

presents: The World as seen by Hayao Miyazaki.



Monday 29 April: MY NEIGHBOUR TOTORO (1988)

Monday 13 May: PRINCESS MONONOKE (1997)

Bank Holiday Monday 27 May: SPIRITED AWAY (2001)

All at 8:15pm, Playhouse Cinema, Eden Court.

The Japanese eco-fantastist Hayao Miyazaki is an animation magician, a crowd-pleasing storyteller who is also a builder of worlds. He designs meticulously engineered imaginary aircraft, sets their perfect gears spinning, and propels them over moss-green rolling landscapes, zipping between the sprung columns of ruined castles. He uses animation in a refreshingly direct and intuitive way, reveling in its capacity to lift things off the ground.

Miyazaki rarely resorts to computer graphic imagery. In fact, he personally draws up to 70 percent of the individual frames in his movies—80,000 out of 140,000 in *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke Hime*, 97), the film that at the time surpassed all others at the box office in Japan. But even without the high gloss of CGI, deploying images that appear hand-crafted (a look as distinctively Japanese as the “organic”



Film notes sourced by Tony Janssens (InFiFa) and compiled by Mark MacLennan (InFiFa)

surface textures of an ancient teacup), he manages to seduce us into believing that these places actually, or at least “virtually,” exist—that they could be turned and tipped and looked at from any angle, and contemplated as a whole.

Mononoke was embraced in Japan, partly for its evocative folkloric elements; it reached back centuries for its images. Young children, who had no trouble embracing the cuddly tree creatures in Miyazaki’s *My Neighbor Totoro* (*Tonori no Totoro*, 86), might be repelled by their potent cousins in this film, red-eyed wild boars and tentacled giant spiders. And Miyazaki’s reach is global. The central romance between a human and the wolf princess reflects the early influence of a Japanese animated classic based upon a Chinese fable, *The Legend of White Snake* (*Hakujaden*, 59), about a goddess who falls in love with a mortal. The intensity of *Princess Mononoke* was a bit of a shock even for the Japanese. For most of his career, Miyazaki had been revered as an optimistic purveyor of family entertainment, a mildly eccentric flying buff who in his spare time draws watercolors of imaginary aircraft for aviation magazines. A lifelong animation industry professional, Miyazaki blossomed into an auteur only after a detour into the world of *manga*, Japan’s flourishing comic book trade.

Born in Tokyo in 1941, he has admitted to feeling pangs of guilt because he lived fairly comfortably as a child in the war years, the son of a munitions engineer. Trained as an economist, Miyazaki went to work—along with future Studio Ghibli partner Isao Takahata—at Toei Doga, initially as an in-betweeners on kids shows like “Heidi and Puss in Boots,” then as a writer and animator on the feature films *Gulliver’s Space Travels* (*Gariba no Uchu Ryokou*, 65) and

Takahata’s *Horus: Prince of the Sun* (*Taiyu no Ouji Horus no Daibouken*, 68).



After relocating with Takahata to Nippon Animation, Miyazaki became a full-fledged director, piloting *Future Boy Conan* (*Mirai Shonen Conan*, 78) for TV and the edgy feature *Lupin III: Castle of Cagliostro* (*Lupin III Cagliostro no Shiro*, 79). All of this early work, however, was undertaken as either a team member or a house director, developing characters created by others. Then, in 1980, the Japanese magazine *Animage* invited Miyazaki to create his *manga* series, a work he soon adapted for the big screen as *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* (*Kaze no Tani no Nausicaä*, 84).



Those fans that were following Japanese animation in the Eighties, the decade of laser-blasting transformer robots and super-dimensional space fortresses, will recall how refreshingly out of step *Nausicaä* looked at the time, before

Miyazaki was established as a one-man subgenre. For the gleaming metal and glass surfaces of the “mechanic” school, Miyazaki substituted the bulges and bristles, the drifting spores and spurting fluids, of natural phenomena. The efflorescent post-nuclear setting is a chaotically fertile wasteland, crawling with giant bugs as it’s slowly engulfed by a creeping forest of fungus, the poisonous Sea of Corruption. The few remaining humans are clustered together on mountaintops, in warring city-states, waiting to be superseded by the tide of mutant evolution. Technology has been erased, although some of its dimly remembered artifacts have been replaced with picturesque approximations, cobbled together out of natural materials—like “The Flintstones” reimagined by a Zen gardener.

There’s a hobbyist’s glee in a lot of his work: the sheer fun of building clever mockups from leftover bits and pieces. By extension these are industrial processes ingeniously approximated with preindustrial technology. The thumping, wooden-gear iron foundry in *Princess Mononoke* for example, operated by teams of women riding huge pedals, recalls the (also purely imaginary) wood-sprocket dye works in Chinese master Zhang Yimou’s *Ju Dou*.

The meticulous detailing extends to the way Miyazaki’s worlds are constructed, the way the pieces interlock—the plausibly offset stones in an ancient wall, the cottony clumping of leaves at the top of a tree. The aerial views of the Tintin-style European settings in several of his films (described somewhere as Europe would look if World War II had never happened) are mapped out with great precision; landmarks, districts, and street plans are all coordinated.

As much care is lavished on the environment, or upon the summery country landscapes of *Totoro*, as upon

the wholly fabricated environments of some of his later works, where Piranesi ruins seem to be built upon a thorough underlying plan of the city as it once functioned. The natural world may not be one enormous organic machine, but internal consistency matters deeply in these kinds of realms Miyazaki created. Ecology, after all, is just a more comprehensive view of the way the parts of things interact. In many ways, the ecosystems of Miyazaki’s stories have a richer fictional reality than most of the people who live in them.

Like any good engineer, however, Miyazaki builds his worlds from the inside out. What he creates aren’t images so much as working models rendered in two dimensions—with the addition of movement (time) to simulate the third. And they can’t just look right; they also have to work right. You get the feeling that if you built flying machines from Miyazaki’s drawings, they would, indeed, fly. Whether we’re considering an airplane or an entire planet, the very same principles apply: internal consistency, symmetry, a seamless sequence of cause and effect. “I’ve come to the point,” Miyazaki said, “where I just could not make a movie without addressing the problem of humanity as part of an ecosystem.”

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Princess Mononoke (1997)

Miyazaki's international breakthrough hit was inspired by the Muromachi period (c.1336 to c.1573), which saw the introduction of firearms to feudal Japan, the film elegantly evokes a simple natural world where animal gods and tree spirits roam the earth, though they are fast becoming threatened by the technological advances and self-serving ruthlessness of humanity. When a remote village is invaded by a boar god driven mad by a bullet wound, and its prince Ashitaka is inflicted with a deadly curse while fending off the beast, it becomes clear that the natural balance of this mystical society is severely out of whack. As Ashitaka ventures out to find the source of the corrupting bullet, he forms an unlikely and tentative alliance with San, a human raised in the forest by the wolf goddess Moro. San is the self-proclaimed Princess Mononoke – 'mononoke' being a Japanese term for spirits or changed beings.

While Ghibli's work has captivated Japanese audiences since the 1980s, it was Princess Mononoke that really put Miyazaki on the map in the west. A record-breaking domestic theatrical run caught the attention of super-producer Harvey Weinstein, who threw his considerable weight behind the film's US release. Fantasy writer extraordinaire Neil Gaiman was enlisted to fine-tune the translated script, and an all-star English voice cast was assembled and the rave reviews eventually led to impressive home entertainment receipts. Aware of Weinstein's reputation for butchering his acquisitions beyond recognition – a habit that earned him the nickname 'Harvey Scissorhands' – Miyazaki's producer reportedly mailed the Miramax head a samurai sword accompanied by a note that read, simply, "no cuts".

If the film's title conjures images of a doe-eyed Disney damsel holding out for a hero, you're in for a rude awakening. The first time we see San, she's nonchalantly sucking on the wound of her 'mother' Moro, her face smeared with fresh blood. Rather than fall weak at the knees at the sight of Ashitaka, she brusquely sends him on his way and proceeds with her plan to kill local industrialist Lady Eboshi, who has wreaked widespread environmental havoc while manufacturing iron and guns. But San's task won't be easy, as Eboshi has assembled an army of fiercely loyal workers by liberating women from local brothels. While Ashitaka is Princess Mononoke's dashing poster boy, it's the fascinatingly multi-layered female characters who really drive the narrative.

Princess Mononoke refuses to conform to the simplistic, black-and-white view of human nature that characterises most mainstream animation. Eboshi might be the chief antagonist, but she's as far from a two-dimensional Disney villain as you can imagine. On the one hand she's a ruthless leader, happy to obliterate anyone or anything that might impede her march towards power. But on the other she's a pioneering proto-feminist who has fashioned her town into a safe haven for lepers and other social outcasts. By the same token, the way in which San's hatred of Eboshi boils over into a blanket contempt for humanity is clearly a sizeable character flaw. Miyazaki refrains from passing overt judgement on his characters, deftly building to a climactic showdown in which there are no clear-cut heroes or villains. And although San and Ashitaka form a deep bond over the course of their time together, at no point is the couple assured of a Disneyesque living happily ever after. Rather than filling the heads of younger viewers with unrealistic ideas about the transcendental bliss of long-term monogamy, *Princess Mononoke* instead imparts a useful lesson about the value of caution and compromise. It's all the more genuinely romantic for it. (Sources: Sight and Sound, Film Comment, Cahiers du Cinema, Cineaste)