Hayao Miyazaki: Exploring the early work of Japan’s greatest animator

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Hayao Miyazaki: Exploring the Early Work of Japan’s Greatest Animator
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Volume filling this gap in the literature in English. In this book Greenberg aims to offer ‘Miyazaki in context’ in its reflection of how Miyazaki grew within the emerging post-World War II Japanese animation industry and how his rise within the same industry is a very important part of his country becoming an animation superpower’ (pp.xii-xiii).

The book showcases the richness of styles, narratives and themes in Miyazaki’s works and how his creativity has evolved over the 50 years of his career. It starts by tracing Miyazaki’s early life – his childhood dream of becoming a manga artist, his encounter with Toei Animation’s first featured animated film Panda and the Magic Serpent (1958) – and his early years as an animator at Toei, the first large-scale animation studio in Japan, between 1963 and 1971. The first chapter examines many works that Miyazaki was involved in and the studio veterans he collaborated with, including Takakaha, Nōkichi Katase, Yasuo Mori, and Yasuo Ôsuka. Greenberg also discusses how Miyazaki was profoundly influenced by Paul Grimblad’s The Adventures of Mr. Wonderbird (1952) and Lev Atamanov’s The Snow Queen (1957) in terms of conceptual, visual, and narrative styles. The second chapter examines Miyazaki’s role in the animated adaptations of classic children’s literature in the 1970s, including Lupin: The Castle of the Alps (1979), 3,000 Leagues in Search of Mother (1976), and Anne of Green Gables (1979) as well as the original short films Panda and Panda (1972). Miyazaki’s first trip abroad was an important source of inspiration, and his great love for the European landscapes were integrated into these shows. Linking these early television series and short films to Miyazaki’s later films with Studio Ghibli, Greenberg argues that Miyazaki started practicing new forms of narratives, styles, and themes through these projects. The third chapter focuses on Miyazaki’s directorial debut feature film The Castle of Cagliostro (1979) as well as the preceding animated television series Lupin the Third (1971, 1972), which are based on the popular action manga by Monkey Punch. The fourth chapter offers a close study of Miyazaki’s largest manga project, Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind (1982–94), and the 1999 feature film adaptation. This chapter examines how the world of Nausicaa was built upon a wide range of the background tropes from Japanese and foreign literature and films. For example, Nausicaa’s character was inspired by the two literary classics The Lady who loved Insect from Helen Japan (794–1185) and Homer’s Odyssey, while the post-apocalyptic world drew from American and British science fiction novels and films, including Brian Aldiss’s Hothouse (1962), Frank Herbert’s Dune (1965), and Douglas Trumbull’s film Silent Running (1972). Greenberg suggests that Miyazaki’s tendency to create strong female protagonists in his films can be traced to Nausicaa. Green also finds a link between Nausicaa and the heroine of influential works such as Pando and the Magic Serpent and The Snow Queen as well as Heidi and Anne. The fifth and sixth chapters explore Miyazaki’s career as a feature-film director at Studio Ghibli: Castle in the Sky (1986), My Neighbor Totoro (1988), Kiki’s Delivery Service (1989), Porco Rosso (1992), and later works Princess Mononoke (1997), Spirited Away (2001), Howl’s Moving Castle (2004), Ponyo (2008) and The Wind Rises (2013). Greenberg finds many affinities in stylistic and thematic elements between Ghibli productions and the works of Miyazaki was involved in before Ghibli, including strong female characters, rich background designs, and complex narratives that were inspired by Japanese and foreign literature as well as Miyazaki’s own life. Miyazaki’s later works, most notably Princess Mononoke, however, depict far darker and pessimistic visions, and Greenberg suggests that his later works reflect the sociopolitical uncertainty of Japan in the 21st century.