

Where the Wild Things Are

The Miyazaki Menagerie

by A.O. Scott

Nowadays, when we think of feature-length animation, our thoughts turn immediately to “Shrek” and Pixar (or less fondly, to “Robots” and “Madagascar”). The animated world, we’ve learned, is round—created in three dimensions by teams of computer wizards and enlivened by noisy, knowing references to American pop culture, past and present. It may seem somewhat paradoxical, then, that the world’s greatest living animated-filmmaker—a designation that his fans at Disney and Pixar would be unlikely to challenge—is Hayao Miyazaki, a Japanese writer and director whose world is flat, handmade and often surpassingly quiet. Not that Mr. Miyazaki, 64, is entirely indifferent to technological advances. Starting with his 1997 epic, “Princess Mononoke,” he has used computer-generated imagery in his movies, though he recently instituted a rule that CGI should account for no more than 10 percent of the images in any of his pictures.

In an interview last week, on the morning before his latest movie, “Howl’s Moving Castle,” had its New York premiere, he spoke about the new technology with a mixture of resignation and resistance. “I’ve told the people on my CGI staff”—at Studio Ghibli, the company he founded with Isao Takahata and Toshio Suzuki in 1985—“not to be accurate, not to be true. We’re making a mystery here, so make it mysterious.”

That conscious sense of mystery is the core of Mr. Miyazaki’s art. Spend enough time in his world—something you can do at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, which is presenting a sumptuous retrospective of his and Mr. Takahata’s work—and you may find your perception of your own world refreshed, as it might be by a similarly intensive immersion in the oeuvre of Ansel Adams, J.M.W. Turner or Monet. After a while, certain vistas—a rolling meadow dappled with flowers and shadowed by high cumulus clouds, a range of rocky foothills rising toward snow-capped peaks, the fading light at the edge of a forest—deserve to be called Miyazakian.

So do certain stories, especially those involving a resourceful, serious girl contending with the machinations of wise old women and the sufferings of enigmatic young men. And so do certain themes: the catastrophic irrationality of war and other violence; the folly of disrespecting nature; the moral complications that arise from ordinary acts of selfishness, vanity and even kindness. As a visual artist, Mr. Miyazaki is both an extravagant fantasist and an exacting naturalist; as a storyteller, he is an inventor of fables that seem at once utterly new and almost unspeakably ancient. Their strangeness comes equally from the freshness and novelty he brings to the crowded marketplace of juvenile fantasy and from an unnerving, uncanny sense of familiarity, as if he were resurrecting legends buried deep in the collective unconscious.

Mr. Miyazaki’s world is full of fantastical creatures—cute and fuzzy, icky and creepy, handsome and noble. There are lovable forest sprites, skittering dust balls and ravenous blobs of black viscous goo, as well as talking cats, pigs and frogs. “Howl’s Moving Castle,” adapted from a novel by Diana Wynne Jones, features a garrulous flame, voiced in the English-language version by Billy Crystal; “Spirited Away” (2001) had its melancholy, wordless no-face monster; “Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind” (1984), the director’s first masterpiece, was nearly overrun by enormous trilobite-shaped insects called Om.

Some of Mr. Miyazaki’s creations seem to have precedents and analogues in folklore, fantasy literature and other cartoons. The porcine title character in the 1992 film “Porco Rosso,” for example, is a dashing Italian pilot from the early days of aviation, and it is just

conceivable that he might have a stuttering cousin somewhere on the Warner Brothers lot, looking for a pair of pants to match his blazer. But most members of Mr. Miyazaki's ever-expanding menagerie—including Totoro, the slow-moving, pot-bellied, vaguely feline character who has become the logo and mascot of Studio Ghibli—come entirely from the filmmaker's own prodigious imagination. In the interview, Mr. Miyazaki was asked where he thought his work fitted within the expanding universe of children's pop culture. "The truth is I have watched almost none of it," he said with a slightly weary smile. "The only images I watch regularly come from the weather report."

The director, a compact, white-haired man whose demeanor combines gravity with a certain impishness, was not just being flip. It is hard to think of another filmmaker who is so passionately interested in weather. Violent storms, gentle breezes and sun-filled skies are vital, active elements, bearers of mood, emotion and meaning. His monsters and animals, who share the screen with more conventionally human-looking animated figures—adolescent girls with wind-tossed hair, short skirts and saucer eyes, mustachioed soldiers and wrinkled crones—are an integral part of Mr. Miyazaki's landscape, but the most striking feature of his films may be the landscapes themselves.

The action in his movies—he has written and directed seven features since "Nausicaä"—takes place far from the cramped cities of modern Japan, and also from the futuristic metropolises that provide the dystopian backdrop of so much anime. His characters tend to live in hillside villages or in tidy, old-world towns where half-timbered houses huddle along cobblestone streets. As much as they can, in gliders, on broomsticks and under their own magical powers, these characters take to the sky; the evocation of flying, for metaphorical purposes and for the sheer visual fun of it, is one of Mr. Miyazaki's favorite motifs. But one reason he ventures aloft may be to offer a better view of earth and water, which he renders with cinematic precision and painterly virtuosity.

Even though his frames evoke the careful brushwork and delicate emotions of Japanese landscape painting, Mr. Miyazaki is very much a product of postwar Japan, and he sits at the artistic and commercial pinnacle of his country's churning, eclectic visual culture. Though he has, in the past 20 years, concentrated almost entirely on film, his earlier career includes television cartoons and manga (comic books). Animation, which arrived in Japan with the American occupying force, has since the war become at once the embodiment of the country's antic modernity and also, in the hands of artists like Mr. Miyazaki and Mr. Takahata, a vehicle for reimagining and preserving its history.

Mr. Takahata, whose clean-lined realism complements Mr. Miyazaki's flights of color and invention, does this explicitly in films like "Only Yesterday," in which a Tokyo office worker looks back on her childhood, and "Grave of the Fireflies," an almost unbearable chronicle of wartime hardship. Mr. Miyazaki's approach to the past is more mystical and elegiac. "When I talk about traditions, I'm not talking about temples, which we got from China anyway," he said. "There is an indigenous Japan," he added, "and elements of that are what I'm trying to capture in my work." The clearest expression of this impulse may be in those carefully drawn landscapes, many of which are overseen by local spirits and all of which vibrate with the feeling that nature is an active presence rather than a backdrop. It makes sense that the world's greatest animator is, at heart, something of an animist.

At the same time, though, Mr. Miyazaki's movies, whose settings variously evoke medieval Japan, 19th-century Europe and the antique futures of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, cast a sorrowful, sometimes scolding eye toward the present. The antiwar implications of "Howl's Moving Castle," which opened on Friday, are as unmistakable as the ecological warnings in "Nausicaä" and "Princess Mononoke," and in nearly every film, technological hubris, political ambition and greed are the true roots of evil. His criticism of the modern world, though, seems less topical than philosophical; his movies do not represent a point of view, but rather present a way of seeing that is radically at odds with what usually meets the eye. It can hardly be denied that they are marvels

of escapist entertainment, but this is in no small part because they offer escape from the noise and aggression that dominate so much other modern entertainment. (Not that Mr. Miyazaki is exactly an outsider to the global entertainment industry. “Howl’s Moving Castle,” which Disney is distributing here in both a subtitled and celebrity-voice dubbed version, has earned more than \$210 million in other countries and is the third-highest-grossing film in Japanese box office history. Ahead of it are “Titanic” and “Spirited Away,” which won the 2002 Oscar for best animated feature). His power to enchant can seem unlimited—the wizards, witches and sorcerers who bedevil, beguile and befriend his heroes are less his alter egos than his kinfolk—but it arises from and communicates an equally powerful sense of disenchantment.

It is not that Mr. Miyazaki’s films are pessimistic, exactly; being fairy tales, they do arrive at happy endings. (“I’m not going to make movies that tell children, ‘You should despair and run away,’” he said.) But the route he chooses toward happiness can be troubling, perhaps especially to an American audience that expects sentimental affirmations based on clear demarcations between good and evil. The division of the world into heroes and villains is a habit Mr. Miyazaki regards with suspicion. “The concept of portraying evil and then destroying it—I know this is considered mainstream, but I think it’s rotten,” he said. “This idea that whenever something evil happens someone particular can be blamed and punished for it, in life and in politics, it’s hopeless.” Like the natural world, which follows its own laws and rhythms—“it does what the hell it pleases,” in Mr. Miyazaki’s words—human nature is not something that can easily be explained or judged. “One thing you can be sure of,” says a character at the end of the film—a fellow who has spent most of the movie as a mute scarecrow with a head carved from a giant turnip—“hearts change.” In the Miyazakian cosmos, so do minds, bodies, rivers, forests, nations and everything else. Wizards turn into birds of prey; young girls are transformed overnight into 90-year-old women; greedy parents are changed into pigs; shooting stars mutate into fire demons. You can call this magic—a word reviewers of Mr. Miyazaki’s films seem helpless to avoid—or you can call it art. But it may just be that he reveals, in his quiet, moving, haunted pictures, the hidden senses of the word “animation,” which after all means not only to set things in motion, but also, more profoundly, to bring them to life.