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Connecting Fantasy Worlds and Nostalgia: Miyazaki Gorō's Animation Movies

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Abstract. In the particular context of post-Cold War Japanese animation, the name of Miyazaki Gorō 宮崎 吾朗 (born 1967) is mostly related to the name of his illustrious father, Miyazaki Hayao 宮崎 駿 (born 1942). Professionally speaking, Miyazaki Gorō is a landscaper (construction consultant in the planning and designing of parks and gardens) as well as an animation director of two animation movies and one TV animation series. This paper focuses on the two animation movies released by Studio Ghibli under Miyazaki Gorō's direction: *Tales from the Earthsea* (ゲド戦記 Gedo senki, 2006) and *From Up On Poppy Hill* (コクリコ坂から *Kokuriko-zaka kara*, 2011). Miyazaki Gorō's two animation movies are described and analyzed, both as ideological manifestos continuing and, from a certain point onward, transcending what might be called the "Ghibli paradigm" and as aesthetical masterworks combining the "Ghibli paradigm" with fresh visions of employing animation as a medium, exploring, absorbing and integrating influences from beyond geographical boundaries and striving to break the "Japanese" limitations of the artistic language utilized in his approach to animated expressive modes.

Keywords: Miyazaki Gorō, Japanese animation, animation movies, nostalgia, science-fiction, progressive animation.

1. Introduction: Japan's cultural consumption and entertainment industry

In the particular context of post-Cold War Japanese animation, the name of Miyazaki Gorō 宮崎五郎 (born 1967) is mostly related to the name of his illustrious father, Miyazaki Hayao 宮崎駿 (born 1942), who has turned throughout decades into the most representative figure of Japanese animation – and, more largely, of Japanese cultural consumption and its entertainment industry, with its corporative structure and very powerful establishment. Professionally speaking, Miyazaki Gorō is a landscaper (construction consultant in the planning and designing of parks and gardens) as well as an animation director of two animation movies and one TV animation series. In this paper, I shall focus primarily on the second aspect of his career, but, before delving into that, I shall refer to Miyazaki Gorō's achievements prior to trying his hand in the field of animation.[1] To this purpose, his involvement in the design

[1] The cel-shaded computer-animated TV animation series *Ronja, the Robber's Daughter* (山賊の娘ローニャ *Sanzoku no musume Rōnya*), consisting of 26 episodes and the result of co-production between Polygon Pictures and Studio Ghibli, which was aired between October 11, 2014 and March 28, 2015 on NHK BS Premium, is not part of this analysis. *Ronja, the Robber's Daughter* is based on the eponymous children's fantasy novel by the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren (1907–2002), first published in 1981, and tells the story of Ronja, the only child of a bandit chief, who grows up among a clan of robbers living in a castle in the woodlands of early-medieval Scandinavia [Clements & McCarthy 2017, p. 521]. When Ronja grows old enough she ventures into the forest, exploring and discovering its wonders and its dangers like the mystical creatures that dwell there, while learning to live in the forest through her own strength, with the occasional rescue by her parents. Ronja's life begins to change, however, when she encounters a boy of her own age named Birk, who turns out to be the son of the rival clan chief. In time, she discovers several dimensions of her pathway through life, from the special bond she shares with her father and his subordinates

and construction project of the Ghibli Museum in Mitaka (opened in 2001) and his contribution to planning and designing the Satsuki & Mei's House on the AICHI EXPO 2005's site in the city of Nagakute in Aichi prefecture, are briefly outlined. Both the Ghibli Museum and Satsuki & Mei's House were part of a marketing strategy striving to familiarize the visitors with the real universe of the animators' life, consisting of long and strenuous work hours throughout extended periods of time, this being particularly valid in case of the "Ghibli phenomenon".

Miyazaki Gorō was the driving force behind the architectural design of the Ghibli Museum (carrying the official name "Mitaka Forest Ghibli Museum" 三鷹の森ジブリ美術館 *Mitaka no mori Jiburi bijutsukan* [Miyazaki 2004, pp. 25–44]). Belonging to Studio Ghibli and located in the Inokashira Park in Tokyo, the Ghibli Museum was opened in October 2001, after several years of negotiations and preparations, with Miyazaki Gorō serving as its director from 2001 to 2005. Like the subsequent Satsuki & Mei's House, Ghibli Museum belongs to the same practical project meant to expand the Ghibli enterprise in the public perception. Ghibli Museum is composed of three main exhibition areas besides a homey cinema for exclusive short-movies by Studio Ghibli and the main hall called "The Principal". It combines features of a children's museum, a technology museum, and a fine arts museum, while being intrinsically dedicated to the art and technique of animation. Additional special features include a replica of the Catbus from *My Neighbour Totoro* (となりのトトロ *Tonari no Totoro*, 1988), a café, a bookstore, a rooftop garden, as well as a restaurant.

The Ghibli Museum recreates in smallest details the atmosphere and the setting of the Ghibli animation works, and it transfers into reality their magical worlds. While providing technical information on the three main production phases – pre-production, production, and post-production – of animation works, Ghibli Museum also aims at familiarizing the visitors with the real universe of the animators' life,

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through the sense of friendship she develops towards those outside her immediate clan to the increasing awareness of her own identity.

with its endless, exhausting work hours throughout extended periods of time. In opposition to the quite technical and distanced space of the Ghibli Museum, Satsuki & Mei's House is rather a poetical emergence into the nostalgic world of childhood [Grajdian 2008, p. 79].

Still, Satsuki & Mei's House appears as an extension of the Ghibli Museum with its Catbus displayed in one of the secondary rooms – kids being allowed to play with it – and with its giant robot built on the roof, which comes directly from the steampunk universe of Miyazaki Hayao's 1986 animation movie *Laputa: The Castle in The Sky* (天空の城ラピュータ *Tenkū no shiro Rapyūta*). The exuberant vegetation and the beautiful view from that roof remind of the plain and familiar miracles of nature and are, at the same time, a direct address to the clearly nostalgic re-construction of childhood memories as represented in Miyazaki Hayao's 1988 animated blockbuster *My Neighbor Totoro*: the identical, life-sized replica of Satsuki & Mei's House on the Aichi EXPO 2005's site.

Indeed, as part of this marketing strategy, in 2005, 17 years after the release of *My Neighbour Totoro* in 1988, on the site of the world exhibition in Aichi (March-September 2005), or Aichi EXPO 2005, an identical, life-sized replica of the family house from the animation movie *My Neighbor Totoro* was included among the international and corporate pavilions. More than previously estimated, this inclusion resulted in the creation of an absolute visitors' favorite, booked-off months in advance during the EXPO 2005. After the EXPO 2005, the entire EXPO site eventually became a huge sanctuary for the preservation of nature with Satsuki & Mei's House as a pilgrimage space in the center. Ironically, though, around the memorial EXPO 2005 park, housing projects and emerging shopping malls increasingly suffocated and gradually eliminated the natural habitat, in a blatant contrast with the motto of EXPO 2005, "Nature's Wisdom", and the EXPO's mission, which gathered national and corporate pavilions expressing the themes of environmental co-existence, renewable technology, the wonders of nature, and living in harmony with nature. Still, Satsuki & Mei's House, as the life-large replica of the family house from the animation movie *My Neighbor Totoro* was named, continued to attract millions of tourists and locals every year,

so holidays and weekends are always booked-off weeks in advance, while working days are running in average at up to 97 percent capacity.

Years later, Miyazaki Gorō, as the person most deeply involved in expanding the Totoro brand beyond its animation-connected relevance, made the following statements on the emotional impact of the project which had brought to life the EXPO 2005's Satsuki & Mei's House:

夕暮れ時、完成した「サツキとメイの家」の茶の間に座っていると、映画の中にいるようでもあり、今はなくなってしまった祖父母の家にいるようにも錯覚します。懐かしさと新鮮さが同居する不思議な気分で、もしかするとマックロクロスケ（真っ黒黒助）が暗がりからこちらを見ているのではないかと空想してみたりするのです. [Miyazaki 2012, p. 4]

"When I sit in the twilight-bliss in the living-room of the recently finished 'Satsuki & Mei's House', there is both the feeling of [directly] immersing into the movie, and the hallucination of being [again] in the house of my grand-parents, which has been demolished. Within the mysterious mood incorporating both nostalgia and freshness, I fantasize that, who knows?, maybe the 'pitch-black assistants' [*makkuro-kurosuke*] are observing me from the darkness."

What Miyazaki Gorō means is the fact that nature and the nature-surrounded family house were a space of escape by means of nostalgic reproduction as the main catalyst within the environment. Family and their lodging place appear as a micro-cosmos of encounters and initiation journeys, as experienced by Satsuki and Mei in the animation movie. It is a gate between universes, not only the human and the animal or the verdant world, but also between reality and dream, the possible and the probable, the necessity and the desire. The broken bucket and the archaic water-well become tools enabling the rediscovery of one's childhood, more often than not experienced as merely the product of a merchandized interaction between what Julia Kristeva called "the imaginary chaos and the symbolical order preparing the self for the confrontation with the real" [Kristeva 1974, pp. 44–57, 73–79].

The three main elements – nature, escapism, and nostalgia – emerge as main parameters in the process of reconstructing the past as a repository of emotional energy and socio-cultural role-models, beyond economic-political compulsions, transcending the limits of time and space.

In this train of thought, it becomes obvious that the "imaginary" and the dynamization of its interaction with the "symbolical" and the "real" play fundamental roles in the creative re-negotiation of identity as an individual choice within the framework of socio-cultural discourses in late-modern Japan (see [Kristeva 1974, p. 28–54; Kristeva 1989, p. 53]). Socio-cultural integration is consequently conceptualized as a historic-geographical construction by which the revitalization of the past via cultural artefacts praising nature, human bonding, and the afterworld creates historical cohesion and mutual acceptance among individuals living in late modernity.

As if the completion of these two projects might have guaranteed a specific level of maturity to allow him to direct his own animation movies, one year after the construction – and the huge success – of Satsuki & Mei's House, in 2006, Miyazaki Gorō released his first animation work, *Tales from the Earthsea* (ゲド戦記 *Gedo Senki*, literally, *Gedo's War Chronicles*), followed five years later by a highly contrastive animation movie *From Up On Poppy Hill* (コクリコ坂から *Kokuriko-zaka kara*), both produced by Studio Ghibli. In the following lines, Miyazaki Gorō's two animation movies are described and analyzed, both as ideological manifestos continuing and, from a certain point onward, transcending what might be called the "Ghibli paradigm", and as aesthetical masterworks combining the "Ghibli paradigm" with fresh visions of employing animation as a medium: they explore, absorb and integrate influences from beyond geographical boundaries and strive to break the "Japanese" limitations of the artistic language employed in Miyazaki Gorō's approach to animated expression modes.

2. *Tales From the Earthsea*: Re-Imagining Science-Fiction

Released in 2006, *Tales from the Earthsea* (ゲド戦記 *Gedo Senki*) is Miyazaki Gorō's debut animation work, more precisely defined as an animated fantasy movie. *Tales from the Earthsea* combines plot lines and characters as well as dramatic elements from the first four books of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series: *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970), *The Farthest Shore* (1972), and *Tehanu* (1990). Additionally, narrative structures and ideas from Miyazaki Hayao's manga (comics) publication *The Journey of Shuna*, released in 1983, are visible. Together, they contribute to creating an original artistic work, which moves away from the initial science-fiction literary works while attempting to outline its own universe [Clements 2018, p. 72; Lamarre 2018, p. 132].

Critical observers have repeatedly pointed out *Tales from the Earthsea*'s alleged lack of consistency and depth, which might result, on the one hand, from the characters' apparent struggle with their own construction, which seems, at first sight, unconvincing and unrealistic, and, on the other hand, from the dark, pessimistic atmosphere, which finds itself in strong contrast with the hopeful tones of social engagement and praise of life as the most valuable asset one possesses and could ever possess, which are often found in other animation works released by Studio Ghibli.

The plot could be summed up as follows. The movie starts with the display of the crew of a war galley which are up against a storm, when suddenly two dragons appear fighting above the clouds, with the result of the White Dragon being killed by the Black Dragon. As one of the crew members mentions in horror, this occurrence is believed to have been impossible for centuries. In another cut, news of the kingdom declining and silence over the whereabouts of Prince Arren trouble the King of Enlad, once famous for its tranquil prosperity. The wizard Root speaks of dragons and men once being "one", divided at some point by their particular desires – respectively, freedom and possessions –

which is the cause of the world's increasing loss of balance and gradual weakening. On his way to private quarters, the King is fatally stabbed in a dark corridor by his own son, Prince Arren, who steals his father's sword and flees the castle into a self-imposed exile, while his father perishes. Once in the desert, hungry and scared, Prince Arren is rescued from dire wolves by the incredibly powerful top-level archmage Sparrowhawk. Together they travel to Hort Town, where Prince Arren saves a young girl named Therru from slavers during his solitary exploration of the town, but is later captured by the same slave master, Hare, with his sword being discarded in the sea. Sparrowhawk rescues Prince Arren from the slave caravan and takes him to a farm run by Sparrowhawk's oldest and greatest female friend Tenar, who lives with Therru.

But Sparrowhawk's intervention against Hare's slave caravan angers Lord Cob, a very strong dark wizard and the ruler of Hort Town, who wants the archmage brought to the castle. Before resuming his search in Hort Town, Sparrowhawk tells Prince Arren that he seeks a way to restore the upset balance, and, once there, he buys Arren's sword from a merchant's stall and manages to detour Hare's efforts at capturing him whilst learning about Cob's castle secrets and nefarious mechanisms.

Subsequently, the plot develops into revealing the characters' true motives and desires on their ways to fulfilling destinies they become aware of in the process of confronting them. Arren's positive shadow and true self "Prince Lebannen" appears in contrast to Lord Cob and his archenemy, Sparrowhawk, both driven by equally powerful aspirations to control or, respectively, to release the negative tension in the world. Similarly, Therru is Tenar's younger and, possibly, more innocent shadow correspondence, as the two female characters in a storyline violently dominated by tormented male characters [McQuail 2012, p. 421; Fuller & Goffey 2012, p. 114].

Within the power balance between the good and the evil, the latter seems to hold the upper hand indiscriminately, therefore allowing for little hope as to the salvation of the world. It is from this prevalent

lack of hope, with its accompanying dark tones of nihilist struggles and their increasing absorption of positive forces into the arsenal of negativity that the overall tone of *Tales from the Earthsea* shows up as disturbingly in line with late-modern apocalyptic fears of loss and irreversible destruction.

Moreover, the movie itself starts off on an unusual premise: the Oedipal topic of patricide, in which the young and obviously confused Arren mortally stabs his own father. It is a highly shocking beginning in an ideological world which praises respect towards ancestors – particularly towards male ancestors – as fundamental within any possible hierarchy of values [Peterson 1999, p. 21; Bauman 1991, pp. 85–87].

The original patricide comes to haunt the young prince in various shapes of male encounters, and he must learn the bitter lessons of self-discovery resulting from fulfilling one's destiny. Interestingly, eventually, as Therru reveals herself as the Black Dragon and therefore immortal, her feminine entity appears as the key to Arren's redemption and self-creation, thus inversing the mythological topos of the male instance starting off on a complicated and dangerous journey of initiation to rescue the female protagonist [Turner 1968, pp. 26–32]. In the climactic moment of despair, as Lord Cob seems to have won the battle which brings the world under his despotic control, Therru turns into the messenger of salvation, and delivers the final liberating solution.

What distinguishes *Tales from the Earthsea* among other animation productions released by Studio Ghibli and by various Japanese studios is its atmosphere of hopelessness and darkness which is slowly, gradually transcended into a message of faith and hope. Miyazaki Gorō experiments with ideas of adult friendship and juvenile attraction while mixing in questions of existential meaningfulness and morbid thirst for power [Thomas 2012, p. 31; Takahata 2013, pp. 52–55].

Sparrowhawk is not the ideal archmage able to find solutions to all problems; Lord Cob is not the absolute evil dictator, spreading his poison on everything and everyone for unlimited control.

In fact, they are side-characters to Arren's quest for self and individual identity in a world which has lost its balance – very much like the contemporary world, with its unlimited resources of distractions, but with little to non-existent models of love and belonging. The movie received altogether generally bad critique; not even the gorgeous, New-Age-like soundtrack composed by Terashima Tamiya 寺嶋　民哉 (born 1958) could contribute to a more positive perception of its overall qualities.

3. *From Up on Poppy Hill*: The Power of Imagined Nostalgia

From Up On Poppy Hill (コクリコ坂から *Kokuriko-zaka kara*) was released in 2011 as Miyazaki Gorō's second animation movie. It is based on the 1980s serialized eponymous Japanese comics in the category of *shōjo* manga (namely, comics targeted at female teenagers) illustrated by Takahashi Chizuru 高橋　千鶴 (unknown birth-year) and written by Sayama Tetsurō 佐山　哲郎 (born 1948). The plot is set in 1964 in Yokohama: the 1960s are a highly symbolical period of time in postwar Japan, as they saw an escalating increase in student activism and campus revolts in Japan as well as in other parts of the world against wars and the prevalent patriarchal social order.

Miyazaki Gorō adheres to this ideology, a soft reminder of the main topos of his previous animation movie *Tales from the Earthsea*, by swiftly building the story-line of *From Up On Poppy Hill* on the premise of paternal absences [Suzuki 2018, p. 125; Suzuki 2008, p. 91]. In the movie, the main female character Matsuzaki Umi's 松崎　海 father was killed when his supply ship was sunk by mines in the Korean War (1950–1953); the male character Kazama Shun's 風間 俊 biological father died aboard a repatriation vessel after the end of the Second World War.

Instead of historically faithfully depicting the details of the mid-1960s city of Yokohama, Miyazaki Gorō insisted on the emotional

realization that simply re-enacting something in its time is not real enough, and additionally would not be necessarily beautiful, so that he decided to show the location as "shimmering and bustling with life" from the viewpoint of the characters involved in the story. In accordance with this directorial vision, the design and the architecture of the "Quartier Latin" is an amalgamation of clutter and dirt in the house's many rooms; it is supposed to serve as a remembrance of one's own college years. The clutter and filthiness naturally accompany such an age and are uniquely associated with the enthusiasm and vitality of those years: their dreams, their joys, their unlimited faith in life and the universe [Sugimoto 2013, p. 162; Ōtsuka 2004, p. 81]. It is precisely this pure-hearted, melodramatic atmosphere of *From Up On Poppy Hill* as a youth movie, full of period details which bring that era into a nostalgic but realistic foreground, that makes viewers wonder at their own disenchanted attitude towards existence and society and question the passage of time as well as their perspective of the world, self, and others. *From Up On Poppy Hill* functions somewhat like a time-machine, displaying dreams of a not-so-distant past; it is a sweet and honestly sentimental story, with the "Quartier Latin" appearing as an almost fantastic entity: the respect and politeness among characters, even among teenage protagonists, is a far cry from what goes on in schools and on college campuses in this day and age (particularly, since the 1990s).

The plot follows the daily life of Matsuzaki Umi, a sixteen-year-old student attending Isogo High School and living in "Coquelicot Manor", a boarding house overlooking the port of Yokohama. Her mother, Ryōko, is a medical professor studying abroad in the United States of America. Umi runs the house and looks after her younger siblings, Sora and Riku, and her grandmother, Hana. College student Hirokōji Sachiko and doctor-in-training Hokuto Miki also live there. Each morning, Umi raises a set of signal flags with the message "I pray for safe voyages". One day, a poem about the flags being raised is published in the school newspaper by Kazama Shun, a member of the journalism club, who had been witnessing the flags from sea as he was riding his father's tugboat to school.

At Isogo High School, Umi meets Shun when he participates in a daredevil stunt for the newspaper, leaving Umi with a negative first impression. Umi later accompanies Sora to obtain Shun's autograph at the "Quartier Latin", an old and dilapidated building housing Isogo High School's clubs for extracurricular activities. Umi learns that Shun publishes the school newspaper, along with Mizunuma Shirō, Isogo High School's student government president, and eventually she ends up helping on the newspaper. Later on, Shun convinces the other students to renovate the building after a debate on the future of the "Quartier Latin", which may be demolished, and at Umi's suggestion, the female student body cooperates with the other students. Subsequently, the plot unfolds as a typical high-school drama reminiscent of the 1990's nostalgia: students unite for a greater good despite individual differences. Against this background, personal stories and conflicts arise and develop, with a particularly bitter-sweet denouement: the power of friendship and of an honest, open attitude towards life's challenges.

From Up On Poppy Hill is an impactful allegory for two reasons: firstly, it embeds what might be labeled "imagined nostalgia" in a thick structure of quotidian happenings and emotional configurations. Umi and Shun are not plainly high-school students coming of age in an era of sociopolitical reconstruction. They are symbolical individuals reminding audiences of past mistakes and the grievances resulted from those mistakes, as well as of the necessity to learn from mistakes and move forward [Davis 1979, pp. 32–37; Luhmann 1996, pp. 24–33; Lamarre 2009, p. 15].

The Tokyo Olympics of 1964 were an important sign of cooperation and forgiveness. The hope and faith connected to the gesture of assigning the first Asian Olympics to Japan were part of a larger historical attitude to employ the past as a repository of lessons to be learnt from and to transcend the past into legacies for the future. From the disenchanted, hopeless Japan of the early 2010s, with its confusions and lack of orientation, the mid-1960s seemed even more of a deep fountain of meaningfulness and insight into its own historical trajectory.

Secondly, it re-designs school life as a preview of society. It has often been said that high-school backyards and college campuses are clear, unmistaken previews of the upcoming society, as they contain the representative citizens of tomorrow in the process of becoming those very citizens, able – or not able – to contribute to their respective social environments. While this preview function of educational institutions has long been inadvertently filtered through overtly optimistic glasses, last decades have been proving that particularly negative aspects of school and college life are those which would become relevant within the society a few years down the road [Fuller 2007, pp. 158–162; Giddens 2020, pp. 13–19; Grajdian 2019, p. 94]. In *From Up On Poppy Hill*, the idealization process is surpassed by a more realistic view, which focuses on the normality of the individuals, on their everyday existences, while pushing into the shadow their symbolical functions as representatives for a specific social stratum or group. Both Umi and Shun are regular high-schoolers, with inevitable emotions and confusions, and are doing their best to come to terms with the requirements coming from those around them.

Overcoming the symbolism commonly attached to characters in artistic works with the simultaneous embedding of "imagined nostalgia" within the conglomerate of the flow of history: these are the two major factors which turn *From Up On Poppy Hill* into a quiet masterpiece to display, both non-judgmentally and self-critically, an era of particular struggles, which would metamorphose later on into a site of ardent remembrance.

4. Conclusion: The Transcendence of Inherited Legacies

As briefly mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Miyazaki Gorō's presence in the landscape of Japanese animation comes accompanied by two main special ad-notations: for once, he is the elder son of the highly praised Miyazaki Hayao. Furthermore, he is not a professional

animator or director of animation movies, but a trained landscape planer and architect. During his involvement in various endeavors related to his father's activities, and possibly inspired by his mother's Ōta Akemi 大田　朱美 (born 1938) profession as an animator, Miyazaki Gorō gained insight into the industry of Japanese animation, as well as into its awes and perils [Fielding 2008, p. 51; Eagleton 2003, p. 76]. From this perspective, one might say that his animation movies so far reflect a rather skewed vision of what an artistic product might – or should – be. On the one hand, it serves as a powerful tool to address issues plaguing the world at a specific point in time and to raise awareness on those very facts, a gesture ideally followed by clear-cut actions to correct or to extrapolate that very specific situation. On the other hand, it impacts the awareness itself of given circumstances, without judgments of value or discrimination, so that the precious precedent of "creativity in freedom" is set [Condry 2013, p. 52; Wells 1998, pp. 51–78]. Either way, the creative act appears as the reflection of a so-called "responsible freedom", which besets the individual in his/her commitment to the truth at the bottom of any functional society – or any over-individual human community, for that matter, too.

Based on the two animation movies released so far, it is still premature to assess whether Miyazaki Gorō's legacy is one of epigonic splendor or one of visionary back-to-the-past and its eternal lessons. What can be evaluated at the moment is his ability to compress into images – and the fluid sounds accompanying, enhancing, transcending them – solid ideals of repentance and redemption, respectively, joy and faith [Nye 2004]. Be it in alternate universes based on science-fiction literary works or in the half-mythical era of the 1960s with their equally half-mythological legends of rebellion and social change, Miyazaki Gorō's animated works talk of a human space filled with hope in oneself and in others, with radical bolts of transgression and the subsequent awakening or punishment, with intransigent rules to be implemented and followed without any exception [Foucault 1969].

In addition, what raises Miyazaki Gorō's animation movies above the average product of the Japanese entertainment industry is their

adherence to a strict moral code – of hard work, persistence, and perseverance, compounded by a healthy dose of humility and idealism – which transcends the volatility and, more often than not, the resentment of fellow-artists and audiences.

That being said, in *Tales from the Earthsea*, Miyazaki Gorō constructs a complex world, somehow related to ours with its conflicts and power struggles, but simultaneously distant with its fantastic creatures and unchartered geographical landscapes. Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series and his father's manga work serve as narrative pretext to expressing some of his own questions about the meaning of life and the unknown elements of coming-of-age in an era seeming to offer everything minus the challenges which might have contributed to strengthening individual character and willpower in the past [Miegel 2005; Bauman 2001a; Castells 1997]. The initial patricide appears as an unusual plot-twist, delivering impactful undertones of loss and emotional devastation in an ideological context of mental self-sufficiency which hardly allows for confusion or hesitation.

Based on that same initial gesture of symbolical liberation, Arren must find his own way in a crumbling world and learn to cope with various male figures of domination, so that, eventually, he attains the key to salvation in Therru's magical (re-)transformation into the Black Dragon and restores the world to its necessary state of balance. Despite the movie's convoluted composition, it is one of the few artistic works in Japanese culture – one of the other major ones being Murakami Haruki's 2002 novel *Kafka on the Shore* (海辺のカフカ *Umibe no Kafuka*) – which addresses the issue of overcoming past models by intrinsically removing them from one's existence (hence the "symbolical killing") and of finding one's own identity by means of self-discovery and the subsequent self-creation [Bourdieu 1979; Bauman 2001b; Butler 1993]. Arren, in this reading, is more than a plain male protagonist, obviously disturbed and lacking a clear pathway in life; he becomes a powerful model for the ideal of individual self-stylization so prevalent in late modernity with its focus on individual responsibility as a fundamental premise to freedom and self-transcendence. In Arren, many viewers can find their own confusion

and sense of loss mirrored and transformed as part of a larger map of meaning, which moves forward from collective mindlessness towards individual awareness.

Miyazaki Gorō seeks answers in *Tales from the Earthsea*; he also strives to find the proper questions, so that, possibly, valid answers result from the questions themselves. He explores various levels of human significance as individual actors on the socio-political stage, able to resist corrupt powers of destruction and annihilation. His conclusions, as they appear in *Tales from the Earthsea*, are not necessarily encouraging or positive; however, he opens the gate for further explorations and questioning and highlights the necessity of courage and honesty in dealing with one's own hang-ups, fears, and pains [Clements 2018, p. 56]. As his next movie *From Up on Poppy Hill* shows, there are multiple answers to the same (old and new) questions, and they all depend both on the individual looking for them and on the circumstances in which the questions are asked. Often, it seems that this interplay of open-mindedness and half-way wit characterizes Miyazaki Gorō's approach to arts and the existential message expressed through them, while delivering powerful insights into the flexibility and vitality of humans, with their idiosyncrasies, joys, and lovely spikes of optimism.

In *From Up On Poppy Hill*, though, Miyazaki Gorō resists the almost compulsive tendency to idealize the past (as "imagined nostalgia") through the automate comparison with present times within the process of ripping main characters of their common symbolical configurations. In *Tales from the Earthsea*, the science-fiction setting allowed him to move beyond any historical constraints and to create a world of desolate scarcity in which humans – or human-like entities – pursued their battles for power and domination [Odell & Le Blanc 2009, pp. 104–106].

In *From Up On Poppy Hill*, the clearly defined historical background "forces" him into specific narrative structures, with coherent characters' inner architectures and transparent story-lines. Then, again, his creative freedom as director allows him to re-create the original manga-work, and thus to deliver new levels of significance above the core plot of a boy-meets-girl-story amidst Japan's glorious postwar recovery.

I would argue that precisely this "glorious postwar recovery" finds itself sliding at the center of Miyazaki Gorō's animation movie, as well as its questioning in light of the realities of the early 2010s and their heartbreaking challenges.

Along several decades, the 1960s had been turning from an era of chaos and revolts against the patriarchal system of chained freedoms and submissive warfare into the memory of the fight for change and for the individual's right to self-fulfillment in itself [Ōtsuka 2004, pp. 92–101, Takahata 2013, pp. 72–79]. However, while the disenchanted 2010s debuted on a rather grave note of despair in face of corruption, incompetence, and the repeatability of history, the relation to the 1960s had deepened, social actors trying increasingly harder to re-construct an idealized era in the face of apparently insurmountable adversities and self-induced delusions.

Miyazaki Gorō's mastery appears in *From Up On Poppy Hill* less in the form of re-inventing the past, and rather as the effort to orchestrate the past as a highly individualized endeavor, without the usual nostalgic pretext: neither Umi nor Shun are symbols of their social class or of their age group. They live according to the historical time-frame in which they are born, and face similar problems and complications as millions of other teenagers throughout times and spaces. Simultaneously, though, they are highly individualized teenagers, who look for solutions to their highly individualized crises against the background of their very specific historic-geographical context [Turner 1968, pp. 94–99].

In doing so, in carefully avoiding the generalization so often so typical for such artistic works, Miyazaki Gorō allows for a straightforward narrative attitude, in which past, present, and future flow into each other and contribute equally to the complementary consolidation of individual pathways in life as such. I would say that this choice of individualization of human experiences against the background of highly idealized historical eras is what confers the movie *From Up On Poppy Hill* its particular charm and its power as a didactic tool to teach lessons about history and people who lived in the past in a manner which encourages curiosity, empathy, and joy, instead of annihilating the emotional

connection to those events which have, after all, pushed historical development towards what we have come to identify as our present.

It has often been argued that much of Miyazaki Gorō's success and acknowledgment comes from being the son of his famous father. This is a very slippery slope. To be sure, the positive side of being born in a family with two wildly gifted and committed animators, of whom at least one has been experiencing tremendous success on the professional road, is a huge advantage when talking about the hereditary – and dynastic – tendencies of history. There is nothing new about it. From the perspective of the media-released reports and critical comments, Miyazaki Gorō comes indeed from a privileged background which delivers him huge benefits over those born in regular families or from disadvantaged backgrounds [Žižek 1989, p. 52]. They must fight their way forward, learn for long and arduous years the bitter lessons of technical practices and of pushing against hardships and heavy competition. Again, there is nothing new about this dynamics of the world, which has existed since times immemorial. However, with this same heritage – that is, being born in a "brand family" with its specific expectations and regulations – comes an immense pressure, which does not allow for compromises or failures: this is the less visible dimension of achievements and accomplishments brought about by the former generation. The children born under such circumstances often live with tremendous tension to be at least as competitive and competent as their illustrious parents, and the cases of ill-deliveries are much more frequent than one would like to acknowledge [Žižek 1989, p. 55]. In addition, the hostility and the (hidden or not so hidden) common inter-generational resentments add to the imbalance of power and creativity occurring in such family configurations.

This danger, however, is handled with elegance and subtlety by Miyazaki Gorō throughout his entire career: without ever turning into competition with his well-known father, he delves into the depths of the human psyche, its desires and its anxieties, its uncanny abilities to repress and to process, and allows them to come forward in haunting images of symbolical patricide as the dramatic premise of his first movie or in lofty narrative lines of a by-gone era with its soft quotidian intrigues

and common solutions. We cannot talk, in Miyazaki Gorō's case, of the larger-than-life symphonic structures from *Princess Mononoke* (もののけ姫 *Mononoke-hime*, 1997) or *Spirited Away* (千と千尋の神隠し *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, 2001): there is something ineffably intimate in the wild disgruntled forces of *Tales from the Earthsea* with its pre-historical living habits and flying dragons. Likewise, there is something intrinsically solemn, almost intimidatingly cerebral, in Umi's daily ritual of raising the flag – and in her prayers for a safe journey and a joyful return of sailors and travelers.

In this train of thought, Miyazaki Gorō does not seek for the simplicity of entertainment – like in his father's *My Neighbour Totoro* (となりのトトロ *Tonari no Totoro*, 1988) or *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (崖の上のポニョ *Gake no ue no Ponyo*, 2008) – or aesthetic-ideological experiments – like in *Howl's Moving Castle* (ハウルの動 城 *Hauru no ugoku shiro*, 2004) and *The Wind Rises* (風立ちぬ *Kaze tachinu*, 2013). Rather, he attempts to harvest and to observe those unique features which make each individual his or her own master, which confer him or her a specific type of ingenuity able to transcend the biological limitation, and thus to attain immortality. Arren and Therru live in times of unpredictability and terror, but they also possess their own spirit to help them move beyond those very times; by the same token, Umi and Shun are confronted with shadows of the past, but perspicacity and genuine love push them to quest for the truth, relentlessly.

Miyazaki Gorō's teenage characters struggle with finding a clear sense of self in a world which, more often than not, does not deliver answers to questions or solutions to problems. They must create their own templates for life, against the background of extremely different lifestyles and historical circumstances. What these life stories have in common, though, is the incessant curiosity to move forward as well as a specific vitality: alternatives do not emerge by themselves, but they are found within the inner worlds of the protagonists, who face the challenges with courage and integrity. The truth does, indeed, make them free, without breaking them apart in the process.

Throughout their journeys of initiation, Miyazaki Gorō's characters encounter alternative self-identities – a plurality of *alter ego* structures from parallel lives – and the possibility to alter their current course for more convenient, more accessible futures; they choose the truth, difficult to view and to address, but also enticing in its promise of unlimited freedom and individual expansion.

By learning the value of responsibility which fuels any authentic project of self-discovery and self-fulfillment, the protagonists envisioned by Miyazaki Gorō understand the value of vulnerability and of personal accountability, of acceptance and of permanent progression, while simultaneously grasping the importance of allowing the others to be themselves in their "radical otherness", as Emmanuel Lévinas famously pointed out decades ago, and to strive towards a community based on perennial hierarchies of values such as hard-work, persistence, humility, as well as compassion and the willingness to cooperate. In doing so, Miyazaki Gorō brings to life a world of "profound humanity", impactful and attainable, able to transcend ideological apprehensions.

Miyazaki Gorō fulfills a multi-layered task of expressing his own creativity and of bringing forth potential worlds of love and light without denying *a priori* the existence and the importance of darkness and pain as pre-conditions for the good to emerge. At the same time, he does not engage in a self-destructive competition with his father, not even as a passive-aggressive endeavor, and moves, confidently, smartly, genuinely, towards those levels of his possible legacy which consist of authenticity and wisdom.

In the process, he delivers powerful lessons in humility and self-acceptance, which eclipse the volatility of cultural consumption and immerse into the welcoming abysses of human knowledge and experience – both vertically, on the historical axis, and horizontally, on the geographical one.

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