

## Publication

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# Miyazaki- world

A life in art

Susan Napier

In *Miyazakiworld*, Japanese culture and animation scholar Susan Napier takes a close look at the life and work of the award-winning animator Miyazaki Hayao (1941), co-founder of the celebrated Studio Ghibli.

According to Napier, Miyazaki's films are united in what she calls Miyazakiworld: "the immersive animated realm [...] marked by the director's unique imagination". She skilfully analyses the elements and themes that keep recurring in Miyazakiworld and together form its essence; from empowered women, the environmental apocalypse, and militarism, to the innocence of childhood. In her prologue Napier asserts that Miyazaki's personal and artistic views are omnipresent in his filmography because he is a true *auteur*. What gives added value to her book is that she not only uses English-language sources, but also draws on a rich array of Japanese-language material to back her claim and reflect upon experiences and events in Miyazaki's life.

The first chapter, 'Ruins', focuses on the horrors of World War II. Napier particularly mentions one traumatic event that had a big impact on the young Miyazaki. When he was just four years old, Miyazaki experienced a severe firebombing air raid in Utsunomiya which destroyed half of the city and robbed forty-nine thousand people of their homes. His family fled the burning city in their company truck. Miyazaki remembers a woman carrying a little girl begging them to be let on, but the family refused. Until today the director expresses his feelings of guilt about his family's unwillingness to help the woman, pointing at the relative prosperity in which he was raised due to the family's wartime efforts: his father was the director of Miyazaki Airplane, a company manufacturing aircraft parts and during the war also parts for fighter planes. Apocalyptic imagery forms a staple of Miyazaki's animated realms, which often emerge from or end in ruins. His films carry strong anti-war sentiments, but he is not blind to the cruelty of life. The animator can be characterized as an optimistic humanist, creating fantastic utopias, while simultaneously showing us the nihilistic wickedness of the world.

Chapter two, 'Constructing an Animator', tells the story of Miyazaki's childhood and his discovery of the animated medium. Chapter three, 'The Joy of Movement', follows his animation career up to his first feature film, *Castle of Cagliostro* (1979). Napier paints an informative and human portrait of the master animator.

The following chapters discuss Miyazaki's feature films, currently eleven in total, in chronological order. Acknowledging the importance of Miyazaki's manga epic *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, Napier devotes a separate chapter to a comparison between his breakthrough film of the same name and the manga it originated from. Occasionally Napier's film analyses seem to be solely based on personal interpretation, such as when she claims the character Chihiro from *Spirited away* (2001) to be a "literal manifestation of anorexia". Her admiration for Miyazaki's work at times colours her assessment.

Napier convincingly links Miyazaki's films to their historical and social context. She suggests for example that *My neighbour Totoro* (1988, fig. 1) and *Kiki's delivery service* (1989, fig. 2) show two distinct sides of Japan's 1980s bubble economy. In *My neighbour Totoro*, we discern a yearning for a simple, modest existence in nature away from the excesses of overconsumption, whereas the young independent witch Kiki embodies and celebrates the changing role of women in Japanese society and their increased autonomy. Napier concludes that *Spirited away* (2001), where exorbitant indulgence brings about the gruesome metamorphosis of several characters, can be seen as a cautionary tale of what happens when the bubble bursts (fig. 3).

Accessible yet scholarly, *Miyazakiworld* will please both the lay and the academic audience. Although the book is informative and carefully constructed, it seems at times to lack depth, especially in comparison to Napier's earlier academic studies on the master animator. However, what makes *Miyazakiworld* stand out within the growing corpus of studies on Miyazaki, is Napier's mix of biography, cinematic analysis and intriguing historical and social context.

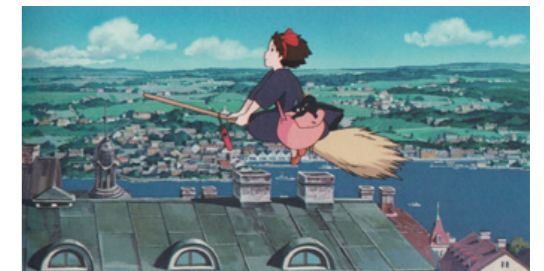
### IN CONCLUSION

With *Miyazakiworld* Napier presents an accessible overview of Miyazaki's oeuvre and a refreshingly human portrait of the master animator.

Philo Ouweleen



1.  
Mei, Satsuki and Totoro waiting for the bus. *My neighbour Totoro*, Studio Ghibli, 1988



2.  
The young witch Kiki flying on her broom. *Kiki's delivery service*, Studio Ghibli, 1989



3.  
The character No Face wreaks havoc inside the bathhouse. *Spirited away*, Studio Ghibli, 2001