

Miyazaki Hayao and Japanese Animation

By Momma Takashi

The Berlin International Film Festival “Golden Bear for Best Film” bestowed in February 2002 on Miyazaki Hayao’s feature-length animated film *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*) may well be one of the greatest milestones in the history of animated films. This was the first Grand Prix prize awarded to an animated film at any of the world’s three leading film festivals – the Venice, Cannes and Berlin Film Festivals, which indicates that animation has come into its own as a genre whose quality rivals live action narrative films. In short, animation has been recognized as a full-fledged art, and the Berlin Film Festival deserves praise for this groundbreaking decision.

In the United States, as throughout the rest of the world, animation has long been seen as a Disney creation and therefore a medium exclusively for children. It is Japanese animation – or *anime*, as it is known in Japan – that, having turned this practical wisdom on its head, is now an effectual presence in foreign markets and is poised to become a considerable threat to Disney.

At one time, anime was considered children’s entertainment in Japan as well. The throngs of university students crowding into theaters to see *Uchusenkan Yamato* (*Space Battleship Yamato*) at the end of the 1970s, however, created a sensational new trend, and the film’s extraordinary success brought an end to an age in which Japanese adults were embarrassed to be caught watching animated films.

Although the long history of animation in Japan encompasses the extensive collection of anime produced before World War II, the majority of these works were short films made for children. In 1945, at the end of World War II, Seo Mitsuyo released his fea-



Miyazaki Hayao at a press conference after he was awarded the Golden Bear

ture-length animated film *Momotaro – Umi no Shimpei* (*Momotaro – Divine Troops of the Ocean*). Sponsored by the Department of the Navy, the film features a young Momotaro, the hero of a well-known Japanese fairy tale, leading a troop of animal soldiers to liberate a southern island from invading demons. Taken in the context of the war during which it was created, Momotaro and his troops obviously symbolize the Japanese army, while the demons represent the British and Dutch armies. Even so, the energetic musical scenes featuring the animal characters reveal the unmistakable influence of animation coming from Disney at that time.

The present golden age of anime began at the end of the 1950s when Toei Corp., one of the five major movie companies in Japan, established Toei Doga (now Toei Animation Co.), a sub-

sidary studio specializing in anime. In 1958, the studio released the first Japanese theatrical feature-length animated film in color, *Hakujaden* (*The White Snake*), based on a Chinese folk tale, which enjoyed acclaim both at home and abroad. Animated films have from the beginning exhibited a high degree of artistry. The animators at Toei Doga were keenly aware of Disney, both as a model to emulate and as a rival to overtake.

Mushi Production Inc., a company spearheaded by Tezuka Osamu, the creator of vastly popular *manga* (comic strips), released the first television anime, *Tetsuwan Atom* (*Astro Boy*), in 1963. Worldwide distribution rights to each episode of the *Astro Boy* series were snatched up as quickly as they were created. Taking its cue from this success, Mushi Production created *Jungle Taitei* (*Jungle Emperor*), the first television anime in color, expressly with foreign distribution in mind. Although renowned for his unrivaled manga before becoming an animator, Tezuka had great respect for Disney, going so far as to later say that his motivation for drawing manga came from “a desire to be an animator like Walt Disney.” Much was made of claims that *The Lion King* was plagiarized from *Jungle Emperor*, but this controversy surfaced after Tezuka’s death. Tezuka himself, for whom Disney represented the ultimate goal, would be genuinely pleased that his own work had influenced the animation giant.

In any event, Japanese television anime series had penetrated foreign markets by the 1960s. The low-cost production system in place at that time generated even more interest from overseas entertainment industries able to purchase Japanese series cheaply, which

Photo : THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN



Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi (Spirited Away) was the first animated film which was awarded the Grand Prix prize

in turn increased the visibility of anime in these markets during the 1970s. Today, anime holds a 70-80% share of the European animation market.

Reducing the number of animated frames per program was the key to the Japanese animation industry's ability to create low-cost television anime series. The typical live action film is produced by running 24 consecutive frames of still shots per second, and Disney animators also employ this method, using 24 consecutive panels per second. The cost of material, personnel, production time and other expenses incurred, however, in creating a 30-minute animated program at 24 panels per second each week proved cost prohibitive. Therefore the number of panels in Japanese anime was successfully reduced to around 18 per second without lowering quality by using special techniques that ensure the fluidity of character movement.

Miyazaki Hayao's career in the animation industry began when he joined Toei Doga in the 1960s. Tezuka's success had ushered in a golden age of television anime in the 1970s, but the popularity of these series also served to gradually erode the audience base for animated films. Nonetheless, it was during this same period that anime broke out of the confines that limited its audience entirely to children and began to embrace a diverse range of genres and themes left untouched by Disney and other foreign animators. Moving beyond its previous narrow focus on science fiction and fairy tales, anime began to look eagerly to sports, historical drama, melodrama and even foreign literature.

As criticism of Japanese animation for being filled with violent scenes and overstimulating children emerged in the 1980s, the number of anime televised overseas fell dramatically. By the end of this decade, however, a new wave of productions came to the fore and anime reclaimed its previous stature. Creators in other countries were impressed with Otomo Katsuhiro's *AKIRA*, Oshii Mamoru's *Kokaku Kidotai (Ghost in the Shell)*, Miyazaki's *Tonari no Totoro (My Neighbor Totoro)* and *Majo*

no Takkyubin (Kiki's Delivery Service), among other works, and a new word, *Japanimation*, was coined.

As Miyazaki worked on a number of productions and built an extensive body of work that included *Mirai Shonen Konan (Future Boy Conan)* and many other television anime series, as well as such animated film as *Lupin III: Cagliostro no Shiro (The Castle of Cagliostro)*, Miyazaki gradually became a household name. After his feature film *Kaze no Tani no Nausicaä (Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind)* proved to be a major hit, Miyazaki founded Studio Ghibli in 1985. He has worked consistently in the realm of animated feature films ever since, creating a host of hit films that include *Tenku no Shiro Laputa (Laputa: The Castle in the Sky)*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Kiki's Delivery Service* and *Kurenai no Buta (Porco Rosso)*. *Mononoke Hime (Princess Mononoke)* in 1997 and *Spirited Away* proved unprecedented hits, breaking Japanese film industry box office records. Miyazaki animation had come to reign as the benchmark of Japanese animation.

The strong attraction inherent in Miyazaki's work lies in the movements of his characters. These characters emanate a brilliant vitality that eclipses even live action film characters. This allows the audience to forget at a certain point that they are in fact watching

pictures drawn on cels (sheets of clear plastic) – unfortunately anime characters do not win acting awards for their performances.

Miyazaki's work also exhibits original "camerawork," with his use of bird's eye views conspiring to make the viewer feel as if he or she is suspended above the ground. Ecological ideology, sentimentality over things lost and a critical view of science seem to be themes reflected throughout his body of work. While the majority of his protagonists are young girls, his audience base is not necessarily made up exclusively of children. His films' track records are unrivaled in the entertainment industry, in itself proof that he offers more than enough for adult audiences to appreciate. Such films as *Princess Mononoke* and others may in fact prove somewhat difficult for children to comprehend. The term anime director does not do Miyazaki Hayao justice; he deserves to be known as a director of films. **UJI**

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