

Miyazaki's World

Tony McNicol reports on a rare press conference by animation master Hayao Miyazaki, held at the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Tokyo.

Several years ago I contacted Hayao Miyazaki's studio to request a photograph of the animator for a story I was writing. It wasn't long after Miyazaki's Oscar winning *Spirited Away* had been released. His press office told me they had stopped issuing photographs because he couldn't leave home without being mobbed.

It's an old story for Miyazaki, whose international popularity has only increased since. His latest animation, *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, was another box office smash. And

when the famously media-shy auteur appeared at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan last November, some 200 journalists and avid fans (many attendees being both at the same time) jumped at the chance to hear him speak.

There was plenty to talk about. Miyazaki makes films for children, but he deals with uncompromisingly adult themes. Environmentalism, feminism, religion, war and peace, good and evil... these are all part of Miyazaki's rich allusive palette. At the press conference, Miyazaki gave

glimpses of deeply held convictions behind his work.

Correspondents from several countries told Miyazaki how much their children adored his films. But the animator expressed his concern for Japan's children. He was "very pessimistic" about the future of the Japanese environment. "Inside of thinking how to stimulate domestic consumption by building bridges and roads, we should have the proper environment in place for our future generations," said Miyazaki.

He lamented Japan's lack of self-sufficiency in food and clothing. "This country consumes more than it produces," he said. "What it produces could only actually support the lives of 32 million people." Instead of living sustainably, Japan lives of its exports: "automobiles and works of animation," he noted wryly.

Miyazaki confessed to another contradiction of his work. "When we look at the environment that children enjoy now, everything is virtual—including the animation that we produce," he said. "It seems that our job is to take away the strength that children inherently have."

He mentioned how his animation production company, Studio Ghibli, has tried to redress those contradictions. In April 2008 a crèche with an outdoor play area was set up for the children of Ghibli's 300 employees. The studio is also trying to help Japanese animation become more self-sufficient. Many companies have outsourced the labor-intensive work of animation to other parts of Asia. But from April 2009, Studio Ghibli will take on twenty-two new animators from around Japan. "We don't want to be reliant on external sources and take advantage of labor condition gaps," said Miyazaki.

Life has never been easy for either journeyman or veteran animators, and Miyazaki gave some sense of the rigors of his profession. "I have a lack of ability to think of things after only four hours of sleep," he admitted, "or being able to see the fine detailed pictures on my desk, or to be confident that I can spend many hours holding onto a pencil without tiring out my arms." Famously, Miyazaki still draws



Hayao Miyazaki at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan, November 20

Ghibli Museum



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Young visitors to the Ghibli Museum inspect a robot figure from Miyazaki Hayao's film *Laputa* (top); the museum contains a recreation of Miyazaki's "ideal workspace" (left); a young girl on the lookout for friends (upper right); a "neko bus" climbing frame, perfect for *Totoro* lovers

There is no official route around the Ghibli Museum (<http://www.ghibli-museum.jp/en/>). The museum is as surprising and labyrinthine as the imagination of its creator, Hayao Miyazaki. Open since October 2001, it was designed personally by Miyazaki for his young fans. Everything is child friendly. The walls are made from tactile traditional earthen plaster, fittings from different kinds of wood. Even the seats in the museum cinema and corridors are child-sized. It is for exploring, playing and perhaps getting lost in.

There is also a replica of Miyazaki's ideal atelier, a library, café and gift shop. The idea to make a museum rather than a theme park was the animator's own. "It is a place to experience the world of Miyazaki's films," says museum staff member Chihiro Tsukue. "It's not just about selling character goods."

The museum is located on the edge of Inokashira Park in Western Tokyo, where the student Miyazaki used to come to sketch. Miyazaki built the museum to slowly blend into the surrounding greenery. Standing on the roof is a tall battered robot from Miyazaki's 1986 film, *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*. Long grass grows over its feet. "This is our guardian spirit," says Tsukue with affection.

The outdoor museum café has been carefully built round a towering red pine tree. No doubt, it would have been cut down during other building projects. The route from the station to the museum follows a small stream, completely overgrown and unusually wild for Tokyo. Flanking the road are cute and chic galleries, cafés and restaurants. Miyazaki said he wanted the museum to gradually blend into the park, but the museum seems to have slowly spread its own influence too.

The museum gets around 650,000 visitors a year and is so popular that tickets are only available by reservation, through a chain of convenience stores in Japan, and travel agents abroad. It is often booked up on weekends and public holidays. Almost 10% of visitors to the museum come from abroad.

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everything by hand, and for early films is said to have personally checked each frame.


Miyazaki's imminent retirement has been reported numerous times over the years, often just after he completes a film. "Creating a film is a risky task... that's why at the end of making a film we are totally exhausted," Miyazaki confessed. "Every time I finish a film I say that I never want to do it again. But it seems that I have said that too many times, so I won't say it again!"

That's good news for Miyazaki fans, but many also have high hopes for his son Goro, who is touted as a possible successor at Ghibli. Miyazaki

chose his words carefully when the topic came up. Goro Miyazaki released his first Ghibli feature, *Tales of Earthsea*, in 2006. "It is a very delicate problem," said Miyazaki, "I do not favor him just because he is my son. I think next time along he will really be tested."

In any case, Miyazaki was on good form for his most recent film, says *Japan Times* film critic and author Mark Schilling. "*Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* was his best film specifically for children since *My Neighbor Totoro*," says Schilling. "It's as if he somehow climbed inside the mind of his five-year-old hero."

As Miyazaki himself confided,

children are both his audience and inspiration. "When we seek paradise, it is necessary to go back to the memories of infancy," he said, expressing a worldview that fans of Miyazaki's films will recognize instantly. "I look at the children in front of me and I make films for them. Sometimes I can't see them, and that's when I end up making films for middle-aged people," said the director. "What I look for is a world that I have never been to before, but which is beautiful, and could be acceptable to children." 

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