

# Representation of the Local and Global Community in the Works of Hayao Miyazaki

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## ***Abstract***

*The aim of this paper is to analyze and discuss the visual choices in Hayao Miyazaki's movies, that reflect the Japanese cultural identity as well as the international one. We see this universalization in his world designs, characters designs and choice of stories. This is what made his movies connect with a global audience, without disconnecting with the local one. We will be studying two forms of Miyazaki globalizations: Movies with national symbolism and how they connected with the world community, and international story-based Miyazaki movies that succeeded in associating with the Japanese community.*

## ***keywords-***

*Animation – identity – community – cinema.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In their article, "Animation: A Free Medium," F. Thomas and O. Johnston describe animation as a free medium where the possibilities are infinite. They focus not only on timing, but on several other factors that make this medium a unique and powerful form of expression. Animation can be used to tell a story in a way that no other medium can. It can also be used to create a sense of motion and energy that is impossible to achieve in live action. Animation can be used to create a sense of humor and whimsy that is unmatched in any other form of storytelling. It is only possible, that with all these factors combined, the emotions an animator wants to convey are properly expressed, "the response of the viewer is an emotional one, because art speaks to the heart. this gives animation an almost magical ability to reach inside any audience and communicate with all peoples everywhere, regardless of language barriers.", describing it as animation's biggest strengths. (F. Thomas and O. Johnston, 1995). In the recent years, the animation industry has slowly but surely enlarged its creative scope, reaching towards dramatic feeling, lyrical and poetic values. This had not only expanded the nature of the public involved, but also created a more intimate and direct relationship between the audience and the filmmaker. Movies such as L'Idée, The Tell-tale Heart, The Magic Canvas and A Short Vision, have clearly expressed the integration of serious social themes into animation. (J.Halas, R.Manvell 1959). Ian Christie and Annie van den Oever state that the reason why the audience is hooked on modern movie theatres and television, is due to our natural preverbal occurrence towards storytelling,

where its essence lies on the visual representation of events. “Movies are the closest external representation of the prevailing storytelling that goes on in our minds” (I. Christie, A. van den Oever, 2018).

Hayao Miyazaki’s animation movies have achieved worldwide recognition today. What began as a small studio he founded with his Toei animation co-worker Isao Takahata (and producer Toshio Suzuki), has now reached a level of popularity comparable to that of The Walt Disney Company. Studio Ghibli has gained this reach and respect, not through vast budgets, but due to its wonderfully directed stories, smooth animations, and stunning visuals. Ghibli has a slow pace of producing movies due to two main reasons: first, the studio is using traditional hand-drawn cel illustrations, and second, they do not produce movies based on the parameters of box office success. The latter reason has gained a lot of respect from its audience.

An animation studio achieves popularity and respect through its movies’ impact on the community. This impact can be brought about through the stories told, or the visual concepts created, to represent the tale. This kind of universalization, where a movie can be related to a local as well as a global community, is quite difficult to achieve. It can lead the creator to either fall into stereotypes (for instance, Disney movie “Aladdin” released 1992, and its representation of the Arab culture) or create a neutral world where no community is represented, which can lead to a disconnect between the audience and the film. Hayao Miyazaki came up with a simple, yet infinitely complex solution where he was able to stay loyal to his cultural identity while connecting with the international one, by creating a single world where fragments of different worlds are gathered. His movies were made for the purpose of belonging to everyone, as well as to each individual (Hayao Miyazaki, 1996, Starting Point); creating a perfect middle such that the character belonged nowhere but there.

For instance, in his movie “Kiki’s Delivery Service” (1989), inspired from the popular Japanese children’s novels by Eiko Kadono, even though the characters were designed as Japanese, the inspiration for the city was taken from a Scandinavian town that Hayao Miyazaki visited during his European trips in the 1980s. His changes were not limited to the visuals, but on the story itself, of which the original author disapproved. The novel talked about a little witch that travelled to a faraway town to live independently. Hayao Miyazaki tried to adapt the story to a more relatable social reality, adding a touch of realism and societal representation to the screenplay. The original story limited Kiki’s independence simply on a financial level, while Miyazaki tried to make the character go through emotional struggles, enabling her to achieve spiritual independence as well. This movie had spoken to a huge number of young females striving for self-reliance, who found their own struggles embodied and personified in the difficulties Kiki had to face. This relatability was not limited to women of a particular cultural background. Miyazaki chose to tell his stories in a way that every person found a little of themselves in them, no matter their nationality. And he did so while surrounding the story with a visual mixture from different cultures.

Globalization today is not limited to the financial world; we experience large-scale cultural globalization as well. We are fast-moving towards a world where cultural barriers are non-existent, and the acceptance of the inevitable plurality is developing. Roland Robertson explained this phenomenon as Glocalization, “*modeled on the Japanese dochakuka (deriving from dochaku ‘living on one’s own land’), originally the agricultural principle of adapting one’s farming techniques to local conditions, but also adopted in Japanese for global localization, a global outlook adapted to local conditions*”. (Robertson, 2014). The mainstream definition of Glocalization involves readapting a global product for the local community, for it to be acceptable. This readaptation can take several forms, for example, the dubbing of Japanese anime TV series in that recipient country’s language, or editing explicit scenes from western movies to cater to a more conservative audience etc. This readaptation is based on taking an already finished product and reshaping it for the local community. However, when it comes to creating a product with glocalization as the primary goal, the changes must be made on a conceptual level,

as we see in Hayao Miyazaki movies. We clearly understand from watching those movies that they do not cater just to the Japanese community. So how did Hayao Miyazaki's work connect with an international community despite coming from a hermitic culture?

Before answering this question, we should first look on the 5 scapes theory of cultural flow as explained by Arjun Appadurai. According to him, seeing the global diversity as Global North v. Global South; first world countries v. third world etc. is over-simplistic for an age where globalization is in constant growth. Instead, he proposes a 5-dimensional cultural flow:

1. Mediascapes
2. Technoscapes
3. Ethnoscapes
4. Financescapes
5. Ideoscapes

He believes that these scapes ensure cultural diversity instead of cultural domination (Appadurai, 1990). Our study falls in the category of Ideoscapes, where ideas and cultural symbols spread from its original country to the rest of the world. This not only allows the international community to understand in a better way the former's ideology and social standards but can also borrow those principles and integrate them in their daily lives. However, there is a big difference between a culture imposing its ideologies on the international community, which is considered ethnocentrism, and sharing your principles without enforcing them upon the global audience's cultures. This difference is expressed through the dialogue each country holds with the rest of the world, in our case, Cinema.

Japanese Anime had a lot of influence on Japanese as well as the international society. There is even a movement called "Otaku" where young people dress up as anime characters and converse in Japanese. This is a side effect of an obsession of animated TV series, where the production of intense visual styles and overdramatic stories influenced the foreign community to a great extent simply because the themes of such stories were relatable to the youth all around the world – standing up against the excessive oversight and control by society, stress, and competitiveness among peers etc., supported by fantasy elements where spirituality is portrayed either like an escape or a useless appendage.

All these ideologies that are ingrained in a global scale are due to the economic and cultural globalization that the world is going through these past decades. This financial integration's side effects are globally common, no matter the cultural difference, which make their expression understandable to the international community. When it comes to Japanese feature animations, the way these messages are delivered or spoken of is different. Hayao Miyazaki's focus is built around the story and the space where the narrative happens, more than the aesthetical trends, complex visual saturation and monetary gains. *"I frankly despise the truncated work "anime" because to me it only symbolises the current desolation of our industry"*. (Hayao Miyazaki, 1996, Starting Point). Instead of overwhelming the audience with unnecessary load of imagery and depressing story lines, Miyazaki has chosen to make his movies as an escape instead of a reminder of reality, a world where audience would reconnect with their childish carefree self while being encouraged to overcome societal pressure.

## **II. From Japan to the world (Spirited away, Princess Mononoke)**

We have discussed above about how Miyazaki movies tend to stand on a middle line where the story is perceived by a global audience, supported by an intercultural visual. There are, however, other examples of how Miyazaki based his entire visuals on Japanese culture while still connecting with the international community. First and foremost, we should keep in mind that this attraction and understanding of the Japanese culture from a foreign community is due to the popularity of Japanese animation (mostly called anime) and manga, for the last decade. The global influence the Japanese culture has had on the world since the 1950s (M. Luken, 2018), allowed many animators-illustrators (mangaka) to stay loyal to their cultural identity. And this

is the reason why two of the most popular Miyazaki movies, “Princess Mononoke” (1997) and “Spirited Away” (2001), despite being filled with esoteric and encrypted Japanese references, were welcomed by the international community.

Spirited away was enjoyed by a wide audience mainly because of its mystical, magical elements that hid behind an already popular culture. It made the audience feel that they discovered a hidden side of Japanese folklore, with a touch of fantasy. What is also interesting is that the local community i.e., the Japanese audience, was also amazed at how their folklore is being revived with a touch of reverie. The movie included many traditional forgotten details that even the young Japanese audiences did not know of. In an NTV documentary covering the behind the scenes of the creation of “Spirited Away”, we can see how Hayao Miyazaki was explaining to the 13-year-old actress Hiiragi Rumi who was chosen to voice the movie protagonist, a scene where Chihiro crushes a little monster (curse) with her bare feet and then holds her index fingers together for Kamaji<sup>1</sup> to unlock while screaming “cut the line!” (see fig. 1). The director explained to the young actress that if you ask someone to cut the line (separate the index fingers), the impurity falls off – “If you touch poo, or dog poo, you go cut the line! Cut the line!”. What is more interesting is that the director was surprised at how this little tradition is known all over Japan, but the young generation is totally oblivious to it. (NTV documentary. Spirited away - Special edition DVD). This explains that Spirited Away was not only a visual promotion for the Japanese culture to the international audience, but also a reminder for the young local community, and the only thing that holds both audiences together is the mutual relatability of the story.



Fig.1. Kamaji cuts the line to release Chihiro from cure impurity

The story of Spirited Away is heavily inspired from Japanese and Greek mythology (M. Luken, 2018). Even though the movie is rooted in local Japanese symbolism, the international audience can still connect with the story. The simple reason behind this is that no matter how different the cultures are, one thing that unites the universal human thinking is “tales”. “*The folktale is not a "national" form of literary or popular expression. It is common to mankind as much in content as in form.*” (UNESCO, 2019).

According to Joel Dubois, all the folktales and myths share the same characteristics that enable them to travel from one place to another. This happens in one of the three forms, or a combination of the three: **the visible human world; a magical transformation of it; a real-world invisible to human senses.** (J. Dubois, 2008). We clearly see a combination of the three forms in Spirited away:

- Chihiro travels with her parents to their new home – they decide to take a short cut – they find an abandoned theme park. (The visible human world).

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<sup>1</sup> is an elderly man with six, long arms who operates the boiler room of the Bath house.

- Chihiro's parents turn into pigs – a spirit world shows up at night - she needs to eat food from that spiritual world to not disappear (a magical transformation of it).
- She works in a bathhouse for spirits, under a witch's command (A real world invisible to human senses).

We see similar combination for many other popular tales such as: Alice in Wonderland, The Wizard of Oz, Sindibad (Sinbad in DreamWorks' version) – Alaa Din (Aladdin in Disney's version). Therefore, we realize that the international community understands Spirited Away's story simply because they recall hearing or reading a similar structure in their culture. And what makes the local knowledge (the Japanese folklore symbols and traditions) digestible is that people process any kind of information, even something completely foreign to them, if it is told in the form of a story. (M. Weinschenk, 2011).

According to a study by Meng Wang, what makes Japanese animation integrate foreign culture is their naturalistic style (Meng Wang, 2014). Hayao Miyazaki has been fighting for international causes that are always present in his films (environmentalism – feminism – ill-effects of the overuse of machinery), however, the one theme that we repeatedly see is the relation between human beings and nature. This resulted in reuniting both local and international communities sharing the same cause, in what Lauren Movius calls as online communities and transnational activism. (L. Movius, 2010). The record-breaking Studio Ghibli film "Princess Mononoke" is the perfect example. A story about the conflict between humans and their greed for exploiting natural resources for industrial production, and Nature (represented by the forest and its spiritual creatures), which is deeply affected by the damages, wants to claim its lands back. The story period is set during the frontier era of Japan in Muromachi period (a period characterized by renewed contact with Chinese culture, a resurgence of Shinto<sup>2</sup>, the spread of Zen Buddhism, and a flourishing of the arts), and the characters are designed in a more diverse way to avoid the period dramas cliché. "In a period like this, the outlines of life and death were more distinct. People lived, laughed, worked, and died. Life was not ambiguous." (Hayao Miyazaki, 1995, Starting Point). Although "Princess Mononoke" spoke about many important principles such as the relation of humans and spirituality, the industrial revolution, coexistence, etc., it was never conceived as a film that would solve these problems or provide a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, as with all Hayao Miyazaki's endings, the most ideal conclusion is simply "coexistence".

### III. From The world to Japan (Howl's Moving Castle and Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea)

We have seen how Hayao Miyazaki has presented a local identity to the international audience and how a shared cause invited the global community to accept and connect with his movies. In this study, we will analyze two movies where a non-Japanese story/tale was presented in a way that Japanese people could still relate to. Our first example "Howl's Moving Castle" (2004) was a story inspired from a novel written by the English writer Diana Wynne Jones, under the same name and published in 1986. Originally, Hasuda Mamomuro was supposed to take the project, but he backed out, leaving it to Miyazaki to direct it as his own interpretation of the book. The director added a realistic touch and wavering from the original story, introduced a strong presence of war in the screenplay (a theme constantly used in Miyazaki movies). In an interview with Newsweek Magazine, Miyazaki had said, "Actually, your country had just started the war against Iraq, and I had a great deal of rage about that. So, I felt some hesitation about the award (Academy Award for Spirited Away). In fact, I had just started to make Howl's Moving Castle, so the film is profoundly affected by the war in Iraq." (Newsweek, 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> Shinto: an animist and shamanist faith also called «the way of living», is the dominant religion in Japan and consists of worshipping the forces of nature and respecting divinities such as "the Kami".

However, the two main themes the movie was based on were “Humanity” and most importantly, “Identity”. Like the book, the main protagonist Sophie, got transformed into an old lady, and later, was able to break the curse. However, in the movie, Miyazaki had introduced a more complex twist to her enchantment. Sophie would only appear as an old woman when she was overcome by low self-esteem, fear, and sadness. Conversely, when she was courageous, fearless, or immersed in something that she loves (making hats, helping others, cleaning, sleeping), her natural youth reappears (figure.2).



Fig.2 Sophie confronts Madam Suliman and stands up for Howl not participating in the war

Hayao Miyazaki argued that the reason why the European community accepted Japanese movies is the European influence on Japanese society after the war. That it is only logical for the occidental audience to feel connected in the Japanese arts, films, political thinking, and literature. (Hayao Miyazaki, *Turning Point*, 2005). However, Miyazaki had insisted on putting down roots, and this little conflict of identity expression is what led him to find that global balance in his movies. Although the director stayed loyal to a certain way of the original book’s origins (character design, clothes, architecture), the Japanese touch in this movie is subtly evident. The change was done on a story level, for example, Sophie the protagonist, is portrayed in the novel as a witch who just has not realized it yet. However, in the movie, Hayao Miyazaki chose to let her stay a “normal” human being, showing that by going through hardships and overcoming them, accepting one’s fate and letting other people help, is in fact a very Japanese way of life called **Ikigai**. Yukari Mitsuhashi explains in an article for the BBC that one of the most famous researchers of Ikigai, Mieko Kamiya, said that ikigai is like “happiness” but with a delicate difference in its nuance. Ikigai is what allows you to look forward to the future even if you are miserable right now. (Yukari Mitsuhashi, 2017).

Howl on the other hand, has never been portrayed in the book, as a wizard that turns into a monster when he overuses his powers. Yet, Miyazaki added this feature to the movie character to show that doing things only to please everyone and letting oneself be used without standing for one’s own opinions, can make of you a monster, that ends up hurting everyone, especially the people you care for the most. A notion although foreign to the traditional Japanese ideology which is based on discipline and respect for hierarchy, it connects so deeply with the young Japanese generation that finds it hard to be bound by the old rules. *“Existential crisis, on the other hand, is typical of modern societies in which people do what they are told to do, or what others do, rather than what they want to do. They often try to fill the gap between what is expected of them and what they want for themselves, with economic power or physical pleasure, or by numbing their senses. This can lead to suicide.”* (H. Garcia and F. Miralles, 2016). This layer adds more depth not only to the character, but also to the relationship between Sophie and Howl, as each found answers in the other’s presence. Sophie was loved for who she was and not for what she looked like (referring to self-love as well as societal beauty standards pressure; Sophie’s sisters were more beautiful and popular with men), and Howl learnt to stand up for himself and to fight for justice (refusing to participate in war and trying to protect everyone).

Our second example is “Ponyo from the Cliff by the Sea” (2008), a movie about a little fish that wants to become a human and live with a little boy called Sosuke. This movie as described by Hayao Miyazaki, is *“a contemporary Japanese setting of Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Little*

*Mermaid*". (Hayao Miyazaki, Turning point, 2006). Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea was designed as a successor to 2D animation. He decided to turn his back to CGI completely, and invest only in hand drawn cel animation. The final movie was produced on nearly 170,000 frame sheets (considered the highest number of cels produced by the studio) and led to an astonishingly smooth and aesthetic animation universe. Ponyo added a touch of freshness to the style of Ghibli, and it happened because of a revelation Miyazaki had when he visited the Tate Britain Art Museum. He was captured by the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood paintings, especially "Ophelia" by John Everett Millais (1852). *"I thought my work was shoddy when compared to those artists. At that point, it became clear to me. Our animation style could not go on as before."* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2019).

The story setting is inspired from a real-life town called Tomonoura in Japan, and all the characters are designed as Japanese (besides Sosuke's mother who is called by a foreign name "Lisa", and the goddess of sea "Granmamare"<sup>3</sup>). The story holds the same intensity as the original tale, which in this movie, puts the balance of the world at risk. Since the narratives are happening in the modern era, the movie does not reflect much on the Japanese folklore, which makes it easier for the international community to conceive. However, the film does hold some subtle Japanese references, such as the beer brand that Lisa drinks being famous in that area, or the ramen bowl she makes for Ponyo and Sosuke in a cozy night atmosphere, that only Japanese people could relate to. When it comes to character design, Ponyo the magical creature, previously called Hilda by her father, is heavily inspired from a shield maiden under the same name in the Norse and Germanic mythology. In fact, Hilda (Brunhilda) was also a magical creature who fell in love with a human man, and in an 1897 illustration by the French artist Gaston Burcier, was depicted as a redhead. This may be why Ponyo as well as her father and mother (granmamre), all have red hair. The music composition was also heavily inspired from the Wagner's operas<sup>4</sup>, *"Ponyo is without a doubt, the most operatic of all of Studio Ghibli's works. It is, after all, partly inspired by Wagner's opera Die Walküre (The Valkyrie), and parts of Joe Hisaishi's score for the film reflects this."* (Screenmuse, 2014).

This movie was originally planned for a much younger audience, but it attracted people from all ages and backgrounds. The familiarity of the story made it easier to be conceived by the younger international community as well as the narratives and the well-created expressions (the joy of rescuing a little fish, his bond with Ponyo, the determination to fulfil his promise etc.) made Sosuke feel like any child from any other country.

#### **IV.CONCLUSION**

The contrast that Hayao Miyazaki lived through, the Japan after the war, its modernization, and subsequent opening to the outside world, made Hayao Miyazaki not only thrive to reinvigorate the Japanese identity and folklore, but also embrace modernization/international influence, and represent it through his movies. We feel that his number one purpose is not to promote his country, but to connect with people, and that is what makes him create a story understood by a global community without being bland or uncharacteristic. His touch of reverie and fantasy is what makes his simple storylines alluring and intriguing, *"The key to Miyazaki's brand of fantasy lies in bringing the magical, the spiritual, and the fantastical, into very real and detailed worlds."* (C. Odell and M. Le Blanc, 2019). His desire for telling universal stories through locally encrypted visual animation is the signature that made him a respected director, not only by his peers, but also by a global audience.

The animation industry is the perfect playground for cultural representation and imagination. Film makers are able to create worlds that relate to either one particular community or several.

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<sup>3</sup> Granmamare: coming from the Latin word "mare", it translates to Grandmother sea.

<sup>4</sup> Wagner's operas: Brunhilda is one of the characters in the four Wagner's Ring Cycle operas inspired from Norse and Germanic mythology.

This cultural representation is frequently inspired not only from a country's customs, but also from folktales and myths. These important factors have dominated this century's animation production, making it an essential element for the narrative discourse. Snow white and seven dwarfs (Disney's first feature-length animation movie in 1937), was considered a pioneer in the animation industry, and helped reshape the definition of animation as a medium. The fairy-tale, as a main source of inspiration, reflected Disney's long history with children's entertainment. After the immense success of the movie, they intended to reimagine these tales through their films, as well as use them both for entertainment and ideology (A. Meyer, 2016). The company's library was said to contain an incredible number of children's stories, joke books and files of humorous publications. This huge source of inspiration is what made the "story department" a valuable pillar of the production process. "The story department, of course, consists not only of men of words, but of men who can translate words into picture action—artists who can tell stories as well as storytellers who can draw" (E. Smoodin, 1994).

Therefore, for our next study, we are planning to understand furthermore the nature of animation and its relation to culture. Our scope of analysis will expand to many countries from the Americas as well as Europe and Asia, in order to properly understand how the cultural representation, through folktales and myths, is visually expressed and conceived by the audience, as well as the challenges of cultural authenticity vs cultural appropriation.

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