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Deconstructing Genre and Gender:
The Magic and Mystery of Miyazaki Movies

In today's postmodern and technology-driven world, discussions of media's influence on children are finally becoming somewhat more prevalent. In the west, cartoons and comics have typically been associated as mediums mainly for children's consumption. In countries like Japan however, comics and animation (manga and anime) are created for specific target audiences including younger children and teenagers, but also adults and families as well. While anime and manga have been steadily attracting American and international audiences since the early 1990s, the subculture remains comparatively small, overpowered by Hollywood films and its influence over Western television. Out of all the anime content produced by Japan, one director's work has bridged the culture gap and captivated audiences in comparably the same way as in Japan: Hayao Miyazaki, co-founder of the animation company, Studio Ghibli.

Undoubtedly part of the reason for Miyazaki's success abroad stems from his mastery and passion for animation itself; it is logical to assume that the combination of such remarkable talent and unique visual style would at least to some degree pique the interest of non-fans and non-film scholars in addition to those more invested in the craft and its criticism. The focus of this paper, however, will save an analysis of his physical animation techniques for another time, and instead attempt to unravel the magic and mystery of his storytelling techniques from another perspective: the interplay between genre, associated themes, and gender/characterization throughout his various works, in hopes of discerning some meaning behind his choices as it relates to audience consumption, the intertextual relationships between his films compared to traditional, more heteronormative narratives, and the potential, if any, to help catalyze a change in discourse about film/media and dominant (patriarchal) ideology.

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One of the most iconic and widely celebrated aspects of Miyazaki movies is the way in which they seamlessly blend fantasy and realism. While Miyazaki has been nicknamed the "Walt Disney of Japan," many scholars and devoted fans alike would argue that such a moniker does not do the animation auteur justice. The director has a "distinctive ability to engage with domestic adventures and full-blown epics, gentle visuals and graphic sumptuousness, with equal doses of sensitivity, daring, and generosity" (Cavallaro, 2006, p. 3). His approach to storytelling, and no doubt in part a reason for his success, is something that seems to stem almost from another world entirely, and yet is simultaneously very deeply grounded in sociopolitical and environmental issues as many of his films suggest. The recurring themes Miyazaki explores often have universal appeal, yet the style in which he conveys them maintains a distinctly Japanese flavor. The principle of "*mono no aware,*" the poignant transience of things that allows for a deeper appreciation of their beauty, remains a cornerstone in Miyazaki's works, (p.8) as does the concept of "*ma,*" which relates to a consciousness of form and non-form, negative space, and the essence of place, as well as intervals of time measurement and silence.

Despite this, there are plenty of examples of his works where a Western influence is quite strong. Six of his nine principal features are set in Western-inspired locales, blending European aesthetics and at times more other-worldly visuals (p. 8). His extensive consumption of classical European and American writers during his time in university, where he obtained a degree in both politics and economics, has also been a source of great inspiration (p. 8). It is the visual realism in terms of character design and scenery of his works that associates him most with Disney; on the whole, his films lack the degree of exaggeration typically found in Japanese manga and anime. Still, much of his cinematographic technique borrows from that of manga and comic

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books in general – as with comic panels, each frame allows the spectator a choice in how he/she

consumes and interprets the story, never sacrificing peripheral details over would-be

predominant foreground elements (p. 10), such as when protagonist Sophie enters Howl's

bedroom in Miyazaki's adaptation of Diana Wynn Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle* (49:21). Thus, it

is his attitude towards his craft that sets his work apart from Disney.

Unlike classical Disney films which rely more heavily on conventional tropes and happy

endings, Studio Ghibli films contain psychologically complex characters who demonstrate more

fluidity in gendered behavior, despite being children or young adults. This is especially evident

in Miyazaki's treatment of his female protagonists, an aspect of his films that has received a

refreshing amount of attention from scholars. The majority of Miyazaki's movies center on

young female protagonists, categorizing them within in Japanese media culture as part of the

"*shoujo*" subgenre, content traditionally aimed at preadolescent and adolescent girls, though

adult males make up a significant portion of the audience. "*Shoujo*" anime is typified by youthful

child or teen heroines placed in a cutesy, dreamlike or magical storyworld. The themes explored

within a given series may sometimes go deeper than the surface-level aesthetics would otherwise

indicate (ex: *Sailor Moon, Cardcaptor Sakura, Puella Magi Madoka Magica*), though they often

do still focus on romantic storylines (ex: *Fruits Basket, Bokura ga Ita*).

According to Tamae Prindle, the shoujo character "nestle[s] in a shallow lacuna between

adulthood and childhood, power and powerlessness, awareness and innocence, as well as

masculinity and femininity" (Cavallaro, 2006, p. 11). However, Miyazaki's heroines do not quite

follow this model, described by some commentators as "youths wearing shoujo masks" (p. 11).

The director himself has emphatically declared his determination to avoid representing his

characters as "play toys for Lolita complex guys" or as "pets" (p. 11). On the other hand, David

Emerson posits that characters such as Chihiro demonstrate "innocence as a superpower," in that

it is their feminine qualities that allow them to emerge triumphant, as opposed to them physically

being female (2009, p. 133). It would seem that rather than outright adhering or rejecting the

genre's conventions, Miyazaki uses them to his advantage to create an entirely different kind of

"*shoujo*" story.

   While some of this aforementioned "cuteness" remains peppered throughout his work, it

is often displaced by the frequent inclusion of the "grotesque," both aesthetically and via

characterization. For example, the depiction of the forest spirits ("*kudama*") in *Princess*

Mononoke and "*totoros*" in *My Neighbor Totoro* as opposed to the more frightening, distorted

figures in *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* (Freiberg, 2006). The "wolf-girl" character

San in *Princess Mononoke* is wild and fearsome, while her enemy Lady Eboshi is a dominating

woman of authority; both women are called "beautiful" by other characters, demonstrating a

more complex definition of beauty and womanhood but rejecting "cuteness" altogether. The

other protagonist, Prince Ashitaka, although skilled with a bow possesses a much sweeter

disposition than either woman, but embodies the grotesque through his cursed right arm. In

Howl's Moving Castle, Sophie, a self-proclaimed plain young woman befriends the titular Howl,

who for much of the film is consumed by vanity even as a powerful wizard; both characters

depict the grotesque, with Howl transforming into a terrifying winged creature and Sophie cursed

into an old crone, caught up in the politics of magical warfare.

   Younger characters Kiki, Chihiro, Sheeta, Satsuki and Mei, of *Kiki's Delivery Service*,

Spirited Away, *Castle in the Sky*, and *My Neighbor Totoro,* respectively, are portrayed as more

stereotypically cute and feminine, but their narratives do not confine them to only those traits.

Miyazaki's heroines actively participate in and shape their narratives. They are often more

independent, bold, inquisitive, and resourceful. They defend causes, do jobs, form social

communities, and even govern micro-territories (Rifa-Valls, 2011). That is not to say that they

are entirely fearless, always particularly wise, or necessarily undignified either. They are simply

more three-dimensional, more human. They define and learn strength in different ways, and they

are not sexualized or purposefully made to be tamed, punished, or put down by their respective

narratives.

In short, Miyazaki's defiant interpretation of "*shoujo*" characters further distinguishes his

approach from Disney and other Japanese manga/anime series' standard characterizations of

females both as independent entities and where the potential for romance exists. On the idea of

romantic subplots, Miyazaki has said:

> I've become skeptical of the unwritten rule that just because a boy and girl appear in the
>
> same feature, a romance must ensue. Rather, I want to portray a slightly different
>
> relationship, one where the two mutually inspire each other to live – if I'm able to, then
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> perhaps I'll be closer to portraying a true expression of love. (Cavallaro, 2006, p. 64).

It appears that the director generally stays true to this proclamation. Lamarre comments that "it is

as if boys and girls have distinctive energies, interests, and actions, and these can work together,

at once autonomously and cooperatively – but only at a moment that precedes yet anticipates

sexual interaction" (p. 24). Sheeta and Pazu, the young protagonists from *Castle in the Sky* and

Kiki and Tombo from *Kiki's Delivery Service* all adhere to this principle. They play, laugh, hug,

and touch, yet the interaction remains innocent. Even in *Princess Mononoke*, where the would-be

couple are mature enough to engage in a physical relationship, there is a noticeable lack of erotic

implications, save a few jeering comments in the dialogue about one taking the other as a mate.

Almost directly in tandem with the above quote, Ashitaka implores San to "live" even as he

himself hovers between life and death after being shot (55:17).

This consistent depiction of not-quite romance in fact aligns itself quite nicely with the

positive elements of the *shoujo* genre, encapsulated in the latter half of the quote below:

> *Shoujo* as a genre has been decried and deplored for encouraging and exhibiting
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> regressive and nostalgic forms of feminine narcissism and infantilism; or conversely, it
>
> has been celebrated as a rebellion against established social values and found to be
>
> oppositional and utopian in its anti-heterosexuality, artistry, lyricism, humanism, and
>
> sensitivity (Freiberg, 2006).

Miyazaki's bending of genre and gender demonstrates, especially to younger girls, but even

more importantly, boys, that labels do not matter as much as they seem. In literature and even in

merchandising, it is not uncommon for girls to identify with male protagonists and engage with

and enjoy their stories or to play with boys' toys, though the latter is often traditionally

discourage. Very rarely does the opposite take place. In this way, Miyazaki's movies give

children (and their parents) permission to enjoy and identify with characters and circumstances

that do not fit as perfectly into the gender binary. What this then allows for is a more conscious

questioning of the carefully constructed media image of gender and genre (action for boys,

romance for girls vs. action as "cool" but romance as "lame"). By promoting critical thinking

and self-awareness at the same time as interesting and complex narratives meant for children,

Miyazaki creates a remarkable space where unapologetic enthusiasm for one's interests and

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passions regardless of gender "rules" becomes encouraged, not shamed. In essence, his work inspires people to love.

In nearly if not all of his works, from Ashitaka in *Princess Mononoke* to Zeniba in *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki demonstrates how love is as much a transformative power as it is an emotion, reminding viewers that to love another person is to change and be changed by them. His stories give hope and empower, reiterating time and time again that intrinsic values like empathy, devotion, trust, and selfless goodwill are not only possessions to be treasured, but powerful resources to help achieve one's goals, possibly even stronger than any spell or technological device, a philosophy the *shoujo* genre continually echoes. One of the best examples of the effect of his films shows through Miyazaki's employment of what Daniel Meyer has termed "white moments," or instances within a story "when the heart warms and expands" (Cavallaro, 2006, p. 84). Such moments recall the great Yasujiro Ozu's mastery of the "pillow shot," whose placement and length connote a lingering cutaway yet whose function and beauty manifest through the intense emotional purity left purposefully unexplained. What makes a "white moment" is not merely its inclusion in the story but the context surrounding its inclusion; much like how in the Japanese language, provided context allows entire sentences to be comprised of a single verb, the larger emotion and meaning behind it unspoken yet unmistakable. These moments do not serve to advance the plot in any way; they are simply meant to reflect the vibrancy of small joys and of life in general.

Where there is joy and light, however, there is also darkness. Just as Miyazaki interweaves the "cute" with the "grotesque" from a visual standpoint, so too does he with his thematic explorations. The director's philosophy on storytelling for children is one that does not

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underestimate a child's ability to grasp darker and more difficult concepts (Cavallaro, 2006, p.

121). Rustin and Rustin note that oftentimes the fantasy genre makes addressing painful or

traumatic experiences easier for children to digest by transforming naturalistic concepts like

death and discord into something less harsh (2012). Yet for all the fantasy elements in

Miyazaki's films, there is plenty of naturalism; enchanted objects and the ever-recurring motif of

flight are balanced with relatively stark depictions of violence (war, bombings, gunfire, gore,

dark magic, etc.), and cultural clashes and awakenings. In addition to alternate depictions of

"strong" females and presexual love, his films deal with notions of "glocal" identity and

responsibility, and feature morally ambiguous antagonists and sometimes no real antagonist at all,

rather than constructing cookie-cutter good vs. evil, "guy gets the girl" storylines to be consumed

without giving pause. To elaborate in his own words, Miyazaki has stated in regards to *Princess*

Mononoke that he "wanted to be honest with the young audience, to tell them of a society that is

not fundamentally blessed…but that even in a world filled with chaos, greed, and hatred,

beautiful and wonderful things still exist" (p. 121).

One interestingly ironic aspect of Disney films is that while many are set in foreign

countries, the characters reinforce the U.S.'s national identity by "performing Americanness" as

Napier terms it (p. 472) – for example, Mulan's characterization as opposed to her historical

counterpart. The characters in Miyazaki's films do not, however, perform "Japaneseness," but

represent a more complex identity as females and males as well as people in general, influenced

by a mix of Eastern and Western culture, and better reflecting the reality of the human

experience/condition despite Miyazaki's fondness for fantasy adventure tales. Rather than

reimagining more sanitized versions of pre-existing female characters, the heroines of

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Miyazaki's movies are more empowered and more universally relatable with unique stories and psychologies, who at the close of their journeys have learned to treasure and believe in themselves (Emerson, p. 145). Miyazaki's work proves that well-written female characters can in fact contribute to successful storytelling both in terms of audience/critical reception and box office sales.

However, some critics argue that Miyazaki's portrayal of female characters, however spirited and away from traditional stereotypes, cannot be interpreted as a feminist one. Napier claims that Miyazaki seems to "explicitly fashion his heroines as inspirational icons for his audience," (p. 474). In other words, while they may be more three-dimensional even in the two-dimensional world of anime, that sense of depth does not extend far enough beyond the requirements of the story – i.e. the characters are endowed with the traits that best suit the story being told from a purely narrative-based perspective, and not so much to reinforce a feminist message in particular. Perhaps this is simply not his goal. For some scholars however, such shortcomings remain inexcusable.

They seem to ask: considering the very prevalent themes of environmentalism, more liberal-minded depictions of emotional expression and human relationships, and emphasis on openness and appreciation for other cultures, why dance around some of the ideals of feminism and not simply write texts that also explicitly include it alongside the rest? According to Freiberg, Miyazaki's heroines very often lack a display of solidarity with the other female characters and do not appear to care about women's rights (2006). From a harsher perspective, closer readings of the texts reveal that although "on the surface [the female leads] differ from the traditional female image, in their heart of hearts they are still trapped in the frame of the patriarchy system,"

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where they step into and assume roles within an otherwise male-dominated society, but do not truly achieve liberation or significantly alter the discourse (Yau, p. 47). Critic Hiromi Murase rebuts this by pointing out the possibility that having females occupy conventionally male-coded roles serves as part of a strategy to subvert patriarchy-infused media culture and representations (Napier, p. 483).

Harkening back to scholars Comolli and Narboni's notion of "Category E" (reactionary conservative) films, an application of the term may indeed be appropriate in this case. Especially considering the target audience of many Studio Ghibli films, families with young children, Napier's theory of a "cinema of de-assurance" in regard to Miyazaki as a director and the validity, if any, of authorial intent seems to warrant further investigation.

> Miyazaki's subtle and complex worldview allows spectators to break the rules of Western culture, to go beyond the Hollywood happy endings or the need for defined good and evil, and embrace the world in all its ambiguity, heartbreak, and hope. …He does not submit the subject of childhood to the idealized view of the adult, nor does he project the evolutionary and holistic view of developmental psychology and child-centered pedagogies (Rifa-Valls, 2011).

Miyazaki explains that he prefers to work with female protagonists because it allows him to "avoid certain totalizing tendencies [in narrative progression/resolution]…surprise viewers, and open the [action-adventure] genre to new narrative possibilities" (Lamarre, 2002, p. 23). And while he has previously admitted in interviews a reliance on traditional views of gender to a point, he also seems to understand that by potentially reinforcing said expectations, he has an

opportunity to say something more, perhaps to ease viewers into a new mode of thinking rather than slapping them in the face with it and hoping it will be well-received.

For example, while occasional shots of the wind blowing up the girls' skirts of course have the potential to imply the very "*shoujo*"-esque combination of lingering innocence and budding eroticism, a separate and more subtle coding re-envisions such moments to reflect instead a metaphysical relationship with nature, providing a sense of emotional buoyancy within the character, and promoting the "weightlessness" factor of animation (p. 23, 30). Lamarre argues that Miyazaki's genre/gender play cannot be definitively labeled as either instrumental or critical, but more likely rests somewhere in between the two:

> On one hand, it can be read as an instrumental use of stereotypes about femininity as means to transform and revitalize received masculine narratives…On the other hand, it can be read as a critical use of feminine paradigms to challenge masculine-centered narratives (p. 23).

This technique combined with the blending of fantasy and naturalism culminate as intergenerational texts that blur the line between the Self and the Other, that push at people's comfort levels not with the intent to disorient, but through the heightened awareness that accompanies said discomfort make perfectly clear the messages he wishes to convey. He combines traditional and nonconforming traits into individual characters to on one level destabilize pre-conceived notions of gender roles and behavior, and on another attempt to redefine the way human interaction and cultural values are traditionally depicted in film (Napier, p. 473). In effect, what results are fantasy-inspired narratives that offer escapism in their stories but realism in their presentation of ethics, ideology, and complex human relationships.

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Perhaps in striving to perfect such a paradoxical combination and present it through the sometimes undervalued medium of animation, Miyazaki has discovered a means of communication that is seemingly, for the moment, irreplicable, but certainly for all time, irreplaceable. He is teaching anyone who sits down to watch his films, scholars, critics, parents, students, but most importantly, children, that there is more than one way of telling an engaging story, that in this ugly yet beautiful world there are all kinds of people with all kinds of ambitions, passions, and beliefs, that morality and gender exist on a spectrum, not in black-and-white, and that empathy and vulnerability are not to be squashed or squandered. It may be an imperfect message, but it remains an admirable one.

With the announcement of his retirement earlier this year, it seems the magic and the mystery of the man and his movies may be coming to a grand close. But the impact he has had on so many individuals, and arguably much of the current generation, is sure to remain strong for years to come. In their own enchantingly eccentric way, his films have helped demonstrate successful and dynamic storytelling that is less traditional and less heteronormative, even as it embraces select aspects of both. Some might say he has inspired audiences young and old and aspiring and seasoned filmmakers alike to embrace possibility and difference, and to take more risks in the way they tell their stories. Others may say he has simply reminded us how to "see with eyes unclouded by hate." And while there may be continued debate over his true intentions as an auteur, inarguably, the fantastic visions he has presented throughout his career have taught the world, and its children especially, to remember to unleash their imaginations and to dream, because "if you listen closely," though you might not always find forest sprites or warrior princesses, you will undoubtedly find yourself.

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