The Magic of Miyazaki
Molly Coyle

When it comes to transporting audiences into the world of the fantastic, there are few creators better than acclaimed Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki. For nearly four decades, Miyazaki has blessed the world with his unique storytelling and stylistic animation through his production studio, Studio Ghibli. For Miyazaki, every detail counts in his quest to fully transport viewers from their seat into his fantasy lands. From hope-filled plots to quiet pacing to intimate camera angles, Miyazaki expertly crafts every facet of his films to provide a fully immersive viewing experience, making his films an excellent choice for anyone seeking an escape from reality.

Having lived through the economic hardships of a post-WWII Japan, Miyazaki is no stranger to the challenges young people face during times of global crisis (Peres, 2019). However, where other animators of his generation explored darker, dystopian and post-apocalyptic themes, Miyazaki chose to approach his stories with curious optimism, allowing his protagonists' compassion to transform dire situations into hopeful ones (Peres, 2019). Though Miyazaki's movies tend to end on a joyful—or at least peaceful—note, he does not shy away from portraying violence, pollution, isolation or other issues faced by young people. Instead, he takes these issues and uses fantastical elements to provide a safe place for audiences to explore different avenues of conflict resolution as they watch the protagonists work to achieve their goals (Peres, 2019; Weedy, 2018). Miyazaki believes that animation provides viewers with joy, inspiration, and courage and he creates movies with the hope that viewers can return to reality revitalized and ready to take on new challenges (Peres, 2019).

Author's Sketch of Hayao Miyazaki

Though watching characters slowly grow and work toward their goals is all part-and-parcel of any movie's content, Miyazaki's movies demonstrate a number of unique techniques that make them stand out above other animated features. One such technique is the use of slow, introspective pacing. Throughout Miyazaki's movies, audiences may note scenes where characters do nothing more than look out of a train or car window with a somber expression plastered on their face (Weedy, 2018). These moments contain no dialogue and seem to last longer than one might think reasonable for a movie aimed at young audiences, yet these scenes seem to resonate with viewers and stick with them long past end of the credits (Weedy, 2018). Critics believe the reason for the success of these quiet scenes is the invocation of empathy and emotion caused by the juxtaposition of simple character design with realistic environments, all accompanied by a dreamy musical score (McCloud, 1994; Weedy, 2018). Characters with simple facial designs—like those in Miyazaki's movies—allow viewers to quickly empathize and project their own emotions onto characters, whereas detailed faces cause viewers to recognize a character as another person and make it harder to form an immediate, intimate connection (McCloud, 1994). Once the viewer sees themselves as the character, the combination of music, scenery, and motion conjure feelings of introspection and nostalgia (Weedy, 2018). In these quiet scenes, Miyazaki brilliantly manipulates audiences into employing an empathy so strong that viewers not only watch the character drift into a dream world, but the viewers feel themselves *become* the character drifting into a dream world. The viewer's sense of escape in these moments may feel so strong that it can seem as if they have awoken from a brief daydream once that movie's action resumes. In today's world, the constant, loud barrage of negative media overstimulates and exhausts viewers; the quiet moments and slow pacing of Miyazaki's films counteract reality and provide a peaceful escape.

A second technique that Miyazaki employs is changing the camera angle to reflect what the viewer might see if they were actually, physically present in the scene. In the introspective scenes discussed above, the camera often sits at what would be eye-level, if the viewer was sitting in the vehicle with the protagonist (Weedy, 2018). Sometimes, the camera angle shifts so it appears as if the viewer is sitting on the train bench next to the protagonist, looking back at them; this allows audiences to closely examine the nuances of a character's face as they process unshared thoughts, gazing out the window at a landscape that do not really see. Conversely, the same technique is used to imbue the film with additional drama. In scenes where the protagonist feels insecure or threatened, the camera will seem as though it is laying on the floor looking up at the threat from behind the protagonist. With the subtle manipulation of the camera, Miyazaki manages to pull audiences deep into his worlds.

With such visually and emotionally immersive films, Miyazaki's popularity has captured the attention of audiences around the world. Though Miyazaki began his work in animation in the late 1960s and founded Studio Ghibli in 1985, it took many years before his films were officially released in North America (Peres, 2019; Williams, 2020). Studio Ghibli has since struck an accord with Disney, who manages the distribution of most of Studio Ghibli's twenty-two movies throughout North America (Travis, 2020; Williams, 2020). In February of 2020, the streaming service Netflix released almost all of Studio Ghibli's films for viewing on their platform (Netflix, 2020). The release of these films coincided well with start of quarantine mandates in North America, when panic was high and the need for escape was urgent. Though the initial terror of the pandemic has long since worn off, the fatigue of prolonged existential dread has taken its toll on the world's population and increased the need for escapism. Fortunately, Studio Ghibli movies have remained available for streaming on Netflix and for checkout from most public libraries, allowing young people to escape from the world of COVID and exist—if only briefly—in the magical world of Miyazaki.

References

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. HarperPerennial.

Netflix. (2020, January 19). *Netflix releases 21 Studio Ghibli masterpieces around the world.* https://about.netflix.com/en/news/netflix-releases-21-studio-ghibli-masterpieces-around-the-world

Peres, C. (2019, May 17). Liberated worlds: Construction of meaning in the universes of Hayao Miyazaki. *Animation Studies*, *14*. https://journal.animationstudies.org/catia-peres-liberated-worlds-construction-of-meaning-in-the-universes-of-hayao-miyazaki/

Travis, B. (2020, November 18). *Every Studio Ghibli film ranked*. Empire. https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/studio-ghibli-every-movie-ranked/

Weedy, K. (2018, Autumn). Chihiro boards a train: Perceptual Modulation in the Films of Studio Ghibli. *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts*, *27*. https://doi.org/10.2218/forum.27.2906

Williams, W. (2020). Examining Studio Ghibli's animated films: A study of student' *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *63*(6), 639-650. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1043