


# A Modular Genre? Problems in the Reception of the Post-Miyazaki ‘Ghibli Film’

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## Abstract

With the eternally looming spectre of Miyazaki Hayao’s retirement, the death of Takahata Isao and the failure to establish a viable new artistic figurehead to follow in their footsteps, Studio Ghibli has been at a crucial crossroads for some time. Over the past few decades, the acclaimed Japanese animation studio has adopted three main strategies to cope with these changes: apprenticeship to foster new talent, co-productions both domestically and abroad, and shutting down their production facilities. Each approach has affected Ghibli’s evolving brand identity – and the meaning of the ‘Ghibli film’ – causing confusion in the international critical reception of the resulting movies. Academic approaches too have shown difficulties dealing with recent shifts. While conceptualizing the ‘Ghibli film’ as the product of a studio brand or as the work of auteurs Miyazaki and Takahata has proven useful, such frameworks have become inadequate for accommodating these changes. This article therefore proposes a new approach for understanding recent ‘Ghibli films’, arguing that, rather than being treated as a brand or genre, they have increasingly been fashioned along modular lines.

## Keywords

anime and Japanese animation, brand identity, critical reception, genre studies, Miyazaki Hayao, production, Studio Ghibli

## Introduction

Over the past decade, Studio Ghibli has faced a crisis of identity. In 2014, producer and co-founder Suzuki Toshio was quoted saying that the company would be taking a ‘brief pause’ and director Miyazaki Hayao re-announced his retirement. Four years later, director Takahata Isao passed away.

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For a time, it appeared that the studio's final films would be *The Wind Rises* (2013), *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013) and *When Marnie Was There* (2014). While that has since proven not to be the case, these events did signal an evolution in Ghibli's brand identity.

Since its founding, Studio Ghibli has built and maintained a particular reputation both domestically and abroad. On this subject, Christopher Bolton (2018) and Thomas Lamarre (2009) discern a back and forth between popular and high art as the hallmark for the studio. These films are 'engineered for broad appeal' and are 'amenable to general mass audiences across the world' (Bolton, 2018: 235; Lamarre, 2009: 98). Out of the three co-founders, Miyazaki and his directorial output have been the most emphasized as emblematic of the studio, especially within western reception but also in the studio's own publicity efforts. In addition to Lamarre, Jonathan Clements (2013, 2016) and Ian Condry (2013) have also noted how Ghibli, as both a corporate and creative entity, has come to absorb and express Miyazaki's worldview. Numerous scholars have provided thematic and stylistic analyses of the director's oeuvre. Particular acknowledgment is due to Susan Napier (2019) and Helen McCarthy (1999), who both published monographs identifying key characteristics of the animator's work, including fantasy settings derived from real-world inspirations, humanistic and ecological themes, the depiction of flight as an expression of vivaciousness and wonder, and a young heroine who serves as a catalyst for change. These features in turn became typical and expected of the studio's non-Miyazaki output, in terms of their reception as well as in their production and promotion. Film critics have searched for Miyazaki-ness in every new film, while the studio itself has persistently attempted to create a brand-genre around select features identified with Miyazaki's work, one that is controllable and subservient to corporate policy, in order to provide continuity once its creative figurehead is no longer creating. Recent fly-on-the-wall documentaries made with the studio's cooperation – such as *The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness* (2013), *Never-Ending Man: Hayao Miyazaki* (2016) and *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki* (2019) – have spotlighted Miyazaki as representative of Ghibli's artistic as well as its corporate culture. Such nonfiction works reveal how much of the studio's performance of its own identity hinges on Miyazaki's public persona, presenting it as informing even the internal workings at the production house, such as in ways staff members are expected to operate and what standards they are asked to live up to.

This combination of repeated textual and stylistic factors with a consistent form of public performance as marketing (and vice versa) reveals that 'Ghibli' has become a modular concept, its components duplicated from film to film on the level of production and promotion. While its consistent use of a 'Great Man' rhetoric has helped Studio Ghibli establish a well-defined identity, it has also become something of a double-edged sword. Creative involvement from co-founders Miyazaki and/or Takahata was always the sine qua non for any Ghibli work, and their personas have consistently overshadowed the influence of key below-the-line personnel.<sup>1</sup> While the studio could conceivably survive the death of Takahata, whose films have been less successful, the recurring threat of a Miyazaki retirement has thrown it into an identity crisis. What does a post-Miyazaki Studio Ghibli look like? How can the studio stretch beyond the creative output of its founders? How has the public responded to different strategies? This article examines the critical reception of three high-profile films, each of which illustrates a new direction for the Ghibli brand: *Tales from Earthsea* (2006) is a product of the studio's apprenticeship system as well as an attempt to ordain a successor for both Ghibli and Miyazaki; *The Red Turtle* (2016) is an international co-production, challenging the supposed Japanese-ness of Ghibli; finally, *Mary and the Witch's Flower* (2017), while not a Studio Ghibli production, demonstrates how the designation 'Ghibli film' is expanding beyond the scope of one studio. Ghibli has an international reputation that varies from country to country. For simplicity, we are limiting our focus to the US critical reception of these three films, focusing on their reactions to these different strategies.<sup>2</sup>

### Three case studies: *Tales from Earthsea* (2006), *The Red Turtle* (2016) and *Mary and the Witch's Flower* (2017)

#### *First strategy: Apprenticeship and searching for an acceptable successor*

The rigid focus on Miyazaki and, to a lesser extent, Takahata as auteurs has resulted in a problem of succession within Studio Ghibli. As Lamarre (2009) has pointed out, by making Miyazaki's methods a central aspect of its brand identity, Ghibli has operated with a degree of conservatism that has proven difficult to shake, often taking precedence over innovation. This tendency is expressed most symbolically by its two figureheads' long-time reluctance to embrace digital animation. At a more fundamental level it also provided a hurdle for the studio's longevity. Ghibli adopted the mentor–apprentice system of Japanese artisanal tradition, but the studio neglected to think sufficiently about its own survival as a creative force. Miyazaki's hierarchical dictum of controlling every level of the production of his films left little room for his apprentices to develop their own intrinsic qualities within the studio's confines. As Lamarre (2009: 99) writes: 'the Ghibli emphasis is not on promoting young directors intent on dramatic innovation. The goal seems to be to reproduce the Ghibli-brand world, which demands artistry in the service of someone else's vision.' Even without the presence of Miyazaki and Takahata, this vision has endured as a parameter for those continuing to create new works. Thus, Ghibli experienced the drawbacks of its fiercely guarded brand. Its continued existence as an active animation studio came to hinge on a question that also occupied the minds of many observers and fans of Japanese animation: a de facto need to find 'the new Miyazaki'.

It should be noted that Ghibli has tried to groom and lure successors in the past. After Mochizuki Tomomi directed the made-for-television *Ocean Waves* (1993), Kondō Yoshifumi was the first person beside Miyazaki and Takahata to direct a Ghibli theatrical feature. Having worked alongside the two Ghibli founders on television productions since the early 1970s, Kondō joined the studio in 1987. He worked as a character designer, key animator and/or animation director on all Ghibli releases from *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) onward before making his directorial debut with *Whisper of the Heart* (1995). Kondō's career was cut short when he died of an aneurysm in 1998. Producer Suzuki Toshio (Suzuki and Yagihashi, 2018, cited in Loveridge, 2018), later revealed that Takahata's rigid demands were the most likely source for Kondō's deteriorating health, an issue that could hardly have had a positive effect on subsequent searches for a new creative figurehead. It would be seven years before the next Ghibli theatrical release not directed by Miyazaki or Takahata: *The Cat Returns* (2002), directed by Morita Hiroyuki. Like Mochizuki and Kondō before him, however, Morita did not direct another feature for the studio, although he continued to work there as a key animator and animation director. More illustrative of Ghibli's problem of succession is the case of Hosoda Mamoru, who had been hired to direct *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) in 2002 but, after having been instructed to make the film 'similar to how Miyazaki would have made it' (Frank, 2018), he left the project and the studio due to the lack of creative freedom. Two further attempts at promotion from within the studio's own ranks would prove somewhat more productive. Long-time employee Yonebayashi Hiromasa showed perhaps the greatest chameleon-like ability expected of him and would direct two features before leaving the studio. We look at his case in more detail below, since his post-Ghibli work is also revealing of the studio's recent conditions of existence. The only other new director to make more than a single feature at Ghibli is an equally telling exemplar of the studio's plight: Miyazaki Hayao's son Gorō, who debuted as a director in 2006 with *Tales from Earthsea*.

By the mid-2000s, Miyazaki Hayao's global reputation as a master animator had been firmly established. Ghibli's worldwide distribution deal with the Walt Disney Corporation had gone into effect in 1996, and the first Miyazaki film fully realized under the partnership, *Spirited Away*

(2001), won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature and Best Foreign Film prizes from the British and French Academies. His next film, *Howl's Moving Castle*, was also nominated for an Oscar and, around the same time, Miyazaki received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Venice International Film Festival. This wave of recognition by western film institutions only increased the conflation of Studio Ghibli's output with the name 'Miyazaki'. It also added a complication to the succession problem: the issue of name value as a major component of the studio's brand appeal. Jonathan Clements (2016) makes a salient point when he addresses the absence of job descriptions or production hierarchy in the closing credits of Miyazaki's *Ponyo* (2008), characterizing this as a performance intended to 'ensure that the only name anyone ever associates with the production is Miyazaki's own'. Such conscious attempts to establish the name 'Miyazaki' have been a notable part of the effort to create longevity for Ghibli as a creative force, guaranteeing that the studio remains both forever associated with Miyazaki as well as capable of producing new works without his involvement. Clements is not alone in arguing that the most conspicuous decision in this regard is the choice to hire the famed filmmaker's son, Miyazaki Gorō – a landscape architect with no prior animation experience – as a director of features starting with *Tales from Earthsea*. There seems little doubt that producer Suzuki, more than anyone responsible for masterminding the Ghibli brand, saw the publicity potential in this move to appoint a second generation of Miyazaki to fill the father's shoes. When Hayao expressed his disagreement, Suzuki played up the father-son rivalry for publicity purposes, as a volatile paradox of continuity and rupture, above all ensuring that the only name on people's lips would be 'Miyazaki'.

This proved indeed to be the case, at least with the US critical reception of *Tales from Earthsea*.<sup>3</sup> Across contemporaneous film reviews, Gorō is almost universally identified as Hayao's son. In doing so, critics praise the elder Miyazaki as a 'legendary animator' (Honeycutt, 2010), 'garlanded director' (Smith, 2010) and 'legendary filmmaker' (Orndorf, 2010). Direct comparisons tend to be uncomplimentary of Gorō, as critics elevate the father's films in order to criticize the son's. As Kirk Honeycutt (2010) of the *Hollywood Reporter* writes: 'no one should expect anything like the magisterial work of the elder Miyazaki.' Owen Gleiberman (2010) of *Entertainment Weekly* claims that 'a certain vitality is missing' in this 'okay imitation' of Hayao's work. Michael Atkinson (2010) of *The Village Voice* adds that 'the lack of the master's poetic control shows' and that Gorō 'certainly lacks his father's charm and humor'. Out of our sample, only Kyle Smith (2010) of the *New York Post* posits that 'the Miyazaki legacy is in good hands.' While the Miyazaki connection is emphasized, the future and legacy of Studio Ghibli are not primary concerns. As such, only a few US film critics explicitly identify *Tales from Earthsea* as a Ghibli production or situate the film within the studio's – as opposed to just Miyazaki's – corpus. Honeycutt (2010) writes: 'The layouts have the striking look one associates with Studio Ghibli productions but the character drawings are dull and inexpressive.' Stephen Holden (2010) of *The New York Times* describes the film as 'a production of the highly respected Japanese production house Studio Ghibli'. Brian Orndorf (2010) of *BrianOrndorf.com* draws an unflattering contrast, stating that the film is 'Perhaps a step down for the Studio Ghibli filmography in terms of elegance and overall abstract pleasures.' Again, the comparisons are made at the expense of *Tales from Earthsea* and Miyazaki Gorō. This mixed-to-negative critical reception for *Tales from Earthsea* further emphasizes the growing reputation of the elder Miyazaki as a master of Japanese animation within US critical circles as well as the inherent difficulty of finding an acceptable successor.

### *Second strategy: Co-production and complicating national identity*

A second way in which Studio Ghibli has attempted to remain a creative entity in the face of Miyazaki's long-expected retirement has been through participation in co-productions. We define

co-productions here as financial and creative involvement, i.e. Ghibli holds a stake in a project alongside other partners. This arrangement ought to be seen as quite distinct from the many cases of Ghibli's past activities as a meat-and-potatoes subcontractor, in which it fulfilled the most basic function of an independent animation studio by handling certain aspects of the production process on animated projects that originated elsewhere. These have ranged from handling in-between animation on Gainax's *Otaku no Video* (1991) to providing background art for Studio 4°C's *Tekkonkinkreet* (2006). Ghibli's financial participation in co-productions goes back at least as far as the live-action film *Transparent* (2001), directed by Motohiro Katsuyuki. The studio became an investment partner after the commercial success of Motohiro's police thriller *Bayside Shakedown* (1998) revived Miyazaki's flagging confidence in the future of Japanese cinema (Mes, 2002). Other notable examples include Ghibli's similar involvement in a number of films by fellow high-profile animator Oshii Mamoru, including *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004) and the live-action/CGI hybrid *Garm Wars* (2014).

While the studio's involvement as co-producer is often used as a sales point in the marketing for these films' Japanese releases, this aspect of the company's activities has gone largely unnoticed abroad and is rarely if ever mentioned in discussions of Studio Ghibli as a creative entity. Assuming that commentators are aware of them at all, they seem to provide too great a challenge or contrast to Ghibli's carefully nurtured (from within as well as without) brand image as an auteur-led anime studio. Not only has Miyazaki become synonymous with Studio Ghibli but also to a certain extent with Japanese animation in general. Ian Condry (2013: 152) claims that, to viewers across the world, 'Miyazaki fills a role akin to that of Akira Kurosawa, representing a national style. Studio Ghibli stands as a national icon, and its influence is likely to continue for years to come.' Indeed, just as the name 'Kurosawa' still often monolithically incarnates all of Japanese cinema to many distant observers, 'Miyazaki' has become conflated with all of Japanese animation.

Such a 'Great Man' narrative has characterized the reception of Japanese cinema in Western Europe and North America since the early 1950s, following *Rashomon*'s win at the Venice Film Festival in 1951. That auteurism has fallen out of favour among film scholars has not prevented the celebration of directors as auteurs continuing to be the norm in nearly all forms of institutionalized cinephilia, including film criticism. Even among some scholars of Japanese film, debates continue about which name deserves to be added to the Kurosawa/Ozu/Mizoguchi triumvirate as Japan's 'fourth master'. This standard has helped the adoption of a view that conflates Ghibli with Miyazaki, particularly since the studio's distribution deal with Disney and the plethora of institutional recognition for the director in the wake of *Spirited Away*.

Needless to say, this is an oversimplification that does little to foster an understanding of the actual and evolving circumstances of the creation of animated works in Japan in recent years, least of all those by the studio with which Miyazaki's name remains synonymous even in the wake of multiple declarations of retirement. In other words, when a work is identified as Ghibli's yet stylistically deviates from the brand, this causes confusion in its foreign reception. This effect is notably apparent in reactions to Ghibli's one widely acknowledged co-production, *The Red Turtle*, in which the studio participated alongside a small committee of French partners spearheaded by sales agent Wild Bunch.

As with *Tales from Earthsea*, common trends recur across US reviews for *The Red Turtle*.<sup>4</sup> Most notably, critics consistently frame Ghibli as the primary or even sole studio behind the film. Even when they do acknowledge that the film is a co-production – as AO Scott (2017) of *The New York Times*, Genevieve Koski (2017) of *Vox*, Roxana Hadadi (2017) of *Chesapeake Family* and Sheryllyn Connelly (2017) of *SF Weekly* all do – Wild Bunch goes unmentioned. Andrew Crump (2017) for *The Playlist* describes *The Red Turtle* as 'the latest addition to the Studio Ghibli stable', and Tricia Olszewski (2017) of *Washington City Paper* calls it 'a product of Studio Ghibli'. According to

Simon Abrams (2017) of *RogerEbert.com*, it was ‘produced by Japanese animation studio Studio Ghibli’ and Ann Hornaday (2017) of *The Washington Post* describes it as ‘the first non-Japanese feature to emerge from Studio Ghibli’. This ascription of nationality is in keeping with Ghibli’s reputation as a synecdoche for Japanese animation. There is then a tension between the supposed Japanese-ness of the primary studio and the supposed French-ness of the final product. Thus, Mark Jenkins (2017) of *NPR* asserts that ‘the Japanese influence is apparent in both the movie’s look and its story.’ Thus, Connelly (2017) words her feminist critique of the film in national terms:

Though not a canonical Ghibli picture, the fact that their last two features . . . centered on well-conceived female characters makes the gender politics here doubly disappointing. That *The Red Turtle* is ultimately a French rather than a Japanese movie explains much, yet excuses nothing.

Absent from this dynamic is the national identity of the film’s director, the Dutch-born animator Michaël Dudok de Wit. Both Miyazaki and Takahata were admirers of the Dudok de Wit’s animated short film *Father and Daughter* (2000), and Ghibli chose him to direct this project with Takahata functioning as Ghibli’s representative throughout the production. However, these reviews only mention Dudok de Wit in passing, usually stressing his relationship with Takahata rather than speculating about any authorial intent (Jenkins, 2017; Koski, 2017). US critics insist on projecting Japanese-ness onto this co-production, regardless of the presence of foreign partners, which suggests a desire for a continuation of the Ghibli brand. The strength of this desire is such that it can be seen even in cases where the studio is absent as a producer yet omnipresent in spirit.

### *Third strategy: Shutting down production and the non-Ghibli ‘Ghibli film’*

In evaluating Studio Ghibli’s long-term attempts to imagine a post-Miyazaki and post-Takahata future for itself, Jonathan Clements (2016) observes that the company concluded that its most viable option was perhaps to abandon animation production altogether. He notes that:

Suzuki spent ten years not just looking for someone to take the torch, but examining the torch itself, trying to work out what parts of it could be replicated by other means. He concluded that there was no torch but the legacy of Ghibli itself.

Without a clear heir apparent, the most likely form of continuity for Ghibli was to focus on the management of its existing intellectual properties. The Ghibli Art Museum in Tokyo’s Mitaka district was a significant step in this direction, providing the company with a dedicated site for self-commemoration. Construction of a larger theme park in Aichi prefecture has been underway for some time. But, in human terms, the implications of Suzuki’s conclusion are exemplified most decisively by the massive layoffs of Ghibli’s creative staff that took place in the wake of the 2013–2014 set of releases consisting of *The Wind Rises*, *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* and *When Marnie Was There*. Even during their production, the former two were already positioned as Miyazaki’s and Takahata’s final films, while *Marnie*’s director, Yonebayashi Hiromasa, had been informed by Suzuki of the imminent firings before his film’s completion (Ehrlich, 2015).

As noted earlier, Yonebayashi had been perhaps Ghibli’s most successful attempt at grooming an in-house heir to Miyazaki, one who could be trusted to work in a similar style on similar material as well as to keep a modest public profile, a director who could literally labour in Miyazaki’s shadow and be content to do so. The studio took steps to make sure that this situation endured. As Clements (2013: 219–220) notes, the gimmick of an end credit roll without indications of hierarchy or job descriptions, begun on *Ponyo*, was repeated on Yonebayashi’s first directorial effort at

Ghibli, *The Secret World of Arrietty* (2010), ‘ensuring not only that Miyazaki’s name was associated with it, but occluding the fact that he was not its director’.

The fateful decision of firing all creative staff ironically also affected Yonebayashi, the very person trained to deliver ‘artistry in the service of someone else’s vision’ (Lamarre, 2009: 99). However, there exists in Japan a long artisanal tradition in which the younger apprentices set off on their own after learning the master’s craft, while the master’s eldest son and heir must stay and provide continuity for the house and business – even when, as in the case of Studio Ghibli, the business model has undergone a fundamental shift. While Gorō stayed on as designated in-house director, Yonebayashi was left to fend for himself. He soon found a new and comfortable home, one expressly built to continue ‘someone else’s vision’ through the production of new feature-length animated works intended for theatrical release – a Ghibli in all but name. Studio Ponoc was founded in 2015 by former Ghibli producer Nishimura Yoshiaki, and it took on Yonebayashi alongside a number of other former Ghibli personnel. Their first feature, *Mary and the Witch’s Flower*, quite overtly replicates many of their former employer’s hallmarks and pays tribute to Ghibli founders Miyazaki, Takahata and Suzuki in the end credits. In other words, since the establishment of Studio Ponoc and the production and release of *Mary and the Witch’s Flower*, Studio Ghibli is no longer alone in producing ‘Ghibli films’.

US film critics picked up on this continuity, and they consistently positioned *Mary and the Witch’s Flower* in relation to Ghibli and Miyazaki.<sup>5</sup> Annlee Ellingson (2018) of *L.A. Biz* writes: ‘Studio Ghibli may have shuttered in 2014 . . . but the company’s influence continues through the talent fostered there’, and Bilge Ebiri (2018) of *The Village Voice* describes Ponoc as being ‘founded by veterans of Hayao Miyazaki’s celebrated Studio Ghibli in the wake of Miyazaki’s supposed retirement’. Terms like ‘veteran’ are often used, as seen in reviews by Tim Brayton (2018) for *Alternate Ending* and Daniel Barnes (2018) for *Sacramento News & Review*. This framing is tied with Ponoc being discussed as an ‘heir’ to Ghibli. Writes Moira Macdonald (2018) of *The Seattle Times*: ‘it follows Miyazaki’s creative path: a gentle, sweet story, told with painterly artistry.’ Ellingson (2018) describes the film as ‘an enchanting start to a new chapter of the iconic Japanese animation studio where its makers cut their teeth’. According to Emily Yoshida (2018) of *Vulture*, a comparison between the two is both inevitable and double-edged: ‘it’s a venture that couldn’t help but be viewed as the spiritual continuation of Ghibli at best, and in Ghibli’s shadow at worst.’ When US critics compare *Mary and the Witch’s Flower* with the rest of the Ghibli catalogue, the former is found wanting. David Ehrlich (2018) of *IndieWire* calls the film ‘a Miyazaki Mad-Lib’, Yoshida (2018) describes its visual elements as ‘remedial’ and Mike D’Angelo (2018) of *The AV Club* refers to the film as ‘Ghibli Lite’. More specifically, *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004), *Spirited Away* (2001) and Yonebayashi’s previous works for Ghibli are points of comparison, as seen in the reviews by Brayton (2018), Barnes (2018) and William Bibbiani (2018) of *IGN*. Across the board, Yonebayashi’s post-Ghibli work is considered lacking. Even with an Academy Award nomination to his name, the director’s reputation is trivialized in relation to his former mentor, Miyazaki.

### **Synthesis: Toward a modular reading of the ‘Ghibli film’**

The interpretation of Studio Ghibli as the combination of Miyazaki Hayao and Takahata Isao, with particular emphasis on the former due to his unparalleled commercial success, has favoured an auteurist reading of the studio’s brand identity that recurs in evaluations of post-Miyazaki works. As a result, little or no attempt has been made to consider the changing circumstances of animation production at Ghibli. The eternal search for ‘the new Miyazaki’ – and its inevitably unsatisfactory

outcome – has dominated and calcified the discussion. To break free of this situation, we need to find new ways to approach, define and understand ‘the Ghibli film’.

Such a new approach to the ‘Ghibli film’ should acknowledge that the post-Miyazaki Hayao and post-Studio Ghibli creation and promotion of such works is a current, ongoing process, within and (perhaps mostly) without Studio Ghibli. It should emphasize that this active process revolves around achieving a continuity in the style and method of animation production, which places these works in the chronological and institutional context of Miyazaki’s and Takahata’s careers, with selective emphasis on their years at Studio Ghibli and Toei Animation. It should also acknowledge an industrial mode of ‘engineering’ new works in which the director is less the towering creative force assumed (and expected) by the ‘Great Man’ narrative than an able facilitator of the above. It should recognize an ambivalent relation to genre, thanks to an understanding that public performance as marketing shapes the image of the ‘Ghibli film’. Finally, it should recognize the constant evocation of Studio Ghibli and Miyazaki Hayao.

Rayna Denison (2015) suggests that, in order to understand Ghibli’s brand identity, we must separate how this identity is regarded in Japan and outside it. In Japan, the brand is less likely to be wholly conflated with the works of Miyazaki since Ghibli has engaged in a diverse set of activities. They have participated in live-action and animated co-productions, released documentaries on animation, as well as handled the Japanese distribution of select international animated films. Abroad, Denison (2015) argues, and notably in the US market, the predominant focus on Miyazaki’s work has turned ‘the Ghibli film’ into a branded subgenre: a recognizable house style made up of identifiable internal and external generic characteristics, such as those styles that have long dominated US animation. The most notable examples are the Disney movie and Warner Brothers’ *Looney Tunes*. In the case of Studio Ghibli as a branded subgenre, its identifiable characteristics are precisely the stylistic and thematic preoccupations of Miyazaki’s work as described above, as well as their central presence in the studio’s promotional efforts. In the eyes of US observers, then, Miyazaki equals Ghibli and Ghibli equals Miyazaki. On one hand, the abrupt rise of Gorō demonstrates that management at Ghibli is aware of this conflation but, on the other hand, it also suggests that the ‘problem of succession’ is itself an indication of some internal confusion between Ghibli’s domestic and international brand identities.

The notion of brand identity as an elucidating concept reveals its limitations when we tackle the post-Miyazaki ‘Ghibli film’. Even for works made with Ghibli’s involvement, it proves too rigid a bracket, particularly for dealing with co-productions – a situation that, since the mass layoffs at the studio in 2014, has become the de facto norm for new work with the Ghibli name attached. This is true for collaborations with foreign parties, such as on *The Red Turtle*, as well as for Ghibli’s involvement in Oshii Mamoru’s works. As a participant in such projects, the studio can choose to lower or raise its profile depending on how well it considers the resulting work to fit the brand, as seen in the case of the Gorō-directed television series *Ronja the Robber’s Daughter* (2014–2015). However, this is largely a matter of performance: the computer-generated animation on *Ronja* was carried out at Polygon Pictures and given a toon-shaded outer shell reminiscent enough of the Miyazaki style for it to be passed off as a Ghibli production. Any co-production demands compromise and therefore exceeds a brand’s grasp to some extent. Brand identity proves even less workable as a clarifying concept when a third party consciously sets out to replicate its constitutive elements, as is the case with Studio Ponoc. Even though it tries everything it can to carry on Ghibli’s torch, Ponoc is not Ghibli but a separate entity, and any discussion of its philosophy and creation exceeds the notion of brand identity.

In her discussion, however, Denison (2015) does provide a point of entry toward a constructive means to deal with the post-Miyazaki era of ‘Ghibli film’ by way of her genre-based approach. As scholars such as Rick Altman (1999) and Ed Buscombe (1970) stress, genres are by nature instable,



which is the opposite of what a brand is supposed to be. A tension is therefore always inherent in the very notion of a branded genre, particularly in the case of what Denison calls the ‘Ghibli genre’. Faced with the seismic changes of Miyazaki’s retirement and Takahata’s passing, Ghibli sought to save the brand’s stability by increasingly centring its creative processes around the instable notion of genre. It is here that we find our inroad, since the inherently evolutionary nature of genre allows us to move beyond the rigid and guarded confines of the brand. The former makes for a much more workable framework than the latter. As our reception analysis above has shown, regarding Ghibli and/or Miyazaki as an immutable brand identity calcifies our ability to evaluate recent works on their own terms as well as to understand the institutional transformations that underlie them.

A genre, even a branded genre, cannot be trademarked or copyrighted; a branded genre is a sort of gentlemen’s agreement at best and one not always honoured. As Jonathan Clements (2013) has noted, Toei Animation consciously mimicked Disney with its early works, from its approach to character animation, to its decision to create full-colour features for theatrical release, to its adaptations of literary classics. However, those who guard the brand have a vested interest in denying the evolutionary nature of genre. They seek to minimize the internal tension by attempting to create a brand-genre that is controllable and subservient to corporate policy, i.e. one that is stable and essentially unchanging. We have noted this in the works produced at Ghibli that were directed by Miyazaki Gorō and Yonebayashi Hiromasa, as well as in Hosoda Mamoru’s brief stint at the helm of *Howl’s Moving Castle*. Their cases express the studio’s desire for the brand’s continuity by consciously and consistently recycling familiar tropes and methods from the elder Miyazaki’s works. In other words, in anticipation of the disappearance of the studio’s founders, the nature of Ghibli film creation became *modular* rather than generic.

Thomas Lamarre (2009: 96–98) notes that, even from its inception, Ghibli has attempted to minimize serializing its creations across multiple media, steadfastly refusing to incorporate the media mix into its business model. This alone makes it atypical among Japanese animation studios, to which product licensing is often crucial to survival. However, Ghibli has not wholly rejected serialization; it has had to decide instead to what extent it would engage in it or, in Lamarre’s words, what pattern of serialization it was willing to follow. Its sizable merchandising activities derived from its intellectual property, from plush toys to art books, as well as its museum and its new theme park are all evidence of the company’s considered – rather than dismissive – approach to serialization.<sup>6</sup> Still, it seems unlikely that the studio will ever produce, say, a *Totoro* animated series, regardless of how lucrative such a prospect would likely be. Operating within this self-imposed limit on the commercial exploitation of its properties has contributed to the viability of a modular approach to the production of new animated works, recycling not characters or story worlds but instead styles, themes and methods to ensure the company’s survival and continuity.

This patterned consistency between what could be termed the pre- and post-Miyazaki eras exists at multiple levels of the films, from their diegesis to the processes of their creation. Firstly, obvious similarities reoccur in the design of backgrounds and characters, and are emphasized in marketing. By their titles alone, *Mary and the Witch’s Flower* and Ghibli’s *Earwig and the Witch* (2020) refer to the witch motif from several past Miyazaki films. The former’s main promotional image instantly evokes *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (the broom and the black cat), *Castle in the Sky* (the cloud-piercing academy building) and *Porco Rosso* (the ‘islands’ dotted around the background landscape). Its protagonist Mary shares Ponyo’s tousled mop of ginger hair, which is furthermore bound with black ribbons, inverting Kiki’s colour scheme. The design of Arrietty’s room echoes Nausicaä’s secret laboratory in both its colour scheme – an abundance of rich greens, yellows and purples also found in interior designs for *Howl’s Moving Castle*, *When Marnie Was There* and *Mary and the Witch’s Flower* – and the preponderance of giant plants. The desert-based meeting of pupil and mentor in *Tales from Earthsea* quotes almost

verbatim a similar scene from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. Secondly, continuity is quickly discernible at the level of characterization, in the ubiquity of *shōjo* protagonists, the repeated premise of a sick character convalescing and the chaste romances between young heroes. Arrietty's apprehensive ventures through the big people's house – to her, an estranged world fraught with danger – parallel Nausicaä's more poised treks into the poisoned forest, as if she were a younger version of the same character. Thirdly, Yonebayashi's works all evoke *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Only Yesterday* and *Spirited Away* by having their protagonists travel from city to countryside, where the latter serves as the portal to a fantasy world. In terms of the films' creation, there is a continued preference for mostly western children's literature as source material – often novels by female authors, including Joan G Robinson, Diana Wynne Jones and Ursula K LeGuin. Meanwhile, approaches to production continue to consciously operate in the *manga eiga* tradition in which Miyazaki and Takahata were trained during the early years of their careers at Toei Animation: the artisanal creation of feature-length animated works made for theatrical release, marked by a desire to express 'realistic' movement through full animation, a preference for at least the appearance of hand-drawn artwork and an immersive form of storytelling without the self-conscious distancing effects common in much television anime. What we notice from the films directed by Gorō and Yonebayashi, then, is the recurring pattern of selected recognizable components of the Ghibli brand identity and/or Miyazaki Hayao's auteur persona. New works can be continually constructed from this basic assembly kit of narrative, stylistic and formal elements, and presented to the world as the continuation of a distinguished grade of high-quality Japanese animation. This can happen without actual participation from Ghibli itself but instead with those who were trained by the studio toward this very goal of modular repetition.<sup>7</sup> Ghibli's decision to limit the extent of serialization results in creating constant variations on an original that are not derivations of existing intellectual property, as in the media mix model, but rather new and diegetically unrelated works designed to evoke their ancestry.

When we consider these new works as modular rather than generic in nature, the tension between stability and instability that exists at their core becomes heightened. Genres are instable: they change and evolve, and they fit different categories in different contexts. The modular assembly kit, however, is fixed and stable, which is its appeal. For example, the ideology surrounding gender and sexuality remains fixed from Miyazaki's films to those of Gorō and Yonebayashi: the 'plucky' and masculinized young heroine, the hysteric or mean older woman and the recurrence of sickness and physical incapacitation. Representations of female agency and/or lack thereof is immutable in the 'Ghibli film' whereas in genre it is open to change. The selected components of Miyazaki Hayao's works are also privileged components, there for the former apprentice to faithfully repeat in a modular performance that omits consideration of their potential for artistic expression.

## Conclusion

Identifying 'Ghibli film' production as modular is not a value judgement. Quite the opposite, it is intended to help us break free of the repetitive cycle of criticism and analysis that enshrines past works at the expense of understanding present developments, as illustrated by the US critical receptions of *Tales from Earthsea*, *The Red Turtle* and *Mary and the Witch's Flower*. The idea is to find the right terms to describe and deal with a brand identity that has become self-sustaining, even beyond the confines of the brand. The creation of 'Ghibli films' today is no longer tied to Studio Ghibli or to the name Miyazaki.

This is a process that researchers should observe and map, just as scholars have mapped the process that led from Toei Animation via Top Craft to Studio Ghibli. The latter has led to greater

understanding of both the artistic and the industrial aspects of each of those successive stages, for example the continuum (or performance thereof) of a *manga eiga* ‘tradition’ rooted in the style and production practices of Toei Animation or the retroactive adoption of Miyazaki’s and Takahata’s earlier films into the Ghibli canon, including *The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979), *Gauche the Cellist* (1982) and *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). The same holds true for mapping the evolution of the ‘Ghibli film’.

A better understanding of ‘Ghibli film’ creation also poses a challenge to scholars and critics alike. How do we define, in more exact terms, what differentiates these new works from past productions without relying on vague and hyperbolic adjectives such as ‘magisterial’ or ‘poetic’ that render discussion of recent works inconsequential? Understanding the ‘Ghibli film’ as the product of a modular process takes us beyond the common and limited auteurist or brand-based approaches to the studio’s output, instead fostering a better understanding of how Japanese animation’s most globally renowned exponent actually functions today.

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### Notes

1. Rayna Denison (2021) discussed the importance of the harmony process by Takaya Noriko, key animation by Futaki Makiko and colour design by Yasuda Michiyo for establishing the Ghibli house style.
2. For acquiring reviews, we established a two-week window around the US nationwide releases of each film (13 August 2010 for *Tales from Earthsea*, 20 January 2017 for *The Red Turtle* and 19 January 2018 for *Mary and the Witch’s Flower*). This approach cut off reviews from some Los Angeles-based film critics for the latter two, which had premiered in that city earlier. Using the review aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes*, we gathered 17 reviews for *Tales from Earthsea* (of which 8 were still accessible online), 29 for *The Red Turtle* and 24 for *Mary and the Witch’s Flower*. Out of the accessible reviews, all 8 for *Tales from Earthsea* mention Miyazaki or Ghibli in some capacity; for *The Red Turtle*, 25, or 86 percent, do; for *Mary and the Witch’s Flower*, 22, or 92 percent, do. For our analysis, we performed close readings of all 8 reviews for *Tales from Earthsea*, 10 randomly selected reviews for *The Red Turtle* and 10 randomly selected reviews for *Mary and the Witch’s Flower*.
3. Referenced reviews include: Atkinson (2010), Gleiberman (2010), Holden (2010), Honeycutt (2010), Keogh (2010), Orndorf (2010), Smith (2010) and Uhlich (2010).
4. Referenced reviews include: Abrams (2017), Connelly (2017), Crump (2017), Hadadi (2017), Hornaday (2017), Jenkins (2017), Koski (2017), McGovern (2017), Olszewski (2017) and Scott (2017).
5. Referenced reviews include: Barnes (2018), Bibbiani (2018), Brayton (2018), D’Angelo (2018), Ebiri (2018), Ehrlich (2018), Ellingson (2018), Jaworski (2018), Macdonald (2018) and Yoshida (2018).
6. See also Dean Bowman (2019) on Ghibli’s involvement in the video game *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* (2013).
7. This is, of course, not an absolute rule. Just as not all former Disney employees have continued to consistently use that house style, not all former Ghibli staffers have gone on to become Miyazaki clones. Just as John Hubley and Tim Burton once worked at Disney, Anno Hideaki and Kōsaka Kitarō spent time working under Miyazaki.

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