**‘The World Ahead’ Cultural Frontline Episode – Studio Ghibli**

Goro Miyazaki, the spearhead of Studio Ghibli’s next generation of animated films, admitted that following in the footsteps of his father Hayao often led to comparisons. The legendary co-founder and visual director of Studio Ghibli, famous for *My Neighbour Totoro (1988), Kiki’s Delivery Service (1989) and Spirited Away* *(2001)* retired in 2014. Since then, Goro’s decision to change from hand-drawn animation to computer-generated graphics has been met with controversy and criticism.

Never having done CGI before, Goro Miyazaki’s first film *Earwig and the Witch (2020)*, required Studio Ghibli to start from scratch, he notes “creating a team to take on this project and also create a system where we could work within the studio to create a CGI film was probably the biggest challenge.” He wanted to create a new path, deciding, “It’s not enough just to carry on the legacy of what they [Studio Ghibli] have built because it would only be a copy and an inferior version.”

Based on the children’s book by Diana Wynne Jones, the story follows a young girl whose mother is a witch. She grows up as an orphan and is happy alone, but then is adopted by another witch. It boasts the strength of family and magic.

The Miyazaki’s have different styles. Music plays a pertinent role in Earwig and the Witch, and having grown up as a child in the 80s, Goro listened to a lot of UK rock, his favourites being *Pink Floyd, Led Zeplin* and *T-Rex*. He incorporated this into his film, something that no Studio Ghibli film had done before.

Hayao Miyazaki is no stranger to retirement, first declared in 1998, a year after the release of *Princess Mononoke*. Three years of silence after, he surprised fans with *Spirited Away*, which quickly became a global success and was the first non-English language film to win the Oscar for Best Animated Film in 2003.

Most recently, in November 2021, Hayao announced that he’s preparing to cast one last spell as the director of a new Studio Ghibli movie, *How Do You Live?* According to a statement from producer Toshio Suzuki, “Miyazaki is making the new film for his grandson. It’s his way of saying, ‘Grandpa is moving on […], but he’s leaving behind this film.”

*How Do You Live?* will feature Hayao’s signature hand-drawn animation style; however, Suzuki says it is more complex as they are drawing more frames. “Back when we were making [1988's] *‘My Neighbor Totoro’*, we only had eight animators […] we made it in eight months. [For] the current film that Hayao is working on, we have sixty animators, but we are only able to come up with one minute of animation a month. Actually, we've been working on this film for three years, so that means we have thirty-six minutes completed so far. We're hoping it will finish in the next three years."

Hayao’s disdain for computer-generated animation was previously revealed in a 2016 documentary “NHK Special: Hayao Miyazaki – The One Who Never Ends.” In a now-viral clip, after observing new artificial CGI animation intelligence tools created by researchers, he reacted by saying, “I am utterly disgusted. I would never wish to incorporate this technology into my work at all. I strongly feel that this is an insult to life itself.”

Despite once saying that computer animation is ‘shallow and fake’, Hayao gave his seal of approval after watching his son’s first film. Goro recounts that his father seemed to have enjoyed it, “He wouldn’t do it himself, but he’s supportive and thinks we accomplished something good that he’s proud of.” As a family shrouded with public speculation, Hayao’s support for his son strengthens the unstable image of Studio Ghibli’s new generation. In many Asian cultures, it’s considered shameful to show weakness in personal and public responsibilities. A proud man wouldn’t relinquish control without trust in his successor.

The Miyazaki’s are undoubtedly strong forces in the animation industry; having a powerful legacy to hand down to your children plays a pivotal role in Japanese culture. After Goro pursued the opposite of what Studio Ghibli stood for, evidently, letting go of his legacy is something Hayao struggled with, perhaps wary of Studio Ghibli retaining its place in the industry.

This is not the only influence that Japanese culture has on the Miyazaki’s. Part of the message of *Earwig and the Witch* is derived from a Japanese term known as *‘Mono no aware’*, defined by the impermanence of things and a gentle wistfulness of its passing. Goro says, “nothing is forever […] Whatever is happening, prospering, or bad, it will always change.” He feels that the relationship between humans and nature has been disconnected.

Mono no aware signifies the deep feeling or pathos of things. It is how something affects us immediately and involuntarily before we can put that feeling into words. It is linked to Japanese Buddhism’s teachings of willingly and gracefully letting go of attachments to transient things.

Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), a scholar of the Edo period, wrote that mono no aware is also a form of knowledge, “To know *mono no aware* is to discern the power and essence, not just of the moon and the cherry blossoms, but of every single thing existing in this world, and to be stirred by each of them”.

The word ‘aware’ (awar-ay) was first used in the Heian period of Japan (794-1185) as an exclamation of wonder. Hence, the sentiment was also translated as “the ‘ahhness’ of things.” Norinaga believed that “this sharing of feeling between the poet and reader – the way in which we can all be moved, […] by the sad beauty of falling petals – was the basis of human community itself.”

Despite Goro being the Miyazaki to publicly mention mono no aware, I experience these fleeting moments of beauty as I view Hayao Miyazaki’s films, but not *Earwig and the Witch*. *Spirited Away* *(2001)* and *Howl’s Moving Castle (2004)* were the first Studio Ghibli films I watched – I was blown away by the abstract and detailed hand-drawn animation, as well as the messages behind the stories. They are touching and hopeful tales, filled with family, trust and adventure.

At first, I didn’t know exactly what felt off about *Earwig and the Witch*. The animation style itself is successful, however, what I soon found missing was the emotive qualities. The CGI was visually flat. In a recent piece on the CBR website, sub-titled “Hayao Miyazaki is Wrong: Earwig and the Witch isn’t Pixar Quality” (perhaps a debate for another day), Anthony Gramuglia suggests that “The characters' faces and posture are too stiff to be effectively expressive. The faces don't transition smoothly between different emotions, but instead, they just oscillate between stock facial expressions. This makes it harder to connect to the potentially interesting characters.”

In *Earwig and the Witch*, Mandrake’s personality may be reflective of Goro’s feelings of comparative inadequacy towards his father – an author usually met with poor reviews who often isolates himself, but has good intentions at heart. Telling, isn’t it?

*(Word Count – 1168 words)*