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From Benshi to Ghibli: The Evolution of Japanese Animation and Hayao Miyazaki's Artistic Legacy

Siduo Chen

Emory University, Oxford, USA
steven041231@gmail.com

Abstract: From a niche subculture down to a globally acclaimed medium, the artistic and commercial success of anime gave rise to some of the most recognized studios like Studio Ghibli. This paper explores the evolution of Japanese animation, through the technological transformations in the industry down to the Studio's production strategies. The paper first discusses the origin of anime, tracing back to an early era of silent films, to the gradual emergence of major studios like Toei Animation and Mushi Production, and finally garnering worldwide attraction through digital platforms like Crunchyroll. One focus of this research lies on Studio Ghibli's unique approach to animation and thematic depth. Through analyzing its traditional cel animation style, its adaption to digital methods such as the implementation of 3D Computer Graphics (3DCG), as well as the recurring themes present in Miyazaki's films, this paper assesses how these elements influence audience reception and contribute to a global appeal. Lastly, the paper emphasizes the role of marketing strategies and decisions led by relevant industry figures like Toshio Suzuki to expanding Ghibli's name and influence. All in all, this research seeks to define the key elements to answer the question of "what makes Studio Ghibli successful", through gathering historical data and a multitude of commercial and artistic perspectives and voices.

Keywords: Studio Ghibli, Cel Animation, Globalization of Anime, Cultural Identity in Anime, Marketing Strategies

1. Introduction

Anime as a film medium has progressed largely over history. What was once an unquestioned subculture has now become among the mainstream, gathering a massive fandom internationally and enjoyed by millions of young and old alike. Among the many great studios that emerged, Studio Ghibli remains one of the most prominent and revered studios out there for animation. It would be naive to assume the rise of anime and Studio Ghibli were pure coincidences. In reality, there were many overlapping factors that had contributed to this widespread phenomenon of anime popularity. There must be something special that captivated the minds and hearts of so many. Through understanding anime history, investigating the production choices, major themes, and marketing strategies of Studio Ghibli, we can better grasp the qualities needed to build a successful anime.

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2. What are the origins of Japanese Anime & How did Japanese anime spread globally

Japanese animation, otherwise commonly known as anime, was in reality only coined in the mid twentieth century. In earlier periods, anime had taken on several other names including *senga* (line art), *kuga* (flip pictures), *manga-eiga* (cartoon films), *dōga* (moving pictures) and more [1]. The origins of early animation in Japan can be traced back to Imperial Japan, in which the *benshi* [1] tradition evolved. Japanese film culture was largely influenced by Western cultures back then, and many of the films were imported from Western countries. The *benshi* played a vital role in early Japanese cinematics by providing a live narration and commentary to silent films. Manytimes, the *benshi* would add in their artistic creativity to the film by dressing up as a character in the film, or to mimic the mannerisms of film characters. For these reasons, the performance *of* the *benshi* was often a marker of a good vs bad film, as the interpretation of the film can be entirely dependent on them.

In the 1910s, what is known as the Pure Film Movement [1] emerged among a group of young cinematographers, who wanted to challenge conventional ways of storytelling and to embrace the potential of cinema as a completely new medium. It sought to emphasize the intrinsic value of film, from "vision" to "movement." To activists of this movement, the *benshi,* in their minds, was a source of the problem, as it unnecessarily made films dependent on live performances. As the movement gained further momentum, it gradually led to the decline of the *benshi* culture and a focus towards visuals in conveying messages.

The mid 1900s gave rise to major film studios like Toei animation, established in 1950, and Mushi Production established in 1961 subsequently [1]. These studios gave rise to some of the most iconic early anime such as *Astro Boy* and *Kimba the White Lion*. These anime TV series became early hits and gained popularity both domestically and worldwide. Although Mushi Pro ultimately shut down due to financial limitations, it opened the doors for future animators in contributing to the success of anime worldwide. Eventually, Studio Ghibli was founded in 1985, during an era widely described as *coming of an information age* [2]. Through cyber technologies and the personalization of private computers and the internet, anime was able to amass a global fandom on USENET, BBS, newsgroups, IRC channels, fan websites, forums, blogs, and many social media sites today [2]. The rise of anime phenomena can largely be attributed to the then developing cyber era that actively promoted fan sharing and participation of anime, transforming it into a true universal culture. Products of this era such as Akira, "Neon-Genesis Evangelion", as well as "Pokemon" showered worldwide attention on anime [3]. These productions became classics and demonstrated the depth of anime storytelling. Futuristic elements of robots and technology vastly shifted Western perspective of Japanese culture [3]. The Pokemon franchise including its games and anime series proved extremely successful. Consider the following quote shared by Professor Kaichiro Morikawa from Meiji University, "The image of Japan in the West (in the 1980s and early 1990s) was composed of two extremes: that of the Orientalized, feudal Japan depicted in samurai films with ninjas and swordfights, and that of hypermodern Japan where economic animals are crammed into trains and pump Walkman and Toyota to the world [4]." People started to see anime as its own medium, rather than a subculture viewed by some esoteric sci-fi fans.

In 2001, Studio Ghibli released "Spirited Away," what would turn out to be the highest grossing Japanese film at $234 million [5], and even overtaking the *Titanic*, for 19 years. *Spirited Away* garnered international acclaim and further solidified its position in the hearts of audiences' worldwide. In the words of Dr. Shiro Yoshioka from Newcastle University, the film's commercial victory contributed to shaping animation as "a very significant, legitimate film genre in Japan [5]."

In 2006, the founding of Crunchyroll became one of the first platforms dedicated to the streaming of anime content. Crunchyroll acts as a pioneer in this regard, and it has become a leading distributor of anime. In 2021, Sony purchased Cruchyroll from AT&T for $1.2 billion and merged it with

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Funimation, which is another anime streaming platform it already owned, making it the largest platform for anime distribution [6]. Crunchyroll's creation is an important frame in anime history because it played a crucial role in the globalization of anime and making it more accessible to the public.

3. What characteristics and features about anime enables it to go beyond what traditional films is capable of

Anyone familiar with anime may also be familiar with *Otaku* [7] culture. Today, the term *Otaku* stereotypically refers to anyone extremely passionate, perhaps immersed, about a specific hobby or interests including anime, manga and video games. However, Otaku originally was a term that intrinsically carried stigma. *Otaku* was first coined in an essay titled, "A Study of *Otaku*" by Nakamori Akio. As Nakamori puts it, *Otakus* are "those creatures" that are "virtually invisible" and "without a single friend [7]." The rise of Otaku Culture can largely be traced back to school culture in Japan. It is observed the existence of an invisible class hierarchy in Japan based on one's "physical prowess." While in every culture there may be those who are introverted and naturally bad at sports, Japan's club structure systematically encourages them to pursue an interest beyond sports. Therefore, those who were bad at sports turned to cultural clubs, where one's interests will be magnified, as a refuge. These clubs, more specifically, are those committed to "the study of manga, SciFi, or computers, as well as art and literature." Even within the *Otaku* community, the use of the term became a self-affirmation to the values of the word, and as a form of self mockery. Such mannerisms and usage of the term may indicate a subconscious denial of being "normal" to those who identify as *otaku*. Perhaps for this reason, *otaku* culture has collectively developed a sense of group consciousness, bound together by the single term *Otaku.* This has enabled the cultural phenomenon of anime to accumulate massive fandom internationally with a universal language sharing a single label, something that any other film medium is incapable of.

Susan J. Napier, professor and author, recounts an encounter with this phenomenon of *Otaku* Culture in an anime convention Otakon [8] (Convention of Otaku Generation) she attended in Maryland. She notes on the "beings" observed in "long costumes dressed as Belldandy from Oh My Goddess" that "stood next to black garbed versions of No Face from *Spirited Away* [8]." If this is not enough to demonstrate *Otaku* culture, consider the following example. Content creator for the Vocal platform, Michelle Stone, describes the evolution of "FanSubs" [9] in the 90s. A "Subb" means to have translated subtitles while keeping the original Japanese voice over. Back then, manga and anime were imported into the United States along with a translation magazine that viewers had to read to understand the plot. During the rapid growth of internet and cyber growth, college and university students began creating their own subtitles through individual research or through knowing the language beforehand. This became known as "FanSub", and students would sell them online. Soon websites began to surface with options for fans to purchase and download the subbed content. This in return, impaired the American anime industry economically, and they formed a coalition called the Japanese Animation Industry Legal Enforcement Division [9], otherwise known as JAILED, to act against commercial bootlegging. These examples showcase the manifestations of *Otaku* Culture in our community. Arguably, anime distinguishes itself as a film medium through its very own Otaku culture and fandom support, more active and impactful than other film mediums.

Another distinguishing feature of anime is a famous quality known as *Mukokuseki* [2], which translates to statelessness. Professor Jingying Li at Brown University observes that anime is designed and marketed to be "culturally ambiguous," and often characters don't indicate any signs of ethnic bearings or nationalities. She states, "Because of its *mukokuseki*, anime rarely evokes cultural connections with its national origin, and most international viewers, though aware of the 'made-in-Japan' label, tend to consume anime completely out of the cultural context of Japan." The global

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spread of *mukokuseki* enables not just Japanese anime, but also manga and video games which were all designed to be "culturally odorless" to be enjoyed in everyone's own independent cultural context. Therefore, anime's lack of cultural identity acts as another factor that differentiates itself apart from other film mediums that are indefinitely bound to a cultural context.

4. How has technology impacted animation and the appreciation for art

Traditionally, Japanese animation has been completely hand drawn with ink and paint; this is also called cel animation [10]. Standard cel animation begins with a storyboard [11], which includes a series of drawings of key scenes in the plot, acting as a visual outline for the entire animation. With the establishment of key frames [11], in-between frames are then drawn on tracing paper. These are then transferred onto a cel, a transparent piece of celluloid, either by tracing on or with a photocopier. Once the outline is all set, the cel is colored in and stacked upon a separate background. A special animation camera is then used to film each frame stacked over, creating the vision of movement in cel animation. Cel animation is a classic technique employed in the early days of Japanese animation and has fostered the success of some of the biggest animation studios such as Studio Ghibli and Disney [11].

In a progressively developing cyber era, however, the use of technology became more mainstream in anime production. 3D Computer Graphics (3DCG) [11] is a method that evolved out of this transformation. Many Japanese anime studios and even Disney began to shift away from cel animation to 3D animation productions. Professor Takeyasu Ichikohji of Tohoku University summarizes five distinguishing features of traditional cel animation and 3DCG.

The feature is described as "human resources [11]." In essence, there is more leeway and diversity in roles for a 3DCG operator than the average animator. While most animators work in the anime industry, 3DCG operators extend beyond the anime industry into fields such as designing "computer graphics for a game" or producing "computer aided designs (CAD) for product development." In addition, animators are generally paid less than 3DCG operators. Although it is interesting to note that 3DCG operators in the anime industry are still paid less than their counterparts. Professor Ichikohji also suggests a difference in "visual sense" among the two professions, hinting that their artistic preferences may be influenced by their background and experiences.

The second feature is "equipment [11]." With traditional hand drawn animation, the tools necessary are often not provided. The animators most likely own the equipment required for anime production. In contrast, 3DCG companies have responsibility to provide needed hardware and software. In this regard, hand-drawn animation companies did not need to worry about fixed costs. With the introduction of 3DCG technology, many accounting departments were taken aback by the "high variable costs such as electricity bills."

The third feature is "production style [11]." In hand-drawn animation, production can occur immediately upon the character design and setting is finalized, with minimal preparation beforehand required. The 3DCG method however would require further preparation even after the character design. This pre-production phase may include modeling of the characters and setups. Notably, the production phase will flow much smoother and rapidly due to its digital nature once the preparation is completed.

The fourth feature is "technological characteristics [11]." Hand-drawn animation enables artists to fully express their artistic creativity. With proper mastery in drawing, the artists can adequately depict nearly any expression or imagery, only being constrained by their own imagination. However, when drawing complex objects that require prices, lines and details, hand-drawn animation may prove lacking to maintain the same quality as 3DCG. 3DCG can more capably maintain consistency in quality when portraying these complex objects like "ships, planes, robots, and other mechanical

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objects." Yet, many Japanese animators perceive hand-drawn animation more suitable for drawing organisms like people and animals, or for objects that appear less frequently in animations.

The fifth and last feature is "technological advancement [11]." With hand-drawn animation, the industry has kept the same production process and does not require any further significant innovation in technology. In comparison, the 3DCG process is one that co-evolves with developing technology. 3DCG's presence lies in a multitude of fields including but not limited to anime, games, movies and research fields. 3DCG animation is open to and dependent on constant change, adapting to new technologies and techniques.

New York Times Reporter Calum Marsh writes on the influence of computer technology on the animation process through a case study of Studio Ghibli and its latest film "The Boy and the Heron" [12]. Accordingly, Hayao Miyazaki is said to be one of the last practitioners of cel animation. IndieWire critic David Ehrlich [12] had called The Boy and the Heron "among the most beautiful movies ever drawn." In addition, the film has received praise for looking like "a relic of the past." Evidently, the film's authenticity to traditional 2D style animation has captivated the hearts of many. Counterintuitively, the production for the Boy and the Heron still integrated extensive use of computer technology from digital compositing to visual effects. This may seem contradictory to the naturalistic imagery the film exhibits, but it is noticeable in subtle details from "the vibrant flicker of a flame" to "the swirling flight of an arrow." While computer technology has become a nearly inevitable aspect of modern animation, Studio Ghibli keeps cel animation at its core. Studio Ghibli cinematographer Atsushi [13] states in an interview that computer technology is "a complementary tool in graphic production that puts hand-drawn 2-D animation as its principal axis."

The transition to computer animation remains an ongoing debate. Recent 3DCG anime films like "The First Slam Dunk" and "Dragon Ball Super: Superhero" have proved immensely profitable, grossing $152 million plus and $86 million respectively for Toei Animation [6]. However, some hardcore anime fans may still express negative sentiment towards this shift. As film professor at the University of Bristol in Britain, Rayna Denison puts it, "A lot of anime is based on manga, which is a 2-D medium…Anime takes these flat images and allows them to move. That's very different from presenting a 3-D model of a character that you know as 2-D [13]." Rayna attributes the aversion as a "resistance to the new." Over the decades, anime fans may have long associated the term anime with tags such as "2-D" and "hand-drawn" that stimulates a specific type of aesthetic imagery. Changing the familiar could in response trigger panic and un-comfortability in fans, leading to a negative attitude towards this new trend.

5. How Do Themes and Genres Contribute to Studio Ghibli's Critical Success

Hayao Miyazaki's films have gained international acclaim, and his films have captured the hearts and attention of millions of fans worldwide. Miyazaki won the best animated film for the Oscar Award in 2003 with Spirited Away and shared the Golden Bear at the Berlin Festival in 2002. His success story is not one by chance alone but impacted by a myriad of factors including the artistic style and themes in his films, and commercial choices Studio Ghibli made.

A secret to the magic of Miyazaki's films lies in the production choices Studio Ghibli makes from soundtrack to imagery throughout the films. Content creator on Sinema, Kiu Qingru, was able to narrate this through a point-to-point comparison of a reference to Ghibli's first 3D anime *Earwig and the Witch* [14] as a perfect counterexample. The film, being directed by Miyazaki's son, Goro Miyazaki, had received negative reviews since the film's release. Critics are putting the blame on the nature of the film as a 3D animation. However, that would be too much of a generalization.

Fans of Miyazaki's films may have noticed an emphasis on the role of female lead characters, often portrayed as hero-like in his films. As stated personally, he aims to portray, "brave, self-sufficient girls that don't think twice about fighting for what they believe with all their heart. They'll

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need a friend, or a supporter, but never a savior. Any woman is just as capable of being a hero as any man." This statement reflects its truthfulness in his films like *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. South China Morning Post writer Richard James Havis describes *Nausicaä* 's self-sacrifice and altruism as giving her a "Joan of Arc-like quality [15]." In *Spirited Away* and the cheerful *Kiki's Delivery Service,* we see dynamic growth in the characters; these young girls overcome challenging obstacles over their journeys including loneliness and self-doubt while learning important lessons of friendship, perseverance and self-confidence. Looking back at Earwig, she remains a static character, and is described as "spoiled, manipulative, and scheming." Her lack of curiosity and effort to prove herself makes it incredibly difficult for viewers to sympathize with and fails to open audiences' horizons to the greater worldview.

The setting of Earwig and the Witch exists predominantly with Bella Yaga's house. This creates a prison-like sensation with little opportunity to explore the outside world beyond the potion room inside the house. Qingru phrases it as "suffocating and claustrophobic [14]." In addition, she critiques the plasticity of expressions that 3D animations bring. Earwig's facial expressions remain stiff throughout the film and is said to use only about "two expressions." Her thoughts are constantly narrated out, allowing no room for speculation on the depth of emotions the character is experiencing. Ghibli's films are supposed to inspire us with the worlds it has created. It allows audiences to stop and appreciate the characters and setting, and with each movement of the character make audiences wonder what they are feeling or experiencing. Film commentator Karsten Runquist perfectly captures the essence of this quality, "Ghibli food looks better than real food, Ghibli grass looks more luscious than real grass, Ghibli clothes look softer than real clothes, and Ghibli fire somehow looks hotter than real fire. Ghibli's artistry is so detailed that the way objects or people move, and the color palettes chosen are all carefully thought out to add to the artistic expression of their films. It almost makes the audience want to live in the world they have created [14]."

Another piece of the puzzle to the magic-like quality of Ghibli's film is its score. Joe Hisaishi [14] has composed all but one of Ghibli's films. His music remains a vital aspect of Ghibli films; it has contributed to some of the studio's most iconic films and thus become an integral piece of it. Qingru comments on the sensation of the music as arousing "nostalgia for places they have never been to and carries a balanced duality of sorrow and longing." The production of Earwig and the Witch had chosen to deviate from Hisaishi's soundtrack and focus on a less conventional "pop rock" sound. Qingru believes that the new soundtrack is not inherently bad, but rather it seems out of place and does not stimulate any further understanding of the story. She describes the soundtrack as "forgettable" and "intentional" in trying to change up the style but only ends up leaving an empty vision. Ghibli's films rely on its score just as much as its imagery, the complementary nature of the two elements help carry the films to greater heights.

Beyond Ghibli's production choices, it's also possible to examine their success through thematic elements and underlying messages present in its films. Miyazaki films are designed for audiences of all age groups, children and adults alike. With that knowledge, Miyzaki is intentional with adult themes in his film that shapes his own identity, culture, and philosophies. A major theme repeated across his films is environmentalism [16], and particularly human interactions with nature. Miyazaki's personal beliefs and values are reflected in his films. Professor Pamela Gossin [16] at University of Texas-Dallas elaborates on Miyazaki's ecophilosophies. Firstly, she indicates Miyazaki's acknowledgement in the values of scientific exploration of nature. *Nausicaä's* [16] venture into the Sea of Decay and actions of studying the plants for a cure to their poisonous effects is a great indication of the appreciation and value that Miyzaki's sees in nature, and he further recognizes the linkage between our natural surroundings to all living beings. Miyazaki in addition is also sensitive to the spiritual values that are often intertwined with nature. His vision includes trees and plants as great artistic symbols for the spirituality of nature. In *My Neighbor Totoro* [16],

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/58/2025.22076

Miyazaki draws upon such powerful imagery in designing the great camphor tree, rendering audiences to the restorative qualities that people often associate with large trees such as peace, calmness, and wisdom.

Interestingly, author Carl Wilson perceives elements of the Chinese philosophy Taoism [17] in informing Miyazaki's films. More clearly, Wilson addresses the notion of yin and yang, or the concept of harmony and balance through complementary forces in Miyazaki's films. For example, in *Howl's Moving Castle* [17], the castle itself is an embodiment of industrialization, and it stands as an alignment between the animals and living beings it passes by suggesting a form of co-existence and balance. The setting describes a reality conceived by "19th century neo-futurist painters," where science and magic also co-exists. The moving castle is described as "covered with houses, cannons, and other disparate parts including ears and assorted junk." Wilson formulates an analogy between the castle to "Frankenstein's patchwork creation." The analogy is then taken a step further as Wilson puts forth to the table that the monster only turned evil upon interaction with humans. In close connection, the castle is fueled by a demon fire spirit manipulated by Howl's heart. The analogy argues for the inherent neutrality and balance in the ethics of technology, where it is completely dependent on the intent of the user that will disrupt this balance and fabricate a concept of "good" and "bad". Miyazaki's themes are pervasive in his films. They convey his strong beliefs and personal philosophies as a universal language that can be embraced globally and understood by all despite cultural differences.

While it is largely true that Ghibi's success falls on its unique production choices and thematic elements, many have neglected another aspect outside of Ghibli's films themselves - commercial decisions and marketing. A prominent figure that played a key role in advertising and contributing to Ghibli's existence is Suzuki Toshio [18]. Suzuki's importance to the early stages of Studio Ghibli lies in his human connections and resources. In quoting Dr. Shiro Yoshioka, "Suzuki, representing the editorial board of Animage, proposed Takahata's decision to Yasuyoshi Tokuma. Tokuma approved the proposal, and Suzuki undertook the practical work for founding the studio, such as converting a company owned by Tokuma Shoten that only existed on paper into Studio Ghibli, and finding an actual building to be used as the studio… Again, it was Takahata and Tokuma who made the actual decision, however, had it not been for the connection between them, which owes much to Suzuki in the first place, Studio Ghibli as we know it today may not have existed at all [18]."

Luckily for all Ghibli fans today, due to his personal work experiences, Suzuki was able to act as the bridge between Miyazaki's crew and Tokuma Shoten, which facilitated the founding of Studio Ghibli. In addition to helping found the studio, Suzuki was also instrumental to several instrumental production decisions of Ghibli's history. To provide an example, the original ending of the storyboard for *Nausicaä* concluded with her landing abruptly in front of rampaging Ōmu, instead of being hit. However, Suzuki who found the ending unnatural was able to persuade Miyazaki otherwise, changing the ending into what is seen today. Without Suzuki, Studio Ghibli would not have accomplished the same achievements, and arguably not even exist. From Suzuki, the importance of personal connections and marketing strategies becomes clear to crafting a successful story.

6. Conclusion

From the origin of Japanese animation beginning with the silent films and *benshi* tradition down to a digitalized and globalized industry, Studio Ghibli stands testament to a dynamic interplay between artistic vision, technological advancement, thematic elements and strategic commercial decision. Through a meticulous blend between traditional cel animation and traces of technology, Ghibli is able to effectively maintain its artistic authenticity to hand drawn animation while adapting to modern animation techniques. Miyazaki's film speaks to a broad audience across generations, through his immersive world building and the underlying themes that resonates with many such as

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environmentalism, character development through self-discovery and coexistence between progress and tradition. Examining beyond Ghibli's mastery in art, its commercial strategies leveraged by key figures such as Suzuki Toshio pushed the studio to greater levels. Through Suzuki's efforts to market its works, secure international partnerships, and establish a timeless brand identity paved the road for the impactful standing of Studio Ghibli today. Ghibli's commitment to tradition in an everchanging industrial world is in itself a story of endurance, craftsmanship, and cultural authenticity. By assessing Japanese animation through the intersection of history, artistry and technology advancements, as well business strategies, this study underscores key elements that have shaped anime into a global phenomenon – one that inspires and continue to be loved by audiences and filmmakers with many more generations to come.

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