On Taking Fate Into Your Own Hands

A Tentative Study of Hayao Miyazaki's Lateness

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Abstract

Hayao Miyazaki's films have been a pillar of animation for over four decades, with a reputation that extends far beyond Japan's borders. Over those four decades, his work at Studio Ghibli has been recognized for its colorful aesthetics, fantastical twists on popular folklore, and orchestral soundtracks. The aim of this paper is to identify a potential break or trend in the late stage of Miyazaki's career, as he is now 85 years old, by analyzing his last feature film to date: *The Boy and the Heron*. The first point I raise in this discussion is the film's backdrop, and how, despite its initial, naturalistic appearance, *The Boy and the Heron* reuses the trope of a passage between two worlds. In this liminal relationship, we uncover ecological and social concerns that are common to Miyazaki's filmography. However, the film also introduces the notion of legacy and reflects quite pointedly the director's repeated refusal to part ways with filmmaking. At this point, I circle back around to questioning the term "lateness" itself, with the support of Theodor W. Adorno's theory on late works. Here I raise the blend of violent and ethereal imageries as an argument the film makes for accepting the world as it is without changing it, despite all the gripes one might have with it. I ultimately argue that the defining factor of Hayao Miyazaki's late phase is, in fact, his resistance to being pinned down as anything at all, and that the real point of interest lies in the discourse surrounding his career.

Keywords

Late works, Film Theory, Japanese Animation, Hayao Miyazaki

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"The future is clear: it's going to fall apart."

— Miyazaki in *The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness* (Sunada, Japan, 2013)

In 2005, Hayao Miyazaki expresses his wish to retire from filmmaking. He keeps making films. After the success of *The Wind Rises* (Miyazaki, Japan, 2013), he officially announces his retirement to the world. Three years later, he comes up with a new idea, and seven years after that, *The Boy and the Heron* (Miyazaki, Japan, 2023) comes out. As of 2026, he is 85 years old and no longer seems to have any interest in retiring at all.

Yet, by virtue of his age, Hayao Miyazaki is at the end of his career. One can stop pursuing art at any point in their lives, but a career can only last as long as what one's body is willing to give. The fact that the renowned Japanese director is in his late phase is undeniable. How this late phase manifests itself, however, is another matter entirely. Adorno states that "death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art and thus it has appeared in art only in a refracted mode, as allegory" (Adorno, 2002, p. 566), which suggests that careful examination of the work of art may be revealing of the end. A couple of elements of visual style and musical composition stand out in *The Boy and the Heron*, but they must not be isolated from the recurring trends and patterns across the director's career—like his choices of setting and his interest in depicting the unfolding process of things. Ultimately, the interplay of these elements reveals Miyazaki's resistance to making his lateness a subject of discourse, though this does not preclude the possibility of such analysis. Indeed, he now more than ever delves into the confounding nature of existence as a place where beauty and cruelty are in constant interaction, embracing both as two parts of a whole.

The basic outline of *The Boy and the Heron* is as follows: a young boy named Mahito flees the war after the loss of his mother and seeks refuge in the Japanese countryside with his father and his pregnant stepmother, who vanishes off the face of the earth without warning. A strange gray heron tempts Mahito into following him into the world of the dead, where he will supposedly find his stepmother. After running from voracious budgies and ensuring that she is safe and sound, he meets the creator of the world, who expresses his wish to make Mahito his successor. Mahito refuses and returns to his home, along with his stepmother and the gray heron.

Remarkably, and despite its fantastical elements, the film is set in wartime Japan, even referencing classical Japanese literature. Miyazaki has explored both fictional and real settings throughout his career, but only his two most recent works are specifically focused on World War II. *The Boy and the Heron* opens with the line: "Three years into the war, Mother died," spoken by Mahito off-screen (00:02:15–00:02:25), and depicts soldiers in uniform carrying the modern Japanese flag while Mahito's father brags about his brand-new warplane factory. Aviation has long been a topic of interest in Miyazaki's films, who never misses a chance to design some kind of flying device regardless of the setting. *Porco Rosso* (Miyazaki, Japan, 1992) and *The Wind Rises* are obvious examples, but so are *Castle in the Sky* (Miyazaki, Japan, 1986) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (Miyazaki, Japan, 2004)—two films that are notably set in fictional worlds.

Howl's Moving Castle is an interesting example of the director's approach to setting. The self-titled novel written by Diana Wynne Jones takes place in a magical kingdom threatened by a powerful witch, who one day turns a modest milliner into an old lady. Sophie, the milliner, seeks the help of Wizard Howl in hopes of overturning her curse, but finds out that the magical prodigy is in fact a doctoral candidate from Wales who opened a portal into another world to avoid his thesis supervisor.

Miyazaki's adaptation ignores the latter part entirely and never cares to reveal Howl's origins, focusing instead on developing a vaguely European-like country plagued by an unspecified war. The film climaxes into a series of massive explosions, airships crashing into a field of flowers and dwellings being blown to pieces while dark clouds of smoke loom overhead. Jones explains that "Miyazaki and I were both children in World War II and we seem to have gone opposite ways in our reactions to it. I tend to leave the actual war out […] whereas Miyazaki [represents] both the nastiness of a war and the exciting scenic effects of a big bombing raid" (2023, p. 316). This is true of most of his works, in which he does not shy away from presenting war as an inherent part of his characters' lives, a theme that would have persisted from the beginning of his career well into his late phase.

The Boy and the Heron witnesses a return to the structure that was introduced in *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, Japan, 2001) yet was abandoned in *Howl's Moving Castle*: the passage from one world to another. Miyazaki uses this opportunity to revisit the themes of duplication and impersonation, which were salient in *Spirited Away,* by scattering various patterns across the two instances of reality. When Mahito meets his stepmother, his first thought is that she looks exactly

like his mother (00:03:27–00:03:35). It is later revealed that they are sisters. When he is transported into the realm of the dead, he finds a collection of wooden dolls bearing a striking resemblance to the old ladies of the rural estate. One of these women mentions the stepmother's difficult pregnancy and compares Mahito's birth to the future baby's (00:33:10–00:33:30). Mahito is initially resistant to these patterns of doubling, refusing to view Natsuko as his new mother and attacking the gray heron for being a trickster spirit dressed up as a bird. Yet, ultimately, it is with these two people that he returns home, leaving the world of the dead behind as he comes to accept that, despite their deceptive nature, they pose no real threat to him.

In this aspect, Miyazaki departs from the earlier example of *Spirited Away* where the second world is not an alternate reality, but an unsettling, mirrored version of the first. Consumed by gluttony in *Spirited Away*, Chihiro's parents have been turned into pigs, and the resort town is now being run by spirits who consider Chihiro an outsider unless she takes on a new name. The film is filled with symbolism, which is the main tool for its critique of hyper consumerism and the "fundamental transformation of social values and interpersonal relationships" (Vorobei, 2024, p. 43). The world of *Spirited Away* is being viewed through the prism of consumerism, prodding at the parts of human existence that have become transactional under its influence. For instance, Chihiro's parents are turned into pigs after gorging themselves with the spirits' food because they believed that money had sufficient exchange value. Similarly, the dark spirit haunting the bathhouse manages to bribe a number of people using gold nuggets, only to devour them. Chihiro is the only character who resists the temptation and sees through master Yubaba's game.

Yet *Spirited Away* is not so far removed from *The Boy and the Heron*, in which Mahito similarly struggles with deception and illusion. Like Chihiro's masked spirit, the heron plays the part of the liar who attempts to convince the protagonist to stray from their path by corrupting their intentions. There are still elements of anti-consumerist critique, namely in how Mahito is perceived as a walking piece of meat by the giant birds populating the realm of the dead. One subtle variation worth noting, however, is the justification of the birds' actions as a necessary response to an environment that does not meet their needs. For example, when all the budgies fly through the portal at the end, they turn into regular sized parakeets as to emphasize their condition of displacement (01:56:26–01:57:00), whereas the masked spirit in *Spirited Away* is granted no logic for its actions. It simply devours.

This nuance calls attention to the notion of late capitalism as a process that "continues to perpetuate domination over human beings" (Adorno as cited in Lowrey, 2017, p. 4). In other words, it cultivates helplessness and distracts from alternate possibilities, in the same way that the birds were stuck in the world of the dead when better alternatives were waiting a door away. This perspective certainly diverges from older films directed by Hayao Miyazaki, which often read like cautionary tales. In fact, Miyazaki's concern with the growth of his young protagonists is really a phenomenon of the 21st century, before which his focus tended to be on the system as a whole (the environmentalism of *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki, Japan, 1997), for example). Mahito's growth into a mature individual, on the other hand, is central to the film's development, which brings us to the theme of succession.

Mahito eventually finds the creator of the world sitting at a small table, closely observing a tower of white stones (01:36:20–01:39:30). He explains that he is a distant ancestor of the boy, and that he would like for him to become his successor in maintaining the balance of the universe. "Whoever it is that succeeds me has to be someone from my bloodline," he says, "however whether or not this world becomes a thing of beauty or an abomination will be entirely in your hands" (01:39:10). This line is somewhat comical, considering that Miyazaki's son, Goro Miyazaki, was a candidate for leading Studio Ghibli yet never could gain his father's approval as a director.

Goro was first responsible for designing the architecture of the Ghibli Museum and went on to make two films for the studio (Grajdian, 2022, p. 113). His second film, *From Up On Poppy Hill* (Miyazaki, Japan, 2011), is labeled by Grajdian as "imagined nostalgia" (p. 122), as Goro was of the opinion that straight re-enactment was insufficient in historical fiction, and that it should instead "[reconstruct] the past as a repository of emotional energy and socio-cultural role-models, beyond economic-political compulsions, transcending the limits of time and space" (p. 116). In other words, to reinvent the medium into a creator of alternatives for the anxieties that riddle modern-day Japan via the inner journey of the protagonists. This leans towards the definition of late capitalism as a "[gesture] to the potential for revolution" (Lowrey, 2017, p. 8).

Hayao Miyazaki certainly appears less concerned with "emotional energy" (p.116) than his son, nor do his hybrid worlds convey any sense of "imagined nostalgia" (save, perhaps, for a nostalgia of childhood itself). Regardless of the motives, he clearly has no intention of choosing a successor of his own will, which may explain his reluctance to retire. To leave the studio to

another artist would mean accepting that his ideas might flourish in the shadow of his renown, shaped by differing perspectives and approaches. And that, perhaps, would be far more unacceptable than overextending his own career.

We thus find ourselves with an author whose lateness is undeniable and who is quite strict on the parameters of his work, yet we still lack the proper vocabulary to define them. Indeed, while several recurring themes and patterns emerge in *The Boy and the Heron*, others can be traced back to films released in the 2000s, when Miyazaki was only midway through his career. But if Miyazaki did truly start thinking about retiring two decades back, it may be necessary to readjust the terms of lateness itself. Does an artist enter their late phase when they decide that they have had their fill, or is it something to be reviewed once they have reached the very end of their career?

For Adorno, most late works are “bitter and spiny” and “lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art” (Adorno, 2002, p. 564). As far as aestheticism goes, not only is *The Boy and the Heron* full of imagery, but it does so with an amount of care that rivals Miyazaki’s previous works. Be it a fishing boat riding a giant wave in the late afternoon light or a million stars pouring out of a tear in the fabric of the universe. It patiently walks the viewer through stunning visuals until they map out a world of breathtaking sights. Miyazaki also puts particular emphasis on showing the process of things, such as Mahito crafting an arrow out of flight feather and rice paste or Kiriko expertly carving a fish open on the floor of her living room. Each little action is meticulously animated and brought to the forefront of our attention where it cannot get swept up in the frantic rhythm of the characters’ absurd circumstances. Certainly, Natsuko is still missing and there are human-eating pelicans looming outside, but for now, the Warawara must be fed, so everything else will have to wait.

This particular genre of Japanese animation tends to linger on such details, taking the time to show a character getting dressed or spreading ham on their toast. They aren’t going for the fly-on-the-wall aesthetic either. The focus is explicitly on the craft, often through close-ups of the hands performing the action and complex sound design. Food in particular has always occupied an important place in Miyazaki’s films, as though the need for nourishment itself was fundamental to the development of the story. However, food in *The Boy and the Heron* is painted in a slightly different light than it was before. We see this when Kiriko teaches Mahito how to slice a giant fish open and its guts spill out all over him after a good minute of struggle

(01:01:30–01:02:40). Rather than showing the meat sizzling in a pan, Miyazaki focuses on Mahito as he painstakingly carves the fish's belly open with a kitchen knife; the way his muscles strain under the effort. His blade hits a hard spot and blood suddenly springs out, covering half of his face and dripping from his chin. He persists, wipes it off, and goes back to work. It is, by all objective measures, quite a repulsive scene, because *The Boy of the Heron* is also violent at its core.

The film opens with the sirens of war and faceless bodies running through a sea of flames (00:00:00–00:02:10). It is impressive to watch in the way that Jones described: vibrant strokes of red and yellow licking up the screen and melting into one another, but it lacks the comforting presence of a wizard swooping down from the sky or the kind eyes of a metal giant. The memory returns to haunt Mahito several times throughout the film, blending his perception with reality as flames come surging up the stairway or as floodwater drains out of the floorboards of his bedroom. In this aspect, the film form itself is an illusion meant to deceive the viewer, if only just for a few seconds. It blurs the line between the real and the supernatural even more than it already is, asking whether we are to trust what we see any more than Mahito trusts what the heron is telling him.

It isn't rare for children to get injured in Miyazaki's films. What is uncommon is to watch a medium close-up of one bashing himself in the head with a rock without a second thought (00:21:40–00:22:00). It is one thing to witness Chihiro fully disappear into a shapeless pile of mud, and yet another to watch Mahito land face first into the bowels of a giant fish. Overall, the imagery of *The Boy and the Heron* is bloodier, more guttural and explicit than usual, just enough that it tips the otherwise sublime visuals slightly out of balance. And it does so with a sparse and light soundtrack, often only a few piano notes so clear that they, too, seem to have crossed dimensions. Of course, the movie experiences musical climaxes in its most intense moments, but they are still a far cry from the full-blown symphonies of *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle.* Stripped bare, fragmented, casting light on "the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself" (Adorno, 2002, p. 566), the soundtrack no longer cares to be grand. It does not create or induce feelings; it reflects them.

When Mahito stands at the center of the universe after passing through a great sunlit vault that looks like it was plucked right out of *Stalker* (Tarkovsky, Soviet Union, 1979), he is presented with the last thirteen building blocks said to be free of malice (01:36:20–01:39:30). He is offered

a chance to rebuild the world into something pure, a place untouched by corruption. Yet he refuses, preferring to embrace the world as it is, in all its horror and misery. In fact, he and Natsuko immediately get pooped on by budgies upon re-entering their reality. There is no flying away towards unknown wonders with a bunch of sky pirates or a charming wizard and his demon pet. Only a return to a world where bombs are currency.

Perhaps there is a bit of Miyazaki in Mahito's resistance to lean fully into either violence or purity; in his refusal to be one thing all the time. It is true that the form "shows more traces of history than of growth" (Adorno, 2002, p. 564), despite focusing on the growth of the protagonist, but it still does not define Miyazaki's lateness as a phenomenon. Perhaps his lateness is more akin to a condition, rather than to one quality of his works. It certainly shows in some places—the visceral visuals and relationship to world endings as a concept, for instance—but that does not change the fact that the previous four films leading up to *The Boy and the Heron* were supposed to be his last. A last work is undeniable in hindsight, a lot less so when the author is still around. Regardless, it is this resistance to let others decide the defining terms of his career and legacy that transpires most in Miyazaki's last film as of date and will keep shifting the parameters of this discourse as the years go on. In the words of Adorno: "The great artists were never those whose works embodied style in its least fractured, most perfect form but those who adopted style as a rigor to set against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth" (Horkheimer and Adorno as cited in Durham and Kellner, 2012, p. 58).

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