

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.



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

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” 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-betweenner 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* (*Taiyo 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 Nausica*, 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."

My Neighbour Totoro (1988)



Studio Ghibli was established after the success of *Nausicaä: Valley of the Wind* (1984) specifically for the production of Hayao Miyazaki's follow-up, the Swiftian tale of airborne adventure, *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986). However, it was the double-billing of his next title with Isao Takahata's tonally quite different *Grave of the Fireflies* that really cemented the position of Japan's best-loved animation house on its home turf.

Ironically, at the time, *Totoro* was seen as the lesser of the pair. Nevertheless, this touching tale of two sisters who move with their father to a rickety wooden house in the country to be closer to their mother convalescing in a nearby hospital has gone on to achieve classic status. A celebration of the childhood imagination, it retains a freshness and originality that appears almost naive to modern viewers, and can be described (alongside 1992's *Porco Rosso*) as the most personal and heartfelt of Miyazaki's creations, with its setup stemming from an episode from his own youth when his mother was bed-bound with spinal tuberculosis. The story is seen through the unquestioning, uncritical, undaunted eyes of a child and is an inspiring film full of hope and tenderness that mixes the magical with the mundane.

A rich fantasy world beneath the ordinary is unveiled before our eyes as the girls explore their new environment, full of tiny spider-like creatures scuttling through the rafters and other strange supernatural beings invisible to adults. These include the huge woolly beastie of the title, hidden deep within the nearby forest, who would become the most iconic of Ghibli's creations. Japan is a nation very much rooted in its own past, with ancient shrines overlooking everything that happens in the here and now. Miyazaki's magnificent film reflects this in all its splendour.

(Sources: Sight and Sound, Film Comment, Cahiers du Cinema, Cineaste)