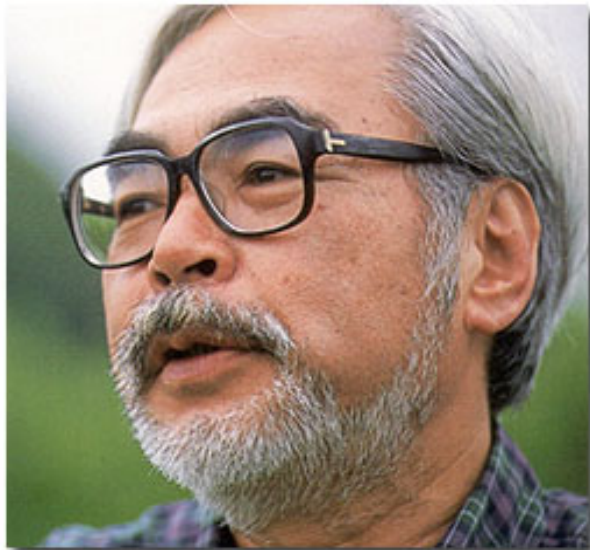


Ghibli Museum

Situated in a park on the outskirts of Tokyo, the Ghibli Museum is dedicated to the work of Hayao Miyazaki, the most beloved director in Japan today, and—especially since his film “Spirited Away” won the Oscar for best animated film, in 2002—perhaps the most admired animation director in the world. Miyazaki’s zeal for craft and beauty has set a new standard for animated films. With few exceptions, we seldom know the names of directors of children’s films, but if you have seen a Miyazaki film you know his name. He not only draws characters and storyboards for the films he directs; he also writes the rich, strange screenplays, which blend Japanese mythology with modern psychological realism. He is, in short, an auteur of children’s entertainment, perhaps the world’s first.

Miyazaki designed the Ghibli himself. The museum was partly funded by his movie studio—after which it is named—and is now a hugely popular, self-sustaining attraction. Though the museum is intended for children, who might be supposed not to care so much for

beauty per se, it is, in nearly every detail, beautiful. A reproduction of the cat-shaped bus in Miyazaki's "My Neighbor Totoro" (1988), which is large enough for children to climb on, has glowing golden eyes, and fur both soft and bristly, like a caterpillar's. The museum showcases not only the visual splendor of Miyazaki's films but also what inspires them: among other things, a sense of wonder about the natural world; a fascination with flight; a curiosity about miniature or hidden realms. When I visited the museum this summer, it struck me as one of the few kid-oriented attractions I know that take seriously the notion of children as natural aesthetes—in part because it portrays for them a creative life that they might plausibly lead as adults.



Hayao Miyazaki

One typical exhibit, "Where a Film Begins," depicts a room in which a young boy dreams up an idea for a movie. The room is supposed to be a study inherited from the imaginary boy's grandfather, and the mise en scène captures an idealized, slightly antique coziness; a glass jar of colored pencils sits atop a wooden desk, and worn tapestry pillows rest on a library chair. The display conjures a creative young mind's half-glimpsed notions and sudden enthusiasms:

models of a flying dinosaur and a red biplane hang from the ceiling; thick books about birds and fish and the history of aviation occupy the bookshelves. As sentimental as it is, this room makes you think with pleasure about the dreamy stage that often precedes the making of art. Standing amid its congenial clutter, a child visitor can easily grasp how it is, as Miyazaki writes in the museum's catalogue, that "imagination and premonition" and "sketches and partial images" can become "the core of a film." Indeed, "Spirited Away," the story of a sullen ten-year-old girl who finds herself transported from an abandoned theme park into a ravishing spirit world, was inspired in part by Miyazaki's own visit to a peculiar outdoor attraction—a Tokyo museum where old Japanese buildings, including a splendid bathhouse, had been carted from their original locations.

Miyazaki is detail-oriented to the point of obsession—he traveled to Portugal just to look at a painting by Hieronymus Bosch that had long haunted him, and sent Michiyo Yasuda, the color designer for his films, to Alsace to scout hues for his latest movie—and so, too, is his museum. For the in-house theatre, which shows short films that he makes especially for the museum (including a sequel to "My Neighbor Totoro"), he hired an acoustic designer to create an uncommonly gentle sound system. Miyazaki wanted the opposite of the "tendency in recent Hollywood films," which is "to use heavy bass to try to pull the audience into the film." He thinks that movie theatres can be claustrophobic, even overwhelming places for young children, so he wanted his theatre to have windows that let in some natural light, bench-style seats that a child can't sink into, and films that make them "sigh in relaxation." Miyazaki fondly remembered the days when cigarette smoke in a theatre could draw your attention to the beam of light stretching from the projector, so he placed the projector in a glass booth that protrudes into the seating area. "I want to

show children that moving images are enjoyed by having huge reels revolving, an electric light shining on the film, and a lot of complicated things being done,” he explains in the museum’s catalogue. Colleagues told him that projecting the films digitally would help preserve them, but Miyazaki relished the idea that, eventually, viewers might see “worn film with ‘falling-rain’ scratches on the screen.”

To plan the menu for the museum café, Miyazaki hired not a professional chef but a woman who was a good home cook and had raised four children: he wanted homemade bread; *katosand*, breaded pork-cutlet sandwiches; and fresh vegetable soup. When he heard that children were prying open the little windows on a model of a house in the museum, and had broken the shutters, he was delighted, and placed pictures inside the house for kids to see. He painted several large murals—one of a commissary, another of an old animation studio—himself. Some of Miyazaki’s ideas could not be realized. He had wanted to make a mountain of dirt at the Ghibli Museum—a mountain with muddy, slippery stretches where children “would fall and get scolded by their mothers.” He had liked the idea, too, of a spiral staircase that gently swayed when you walked up it. These notions were eventually deemed unsafe or impractical, but, over all, the museum still feels stubbornly, and joyfully, idiosyncratic.

Despite Miyazaki’s fame—his latest film, “Howl’s Moving Castle,” grossed a record \$14.5 million in its first week of release in Japan—he almost never grants formal interviews. Yet a few days after I visited the museum I was lucky enough to run into him during a tour of his nearby studio, and he began chatting amiably. It immediately became apparent why he was compelled to create imaginary worlds. A spry, slim man of sixty-three, with silver hair, parenthesis-shaped dimples, and thick, expressive black eyebrows, Miyazaki betrayed a profound dissatisfaction

with modern life. He complained, “Everything is so thin and shallow and fake.” He lamented the fact that children had become disconnected from nature, and fulminated about the deadening impact of video games on the imagination. Only half in jest, he said that he was hoping for the day when “developers go bankrupt, Japan gets poorer, and wild grasses take over.” And the conversation grew only darker from there. A man disappointed, even infuriated, by the ugliness surrounding him, Miyazaki is devoted to making whatever he can control—a museum, each frame of a film—as gorgeous as it can be.

John Lasseter, the director of “Toy Story” and “A Bug’s Life,” is an ardent fan, and a friend, of Miyazaki’s. He recently visited the Ghibli Museum with his sons. “You know how when you’re watching a movie, you’ll say, ‘Wow, I’ve never seen that before’? With his films, that happens in every sequence,” he said. “And he has such a big heart; his characters and his worlds are so rich. The museum is like having a place to visit those worlds. It’s like when Disneyland first opened, in the fifties—visitors must have felt, in a very pure way, like they had walked inside a Disney film.”

People have been invoking Miyazaki and Disney in the same breath for a long time, and in some ways it is an apt comparison. Miyazaki films are as popular in Japan as Disney films are in America. (“Spirited Away” is Japan’s highest-grossing movie ever.) Miyazaki-inspired merchandise—such as plush versions of the Totoro, a rotund woodland creature of Miyazaki’s devising—is nearly as ubiquitous in Japan as Disney stuff is here. Like Walt Disney, Hayao Miyazaki started his professional career drawing animation cels and rose to head an independent cartoon empire with a tentacular hold on kids’ imaginations.

Yet, in themes and style, Miyazaki’s eight films do not much resemble the Disney oeuvre. Unlike Disney movies—so many of which are

based on familiar fairy tales—Miyazaki’s films are either original stories or his own adaptations of fairly obscure works. Though they contain set pieces of suspenseful action—he is particularly fond of airship battles and dramatic rescues in the sky—they have a much quieter, less frenetic feel. In part, this is because they are not musicals: no brassy showstoppers or treacly ballads interrupt the narratives. Moreover, his films rarely have villains of the scenery-chewing, extravagantly black-hearted Disney variety. Miyazaki sometimes forgoes villains altogether—as in “Totoro” and the charming “Kiki’s Delivery Service” (1989), the story of an apprentice witch—making you forget what a fixture they are in other children’s films. His is not a black-and-white moral universe: he has sympathy for the vain and the gluttonous and the misguided, a bemused tolerance for the poor creatures we all are. Some of his characters can be threatening or unappealing, but also complex and capable of change—like the moody young wizard in “Howl’s Moving Castle,” which will be released here later this year. It might be said that Miyazaki’s malevolent characters are capable of redemption, except that redemption is too Christian an idea: it’s more that they prove capable of a kind of shape-shifting, which allows them to reveal a different facet of themselves.

The absence of villains also means a refreshing absence of perfect and perfectly pretty heroines, their lives arcing toward romance. Miyazaki’s protagonists are usually girls, and though they are likable and loyal, they tend to be ordinary children—which makes them extraordinary in the world of children’s films. Miyazaki dwells on the latent phase of childhood, so that his girl characters are often close friends with boys. And they can be bratty and grievously sad, as well as plucky and resourceful.

In “My Neighbor Totoro,” one of the loveliest children’s films ever made, two sisters, Mei and

Satsuki, are not idealized; they are at once goofy, brave, and vulnerable, like a lot of kids. The sisters have just moved with their father to a new house in rural Japan. Gradually, the two girls discover a host of strange but benign woodland creatures: fuzzy little soot sprites that hang out in old houses and hide when you turn on the lights; the plump, whiskered Totoros, who live in the roots of a giant camphor tree; and the marvelous cat bus, with its headlight eyes, caramel-colored stripes, and extra legs that function as wheels. (In a 1993 televised discussion between Miyazaki and the director Akira Kurosawa, Kurosawa mentioned how much he admired the sweetly surreal cat bus.) There is a gentle hint of Shintoism in all this: the father, an anthropologist, respectfully accepts the notion that the forest is presided over by spirits, though he is no longer able to see them, as his children can. Unlike the animals in most American cartoons, these creatures are not excessively anthropomorphized; they don’t speak, which somehow makes them seem both more plausible and more dignified, and which gives the girls the delightful challenge of interpreting them. In fact, the film is focused on dignifying the girls’ imaginations, honoring their ability to partake in a fantasy that is both comforting and fortifying—for we gradually learn that they are separated from their mother, who is ill and in the hospital.



A scene from *My Neighbor Totoro*

The tone of the film is dreamy and playful—it has the sun-soaked colors and languid pace of a

summer afternoon in the country—but the way it melds such elements with a subtle psychological treatment of the children’s anxiety over their mother makes it a radical film. When four-year-old Mei learns that her mother won’t be coming home for a visit as planned, her grief takes the form of a tantrum. She howls—her mouth a black cavern, her arms stiff. (In Disney movies, children weep decorously or break into poignant song.) Satsuki, panicked and struggling to be the mature sister, shouts at her not to be so “stupid”; Mei runs away to the hospital to find her mother. Both girls are ultimately rescued by the cat bus, which opens up a warm, golden, womb-like interior to them—an entrancing image of solace—and bounds across the countryside to return them to their father. Miyazaki is a master at conveying emotions as a child would experience them: obliquely, often physically, with a thread of magical thinking that promotes resilience.

Miyazaki’s films are also striking for their preoccupation with the environment, and their not entirely metaphorical suggestion that the natural world is capable of remembering what’s been done to it. (He believes that we harbor “memories in our DNA from before we took the form of humans.”) “Nausicäa of the Valley of the Wind” (1984) is set in a post-apocalyptic world where humans live huddled on the edge of a toxic forest. Its heroine finds beauty in the lush, strangely colored undergrowth and the giant cicada-like insects that dwell there, nursing a grudge against the humans who’ve poisoned their habitat.



A scene from *Nausicäa of the Valley of the Wind*

Miyazaki began his animation career in the nineteen-sixties, at a time when the economic miracle that had swiftly transformed postwar Japan into one of the strongest economies of the world was, almost as swiftly, obliterating its countryside. In the nineteen-eighties, the government cleaned up the worst industrial pollution, but Japan is still a country where developers (especially golf-resort planners) have free rein, where most people prefer nature in tamed and miniaturized form (bonsai, Zen gardens, lavishly packaged tiny melons), and where few places are untouched by commerce (there are vending machines on Mt. Fuji). “Spirited Away” contains a memorable scene in which a gloppy-looking creature—the spirit of a polluted river—comes to a bathhouse to be cleansed; a lot of dirty, foul-smelling labor is required. For this sequence, Miyazaki drew on his own memories of cleaning up a river—and pulling things like bicycles out of the muck.



A scene from *Spirited Away*

Miyazaki's movies are threaded with other personal obsessions, just as samurai imagery pervades Kurosawa's work. Pigs, for example, turn up in many films. ("The behavior of pigs is very similar to human behavior," Miyazaki has said. "I really like pigs at heart, for their strengths as well as their weaknesses.") A 1992 film, "Porco Rosso," tells the story of a pig that flies—he's a pilot who works the skies over the Adriatic before the Second World War. In one tender scene, the pig recalls the air battle in which his fellow flying aces just kept ascending—floating ever upward into a cold empyrean death—while he, a more earthbound creature, could not face such self-sacrifice. Next month, Disney, the American distributor of Miyazaki's films, will release a video version of "Porco," whose title character will be voiced by Michael Keaton. It will also make available an English version of "Nausicäa, with voices by Uma Thurman and Patrick Stewart. With these two releases, the entirety of Miyazaki's eccentric output will be available in good English versions for the first time.



A scene from *Porco Rosso*

John Lasseter told me that when the animators at Pixar get stuck on a project they go into a screening room and watch a Miyazaki film. The irony of this admiration is that Miyazaki is an old-fashioned artist who has rejected the computerized path that many animation studios, including Pixar, have taken. (Last year, Disney closed down its hand-drawn-animation unit, in Florida, in favor of digitally rendered

work.) Though Miyazaki incorporates some computer graphics in his films, he insists that all his characters and backgrounds be drawn by hand.

Toshio Suzuki, a wry, articulate man with close-cropped silver hair and an elfin grin, is Miyazaki's producer and longtime collaborator. "When silents moved to talkies, Chaplin held out the longest," he told me. "When black-and-white went to color, Kurosawa held out the longest. Miyazaki feels he should be the one to hold out the longest when it comes to computer animation." Miyazaki lavishes particular attention on his backgrounds, which are full of painterly flourishes. I'd never really noticed the colors in an animated film until I noticed his. Skies and seas are saturated in strangely emotional blues; wet halos surround the red lantern and absinthe-green neon signs in "Spirited Away"; in "Kiki's Delivery Service," the young witch's dress isn't quite black—it's the smudged purple of the darkest plums.



A scene from *Kiki's Delivery Service*

Even Miyazaki's most outlandishly imagined creatures have an unnerving realism. The eerie, poignant No Face in "Spirited Away" is a creature who wears a mask, whimpers softly, and eats everything in sight, greedily eager for communion with others; he glides along like an inky rain cloud, and expands just as ominously. In the same film, a flock of white paper birds flash through the sky: they are like origami, only sharp-edged, and capable of drawing blood.



Chihiro encounters No Face in *Spirited Away*.

Miyazaki's starting point for a film, Suzuki said, is often a small visual detail. Five years ago, when Miyazaki read a Japanese translation of the book "Howl's Moving Castle," by Diana Wynne Jones, a British author, he was immediately taken with the idea of a castle that ambulates around the countryside. "The book never explains how it moves, and that triggered his imagination," Suzuki recalled. "He wanted to solve that problem. The first thing he did on the film was to start to design the castle. How would it move? It must have legs, and he was obsessed with settling this question. Would they be Japanese warrior legs? Human-type feet? One day, he suddenly said, 'Let's go with chicken feet!' That was, for him, the breakthrough." Suzuki thinks of Miyazaki's approach as uniquely Japanese: "In traditional Japanese architecture, you start with one room—maybe the alcove, where you hang some pictures. You spend a lot of time trying to pick the right shelves, the right little pillar, what kind of handles the drawers will have. Only when you finish that room do you worry about the next. In the West, you start from the general and go to the specific. A Hitchcock movie might start off with a panorama of the city, and then the camera closes in on a street, and a house, and then the stairway inside. If you're a Japanese filmmaker, you might start with the railing on the stairway. When Miyazaki makes a film, he is thinking, like with this new one, O.K., first off, here are two very important points to settle: Does Sophie, the little girl in the movie, have braids or not? Are they long or

short?"

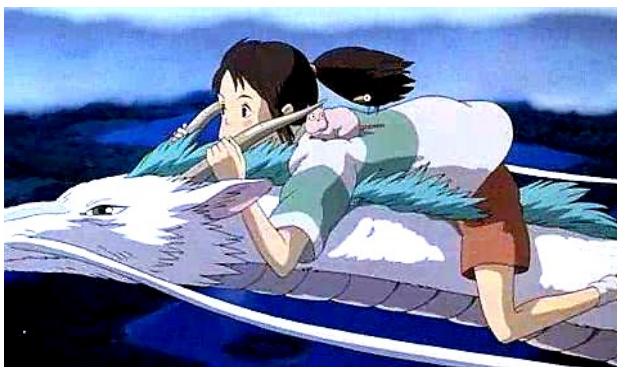


From *Howl's Moving Castle*

But it wouldn't be quite right to describe Miyazaki's approach as wholly Japanese. As with fantasy writers in the British tradition, from C.S. Lewis to J.K. Rowling, Miyazaki makes the details of the worlds he creates concrete and coherent, so that we might better suspend our disbelief for the big leaps of fantasy. This devotion to realism, Suzuki acknowledges, "is rare in Japanese animation," which tends to revel in the freedom from earthly laws that the medium allows. Miyazaki can be steely in pursuit of this goal. In a Japanese television documentary about "Spirited Away," he is shown at a meeting with his young staff, explaining how they are to draw certain images based on his storyboards. "The dragon is supposed to fall from down the air vent, but, being a dragon, it doesn't land on the ground," Miyazaki says. "It attaches itself

to the wall, like a gecko. And then—ow!—it falls—thud!—it should fall like a serpent. Have you ever seen a snake fall out of a tree?” He explains that it “doesn’t slither, but holds its position.” He looks around at the animators, most of whom appear to be in their twenties and early thirties. They are taking notes, looking grave: nobody has seen a snake fall out of a tree.

Miyazaki goes on to describe how the dragon—a protean creature named Haku, who sometimes takes this form—struggles when he is pinned down. “This will be tricky,” Miyazaki says, smiling. “If you want to get an idea, go to an eel restaurant and see how an eel is gutted.” The director wriggles around in his seat, imitating the action of a recalcitrant eel. “Have you ever seen an eel resisting?” Miyazaki asks.



Chihiro on Haku the dragon in *Spirited Away*

“No, actually,” admits a young man with hipster glasses, an orange sweatshirt, and an indoor pallor.

Miyazaki groans. “Japanese culture is doomed!” He says. When he describes a scene in which his heroine, Chihiro, forces open the dragon’s mouth to give it medicine, he says the animators should be thinking, as they draw, of what it’s like to feed a dog a pill, when you tip its head to the side, and “the dog clenches its teeth and its gums stick out.” There is more note-taking, but no sign that this might be a familiar experience.

“Any of you ever had a dog?” Miyazaki asks.

“I had a cat,” somebody volunteers.

“This is pathetic,” Miyazaki says. The documentary shows the chastened staff making a field trip that night to a veterinary hospital, videotaping a golden retriever’s gums and teeth, and then returning to the studio to study the video.

It seems almost inevitable that the world’s greatest animator should be Japanese. Over the past decade or so, Japan has become, outside the United States, the most successful exporter of children’s pop culture. With television shows like “Poké-mon” and “Yu-Gi-Oh!,” which have large casts of creatures accompanied by their own stats and trading cards, the Japanese figured out how to tap into children’s mania for collecting and classifying. With shows like “Hamtaro” (Little Hamsters, Big Adventures”) and “Sailor Moon” (in which giggly, shopaholic schoolgirls turn into saviors of the world), they got the idea that overmuscled superheroes, as alluring as they are, can seem out of reach, whereas smaller creatures that are simultaneously cute and powerful are easy to identify with. With Hello Kitty—the blank, big-headed cartoon cat—they proved that innocence was an aesthetic that could be pushed to extremes. Sanrio, the company that manufactures tens of thousands of Hello Kitty products—from pink vinyl coin purses to packets of “sweet squid chunks” bearing her wide-eyed likeness—is a billion-dollar business.

One reason the Japanese are so good at this kind of thing is that many adults in Japan are curiously attuned to cuteness. Even in a cosmopolitan city like Tokyo, *kawaii*—or “cute” culture—is everywhere: road signs are adorned with adorable raccoons and bunnies; stuffed animals sit on salarymen’s desks; Hello Kitty charms are offered for sale at Shinto shrines. It is also a culture where anime (cartoons) and manga (comic books) are both widely consumed and, in some cases, highly regarded

as art and literature. No one knows exactly why comic books are so popular in Japan; one theory is that they grew out of woodblock prints and seemed naturally connected to a broader artistic tradition that produced some of its best work in ephemeral, everyday objects like fans and screens. In any case, manga make up nearly half of the book sales in Japan, and you see people of all ages reading them on the subway. Animated programs, of which ninety or so air on Japanese TV every week, have long been shown in prime time, on the assumption that families will watch them together. And while much anime and manga is intended for adults—violent sci-fi and pornography, as well as contemplative family dramas—the market for children remains the largest. Although much of Japan’s kid-oriented anime has been exported to the U.S., a great deal more—such as “Anpanman,” a hugely popular series about a bean-paste-stuffed bread roll—has not. (A fan Web site notes, “To a non-Japanese person, the concept of a living bread superman who fights giant germs and feeds the hungry with pieces of his head may seem bizarre.”)



Hello Kitty

Miyazaki distances himself from all this commercialism. He doesn’t care for a lot of contemporary Japanese animation. “Animators are getting too old,” he told me. “Animation

used to be for young people. Now people in their forties are the ones who are supporting it.” When he watches movies at all these days, he said, he prefers documentaries, especially “the simple ones that just try to show other people and other civilizations. They have their own distortions, but, still, I like them.” He is a leftist who thinks that too many people are making money off children, who frets over the spectre of virtual reality “eating into our emotional life,” and who wishes that we could drastically reduce the number of video games and DVDs available for sale. He worries that he is contributing to the problem by making anime himself, and isn’t keen on promoting his own films, which is one reason that he resists giving interviews.

Several people who know Miyazaki told me that mothers frequently approach him to tell him that their child watches “Totoro” or “Kiki” every day, and he always acts horrified. “Don’t do that!” he will say. “Let them see it once a year, at most!” In an essay he wrote in 1987, he was already concerned: “No matter how we may think of ourselves as conscientious, it is true that images such as anime stimulate only the visual and auditory sensations of children, and deprive them of the world they go out to find, touch, and taste.” And yet he would not be quite the figure he is—recognized by children on the street, in a position to make just about any movie he wants—in a country that did not honor animation and fetishize childhood quite so much.

Hayao Miyazaki was born in Tokyo in 1941. His father helped run a family-owned factory that made parts for military airplanes. His mother, like the mother in “Totoro,” was sickly and often bedridden, but she was also smart and strong-willed. “My grandfather was affluent, and he knew how to live,” Goro Miyazaki, one of the director’s two sons, recalled. I spoke with him last summer at the Ghibli Museum, where he is the curator. “He liked to have fun—he liked to go to restaurants and movies.

My grandmother was very intelligent and not particularly interested in going out. She had her own mind and she didn't like to spend money. She exerted a huge influence on Miyazaki. When he was young, he had all these questions—big ideas—and it was his mother he could talk to about them. He was one of four boys, and he was the closest to her."

His friend Suzuki was more direct. "He was a mama's boy," he said. Suzuki thinks the fact that there is always an old woman in Miyazaki's films, and that she is often a trenchant character, is a tribute to the director's mother. "When he was small, and his mother was ill, the four brothers took turns helping out with chores. But he loved her the best of all of them." (Like the tough grannies in his movies, Miyazaki's mother surprised everyone by living into old age.)

Neither of Miyazaki's parents was artistic. "My grandfather liked buying paintings, and he liked to show them off to guests," Goro Miyazaki said. "But I don't know that he had any particular artistic understanding. It's a mystery where Miyazaki's talent came from. He had a kind of a complex toward his brothers, and that gave him a strong motivation to succeed at animation. His brothers went into business; they were more influenced by their father. But success wasn't easy for him. He wasn't dexterous, and he really had to work to achieve what he has."

At Gakushuin University, in Tokyo, Miyazaki studied economics and political science. But he also joined a children's-literature group, where members read and discussed fantasy fiction. As a senior in high school, Miyazaki had sneaked out to see the first Japanese animated film made in color, "The Legend of the White Snake," when he was supposed to be studying for his entrance exams. The film had a big impact on him, he wrote years later, because while he could see that it was "cheap melodrama," its naked emotionalism touched

him. "My soul was moved and I stumbled back home in the snow that had just started. Comparing my pitiful situation to the characters' earnestness, I was ashamed of myself, and cried all night." At the time, he had been trying to write a sophisticated, absurdist manga, but he realized, somewhat to his embarrassment, that he was more interested in creating something sincere.



Poster for *Legend of White Snakes*

In 1963, Miyazaki went to work as a rookie animator at Toei Animation, in Tokyo, which primarily made cartoons for television. The company's animation had a particular style—the style we associate with anime in general, though not so much with Miyazaki—and it derived mainly from economic necessity. Japanese studios were not the wealthy behemoths that Disney and Warner Bros. were, and they saved money by having animators draw fewer cels. The result was

jerkier, with more stilted movements and longer close-ups, in which faces often filled the screens: a kind of cut-rate Expressionism. The big, round eyes that Westerners associate with anime because signatures then—the legacy of Osamu Tezuka, the comic artist who, in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, drew *Astro Boy* and *Kimba the White Lion*. (One theory is that Tezuka was influenced by Betty Boop, who was very popular in Japan.) Miyazaki admired the soulful Tezuka, but his influences were more cosmopolitan: he loved Chagall, Bosch, and the Russian animators Lev Atamanov and Yuri Norstein, who made bewitching animations based on Russian folktales. His image of Japan was so shaken by memories of the country's postwar devastation that for years afterward, he told Kurosawa, his imagination turned reflexively to Europe—a fantasy version, stitched together in his mind, that had never experienced the Second World War. (In his films, Europe looks like a harmonious amalgam of Scandinavia, Alsace, and the Amalfi coast, with a bit of Dalmatia tossed in.)

At Toei, Miyazaki met Akemi Ota, an animator, whom he married in 1965, and who decided to stay at home when the couple's two sons were young. (Goro, who was a landscape designer before going to work at the Ghibli Museum, was born in 1967; Keisuke, an artist who makes intricate wood engravings, was born two years later.) On his first job at Toei, Miyazaki also met Isao Takahata, an animation director with an intellectual bent, who had graduated from the University of Tokyo with a degree in French literature; and Michiyo Yasuda, the gifted color designer, who went on to work on most of his films. The three of them were officials of the animation workers' union, and spent a lot of time during union meetings discussing their own artistic futures, which they were determined to entwine. "It wasn't too philosophical—more practical," Takahata recalled. " 'O.K., you're drawing a robot. It's got to be heavy. What kind of holes does it make in the ground when it moves?' We talked

a lot about the challenges of depicting things correctly."

In the seventies, Miyazaki and Takahata both took jobs at Nippon Animation. Between 1974 and 1979, Miyazaki was a key artist or scene designer for five of Takahata's television series, including "Heidi," and worked on a film for television that Takahata directed: "Panda! Go Panda!," a funny, sweet movie featuring a spirited, pigtailed, pug-faced little girl—the precursor of Miyazaki's own heroines. "She was modeled on Pippi Longstocking," Yasuo Ohtsuka, an animator who worked with Miyazaki on several projects, said. "Miyazaki wanted to draw an audacious, energetic little girl—they're just a lot more fun to draw. We thought of her as a girl from American or European literature, because Japanese girls aren't -or weren't, anyway—all that high-spirited."

Miyazaki is a workaholic, and that tendency was in full force by then. "When I was small, he would come home at 2 A.M. and get up at 8 A.M. and do TV series all year round," Goro Miyazaki recalled. "It was very rare for me to see him. Every morning, I'd look into my father's bedroom and see him sleeping. Just to check: 'O.K., he's here. He's in the house.' " When, in his early thirties, Goro started working closely with his father for the first time, on the Ghibli Museum, he felt that he "understood his creative processes so well precisely because he'd been such an absent father. When I was a child, I studied him. To learn more about him, I watched his movies obsessively. I read everything that was written about him. I studied his drawings." With a rueful chuckle, he added, "I think that I am the No. 1 expert on Hayao Miyazaki."

When I asked Goro if he'd ever talked with his father about what he'd learned about him, he laughed and said no, he couldn't picture that happening. He was closer to his mother, he said, who would take him hiking and mountain

climbing, and who taught him the names of trees, flowers, and birds. But Goro did remember that after his father finished a production the family would celebrate with an eel dinner at a restaurant. When he pestered his father for toys, Miyazaki had shown him how to whittle instead—an ability for which he was now grateful. It left him with the feeling that no matter where he was he could make something with his hands.

As driven as Miyazaki was, he did not achieve fame overnight. He was in his late thirties by the time he had his first directing credit—for a Japanese TV series, “Future Boy Conan,” as it’s called, awkwardly, in English. And it wasn’t until he wrote the manga “Nausicäa of the Valley of the Wind,” and then received funding to make it into a movie, that he became widely known.

Toshio Suzuki met Miyazaki in 1978, when Suzuki was working as the editor of *Animage*, an animation magazine. He had been assigned to interview Miyazaki, but Miyazaki refused. “So I showed up at the studio, without phoning first, and Miyazaki ignored me,” Suzuki told me. “He said only one thing: ‘I’m busy. Go home.’ I brought over a chair and sat down next to him. He said, ‘What are you doing?’ I said, ‘I’m not going home until you say something to me.’ I sat there till late at night, until he went home. The next day, I went back and sat down in that same place. On the third night, he finally spoke to me—to ask for advice. He asked about whether there was a specific term for this kind of car chase he was doing. I told him what the name was; we talked about other things, and after a while he consented to an interview. But then we tried to take a photo. He didn’t want a photo. Only from the back. So I got pissed. I ran the shot and I did a little caption for it: ‘A very rare photo of the back of Hayao Miyazaki’s head.’ That was my revenge. Starting from that day, we’ve been working together for twenty-five years, and I have seen him nearly every day.”

In 1985, Tokuma Shoten, the publishing company, which had released the manga of “Nausicäa,” opened an anime studio, Ghibli; Toshio Suzuki, Isao Takahata, and Hayao Miyazaki became its directors. The name was Miyazaki’s choice; *ghibli* is a word that Italian pilots once used to describe a wind blowing from the Sahara. To Miyazaki, the name conveyed a message, almost a threat—something like “Let’s blow a sensational wind through the Japanese animation world,” Suzuki recalled, in a speech years later. The studio would produce animation that, as Suzuki put it in his speech, “illustrates the joys and sorrows of life as they really are: and, as Miyazaki put it in the Ghibli Museum catalogue, shows “how complex the world is and how beautiful the world should be.”

Miyazaki threw himself into the project single-mindedly. “He would work from nine to four-thirty in the morning,” Suzuki said. “And he didn’t take holidays. He changed quite a bit when he turned fifty—he figured maybe he should take off a Sunday now and then. Now he tends to leave at midnight.” (Miyazaki told me, “I don’t take long vacations. I don’t have the time. My idea of a vacation is a nap.”)

Studio Ghibli’s first film was “Castle in the Sky” (1986), a fable featuring a gutsy girl from another planet, a gallant boy from a Welsh mining village, a magical crystal pendant, and a variety of flying machines that look like futuristic imaginings from the nineteenth century. Neither it nor “Totoro” nor “Grave of the Fireflies” (1988)—an almost unbearably sad film, directed by Takahata, about two Japanese children fleeing fire-bombing raids in the last days of the Second World War—did well at the box office, though they received great reviews. But the “Totoro” characters had staying power: two years after the film was released, Ghibli licensed the merchandising of Totoro stuffed animals, and, when sales took off, the studio was able to cover any deficit in its production

costs. And in 1989 the studio had its first hit, “Kiki’s Delivery Service.” (The apprentice witch, modeled on Suzuki’s teen-age daughter, leaves her family for a time to live in a coastal city in Miyazaki’s Europe, starting her own business delivering parcels by broomstick.) “Kiki” was seen by 2.6 million people, becoming the most popular domestic movie in Japan that year.

At that point, Miyazaki floated the idea of disbanding the studio. “He felt that after directing three films, made with the same group of people, the human relationships had become too tangled,” Suzuki recalled. He eventually convinced Miyazaki that closing shop would be a mistake. (Suzuki is perhaps one of the few people, if not the only person, who can talk Miyazaki into anything. “He knows how to handle Miyazaki,” Takahata said. “He knows that it’s like dealing with a child: when you want something, you say the opposite, because you know he’ll say no to your suggestion.”)

The studio became successful to the point that the staff was working on two projects at once. Miyazaki, Suzuki recalled in his speech, “came up with a proposition: Let’s build a new studio!” He went on, “It was the Miyazaki way: when facing a problem, try to find a breakthrough by coming up with a much bigger problem.”

The day I spoke with Suzuki, he was wearing black jeans and a T-shirt, and was chain-smoking. “Young people, unknown people with aspirations—they are very pure, honest, and so on,” he said. “Miyazaki saw that I was not that type, and he liked that.” Suzuki is the public face of Ghibli. He, not Miyazaki, attended the Venice Film Festival, in September, where “Howl’s Moving Castle” won an award for technical achievement. He’s funny and shrewd, and he fills in for the interview-shy Miyazaki with flair. Suzuki told me, “Just recently, Miyazaki-san came into my room at night and

we had a talk—just the two of us. He said, with a very serious look, ‘What are we going to do about Studio Ghibli? There aren’t many young talents out there.’ He said, ‘I think I can do this another ten years.’ I said ‘You can? Another ten years?’ Japanese fans tell him, ‘Please keep making animation.’ I’m the only person in Japan who hopes he will retire soon.”

Takahata and Miyazaki, who worked together so closely for years, have lately moved in different directions. Takahata is more interested in literary and film theory, more cerebral and less enamored of magic. His films are not for children, and “Grave of the Fireflies” could easily have been a live-action film. Takahata is sixty-nine, but he has a formidable head of dark hair and a handsome, unwrinkled face. “With Miyazaki, you have to totally believe in the world of the film,” Takahata told me. “He is demanding that the audience enter the world he has created completely. The audience is being asked to surrender.” He paused. “I want the audience to have a little distance. My relationship with him is limited now. We are friends but we don’t have a direct working relationship.”



A scene from *Grave of the Fireflies*

For many viewers, of course, surrendering to Miyazaki is a pleasure. Weeks after I saw “Spirited Away,” I was still thinking of the scene in which Chihiro takes a train trip, in the company of No-Face, to seek out a witch who may help her save her friend. The sequence is

both emotionally precise and fantastical. It's like every solitary journey you've ever taken, when you felt lonely and a little exalted, but it is also deeply strange, for the train glides, stately and surreal, over a translucent blue sea, while the sky slowly ripples through the possibilities of a sunset, from the pink of crushed petals to a soft, forgiving black.



A scene from *Spirited Away*

On the wall of one of the Studio Ghibli buildings is a kind of joke about Miyazaki's fears of invasion: two aluminum poles and two red hard hats on pegs. The staff was free to borrow them, Miyazaki explained to his colleagues, in order to repel unwanted visitors. But during my visit to the studio Steve Alpert, an American who heads Ghibli's overseas division, showed me around, and in an upstairs room I saw Miyazaki hanging out with a couple of animators. He had shown the completed "Howl's Moving Castle" to his wife and the Ghibli staff that day. He was in a relaxed mood, and when I started asking him questions, through a translator, he started answering.

Miyazaki's hair was parted on the side, and a luxuriant hank of it fell over one eye periodically, Veronica Lake style. He wore big oblong glasses, gray slacks, a light-blue short-sleeved shirt, and straw-soled sandals with white socks. At first glance, he seemed full of suppressed amusement—even jolly.

Today, Miyazaki announced cheerfully, marked the last time that he would watch "Howl's Moving Castle." "I never watch my films after

they've left the studio, because I've lived it and I know exactly where I've made mistakes," he said. "I'd have to sort of cringe and hide, just close my eyes. 'Oh, right, I remember that mistake, and that one.' You don't have to go through that torment over and over." The remark was punctuated with a giddy, slightly maniacal laugh—more of a giggle, really. In any case, he said, he was already planning his next project: a short film for the museum. "I have several I have to make. What can I do? I have to keep feeding my staff," he said, gesturing toward a group that had gathered around us. "Look at all the mouths I've got to feed here."

I asked him what had attracted him to "Howl's Moving Castle." He said, "Sophie, the girl, is given a spell and transformed into an old woman. It would be a lie to say that turning young again would mean living happily ever after. I didn't want to say that. I didn't want to make it seem like turning old was such a bad thing—the idea was that maybe she'll have learned something by being old for a while, and, when she actually is old, make a better grandma. Anyway, as Sophie gets older, she gets more pep. And she says what's on her mind. She is transformed from a shy, mousy little girl into a blunt, honest woman. It's not a motif you see often, and, especially with an old woman taking up the whole screen, it's a big theatrical risk. But it's a delusion that being young means you're happy."



Sophie in *Howl's Moving Castle*

Miyazaki puffed on a cigarette. “Some people may say this girl is a lot like Chihiro. Maybe. But I don’t fear that. I think I’d lose a lot more by trying to avoid repeating myself than by just repeating myself. Some people are always trying radically new material. I know what I want, and I’ll continue with it.” He went on, “I don’t have much patience for calculating and intellectualizing anymore. It has to do with the times. Nobody knows everything. Nobody knows what’s going to happen. So my conclusion is, don’t try to be too smart and wise. Why does anybody feel the way they do? Why is somebody depressed? Or angry? Even if you have a therapist, you’re never going to figure it out. You’re not going to solve it. Besides, every trauma is an important part of you.”

Miyazaki cradled the back of his head with his hand. “I’ve done things in this movie I wouldn’t have done ten years ago,” he said. “It has a big climax in the middle, and it ends with a resolution. It’s old-fashioned storytelling. Romantic.” Indeed, “*Howl’s Moving Castle*” has the first kiss ever in a Miyazaki film, and contains more of an overt love story. “*Howl’s* doesn’t have the elegiac beauty of certain sequences in “*Spirited Away*,” nor does it have the emotional delicacy of “*Totoro*.” (The *Howl* character, a vain, reclusive boy wizard who dresses in capes and epaulettes jackets, reminded me somehow of Michael Jackson.) But it does have the director’s commanding sense of magic, along with a windy, wildflower-strewn Alpine landscape, and an amusingly cranky fire demon named Calcifer. And the living, breathing, clanking castle is one of Miyazaki’s most marvelous designs: it looks like a giant teakettle bristling with turrets and balconies, and shifts about in its metal skin like a rhino, striding across the countryside on, yes, chicken feet.

The afternoon was warm, and outside the

window cicadas were making a racket. Miyazaki continued to look twinkly, but nonetheless he began airing a briskly dire view of the world. “I’m not jealous of young people,” he said. “They’re not really free.” I asked him what he meant. “They’re raised on virtual reality. And it’s not like it’s any better in the countryside. You go to the country and kids spend more time staring at DVDs than kids do in the city. I have a place in the mountains, and a friend of mine runs a small junior-high school nearby. Out of twenty-seven pupils, he told me, nine do their schoolwork from home! They’re too afraid to leave their homes.” He went on, “The best thing would be for virtual reality just to disappear. I realize that with our animation we are creating virtual things, too. I keep telling my crew, ‘Don’t watch animation! You’re surrounded by enough virtual things already.’ ”

We walked out to the rooftop garden that Goro had designed as a place where staff could rest and recharge. The studio’s four small buildings are lovely, and are complete with Miyazakian refinements. In some workspaces where he thought there wasn’t enough light or hint of the outside, he had trompe-l’oeil windows painted that depict meadows beneath cerulean skies. The building containing his office—which he refers to as “the pig’s house”—looks like an elaborate Swiss chalet, with a steep narrow stairway made of laminated blocks of golden pine, and a flying bridge with small doorways on either side. Once, Alpert told me, when Miyazaki looked out and noticed a procession of preschoolers walking by on the street, he invited them in, “and just gave them free rein and they ran up and down the stairs and onto the bridge, screaming and laughing.”

From the garden, we could hear taiko drums thumping out a dance for a neighborhood festival, and see a flamboyant sunset over the old pine trees that remain in this neighborhood, unlike in so many others around Tokyo. With surprising enthusiasm, Miyazaki brought up the subject of environmental apocalypse. “Our

population could just suddenly dip and disappear!" he said, flourishing his cigarette in the air. "I talked to an expert on this recently, and I said, 'Tell me the truth.' He said with mass consumption continuing as it is we will have less than fifty years. Then it will all be like Venice. I think maybe less, more like forty. I'm hoping I'll live another thirty years. I want to see the sea rise over Tokyo and the NTV tower become an island. I'd like to see Manhattan underwater. I'd like to see when the human population plummets and there are no more high-rises, because nobody's buying them. I'm excited about that. Money and desire—all that is going to collapse, and wild green grasses are going to take over."

He said that he'd visited the office tower of NTV, a Japanese television network, the day before: "I climbed two hundred and six metres up, to where the red lights are to warn the planes. You could see the whole city. And I thought, This place is haunted, doomed. All those buildings. All those cubicles."

Suzuki joined us, and Takahata sat down without greeting anyone, delicately removing an enormous black ant from his pants leg. He said that he'd been reading a French novel in which ants are highly intelligent and can read. Somebody mentioned E. O. Wilson's work on insects and their elaborate forms of communication.

"How are your frogs, by the way?" Suzuki asked Miyazaki, who explained that he kept them in a pond at home.

"I'm trying to keep track of how many tadpoles I have, but how can I? I can't write numbers on their backs."

The three men talked for a while about frogs and dragonflies and cicadas, and how the Japanese grasshopper population is declining because of overdevelopment. All of them warmed to the topic. "There's an abandoned house near mine, and I want to buy it and keep

it wild," Miyazaki said. "Let all the wild grasses grow over it. It's amazing how much they grow—their living energy. I wouldn't cut the grass at all, but then there's always the old ladies who come along with their hedge trimmers and scold you. We'll have to wait for that generation to die off. Until then, we'll never see grass like I want to see grass."

He was not a gardener himself, he said. "Gardening is my wife's territory. But, when she gardens, it's like a holocaust. You see a bug? It's evil. You have to exterminate it. Even the weeds—poor plants—she just yanks them out." He smiled. "It's not ecological at all. It's fascism." Japan should start a new form of agriculture, he proclaimed, then admitted, "I can't do it. I'm not the farmer type, so I just complain."

I noted that he had donated the "Totoro" licensing rights to a nature trust to help buy up some nearby woodlands and preserve them from development. "Oh, it's not much of a wood, but we try to do something," he said. Takahata spoke up: "If you add up all the land you've saved, it's vast." Miyazaki shrugged.

I asked him if he'd ever want to live anywhere else—he seemed so bitter about Japan's environmental depredations. "No," he said. "Japan is fine—because they speak Japanese. I like Ireland, though, the countryside there. Dublin has too many yuppies, computer types, but I like the countryside, because it's poorer than England." He mentioned liking Potsdam, in Germany, and the decrepit castle at Sans Souci. "Sometimes I encounter places that I feel as though I saw as a boy. A certain light in an old kind of town. Like in Tarkovsky's films, that feeling is always there. I felt that way about a town in Estonia that I visited." Miyazaki added that he didn't really find travel relaxing; he found walking relaxing—that was the way human beings were meant to relax, and he expressed the wish that he "could walk back and forth to work every day, except that it

would take two and a half hours each way,” and then he wouldn’t have enough time to work.

This remark suddenly seemed to remind him of all the work that he had to do. Miyazaki turned to leave, and Suzuki and Takahata, along with other staff members, began drifting away.

On the train ride back to downtown Tokyo, I thought about how kind and humane Miyazaki’s films typically are, and how harsh he had often sounded in person. I decided to admire this dichotomy as an example of what the social critic Antonio Gramsci called “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” An interviewer once remarked to Miyazaki that his movies expressed “hope and a belief in the goodness of

man.” Miyazaki replied that he was, in fact, a pessimist. He then added, “I don’t want to transfer my pessimism onto children. I keep it at bay. I don’t believe that adults should impose their vision of the world on children. Children are very much capable of forming their own visions.

This article first appeared on The New Yorker, January 17, 2005. Margaret Talbot is currently a contributing writer at The New Yorker. She has also been an editor at Lingua Franca and The New Republic, and has written for The New York Times Magazine, Salon, and The Atlantic Monthly. Posted at Japan Focus, March 29, 2006.