How Will You Live?

Miyazaki's Critique of Japanese Imperialism and Dialectic with Takahata in *The Boy and the Heron*[1]

Daniel T. Roberts

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Miyazaki Hayao's recent and perhaps last work, *Kimitachi wa dō ikiru ka* (*The Boy and the Heron*, 2023) announces itself as a dramatic departure from its opening fade-in on a blaring siren over war-time Tokyo. It may especially jar audiences more familiar with Miyazaki's globally beloved family-friendly fantasies like *Tonari no Totoro* (*My Neighbour Totoro*, 1988). Even for audiences who had followed his turn to Japan's wartime legacy in *Kaze tachinu* (*The Wind Rises*, 2013), *The Boy and the Heron's* early minutes mark a sharp thematic and aesthetic break from that film's familiar romanticism and stylistic conservatism. The newest film's opening hews closer to the realism and experimentalism of Takahata Isao, Miyazaki's long-time mentor, collaborator, and creative rival. In their brutality, the scenes allude compositionally and thematically to firebombing scenes drawn from Takahata's own life in the opening of his wartime tragedy *Hotaru no haka* (*Grave of the Fireflies*, 1988). In turn, its emotionally expressive impressionism echoes the titular protagonist's run from her circumstances in the iconic "banquet escape" scene of Takahata's final masterwork, *Kaguya-hime no monogatari* (*The Tale of Princess Kaguya*, 2013).

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Miyazaki eventually spirits his audience away with his child protagonist Mahito into a surreal fantasy world, mirroring adventure narratives from past films like *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*, 2001). Nonetheless, the opening's uncharacteristic darkness persists in both the film's foreboding first act in the real world and in its dream-like "underworld" stinking of death. This tonal continuity and further context cues suggest Miyazaki's fantasy narrative should be interpreted as an allegory for the real-world wartime setting that brackets it. The film's Japanese title (commonly translated *How Do You Live*? but better rendered *How Will You All Choose to Live?* since Japanese collapses tense and English lacks a second person plural) alludes to that of a 1937 Japanese novel by Yoshino Genzaburō, an allegorical reflection on ethics and politics still assigned to schoolchildren today. Yoshino, a humanist imprisoned for political crimes against the monarchy by Japan's militarist government after attending socialist meetings, found a job as an educational textbook editor after being freed and used his role to esoterically offer Imperial Japan's youth an alternative to its dominant ideologies of militarism

and imperialist cultural chauvinism.[2] The novel, a childhood favourite of Miyazaki's,[3] is featured tellingly in two brief scenes bookending Mahito's journey into the underworld.

An alternative interpretation instead picks up on comments made by the film's producer Suzuki Toshio and scenes from a recently released making-of documentary, [4] interpreting the film as showing Miyazaki in an autobiographical mode. These sources suggest the film should be viewed primarily as Miyazaki's last creative conversation with his long-time friend and rival, Takahata. These two interpretations are not only reconcilable but mutually reinforcing. Miyazaki's politically engaged critique of past and present Japanese nationalism, conveyed in a fantastical hero's journey familiar to audiences, itself constitutes Miyazaki's answer to the dialectical challenge posed by his Studio Ghibli co-founder and longtime creative muse.

The Boy and the Heron as Political Allegory

Before Miyazaki brings the audience into his fantasy world, he introduces them to a starkly realist war-time context. In the film's pre-title sequence, the impressionistic portrayal of an inferno killing the protagonist Mahito's mother is followed by a cut to a parade of tanks being sent off to Japan's front in its war against the United States. As a crowd watches stoically, Mahito narrates his evacuation to Japan's countryside in 1944, by which time the war had turned against

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[2] Genzaburō Yoshino, *How Do You Live*?, trans. Bruno Navasky (New York: Algonquin Young Readers, 2021).

[3] Yoshino Taichirō, "「君たちはどう生きるか」宮崎駿監督が、新作映画について語っていたこと。そして吉野源三郎のこと" ("'Kimitachi wa dō ikiru ka' Miyazaki Hayao kantoku ga, shinsaku eiga ni tsuite katatteita koto. Soshite Yoshino Genzaburō no koto" = "What *The Boy and the Heron* director ' Miyazaki Hayao said about his movie and Yoshino Genzaburō,"), 好書好日 (*Kōsho Kōjitsu* = *Good Life with Books*), 14 July 2023.

[4] *Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron* (Arakawa Kaku, 2024)). Originally released as "ジブリと宮﨑駿の 2399 日" ("Jiburi to Miyazaki no 2399 nichi" = "2399 days with Ghibli and Miyazaki"), special episode of プロフェッショナル 仕事の流儀 (*Purofesshonaru shigoto no ryūgi* = *Professional: Methods of Work*), aired 16 December 2023 on NHK.

Japan. After being picked up from the train station by his mother's younger sister and now stepmother Natsuko, the pair honour a sad parade of middle-aged soldiers called up to the front, marching under banners reading "May your luck last long in battle" and "Congratulations on your call-up". The following morning, as the new family settles into a sprawling estate owned by Mahito's maternal family, his war-profiteering father suggests glibly that the military's shock at losing the Battle of Saipan would have business booming at the factory. The contrasting sympathy Natsuko offers to the war-dead cues the audience to recall the film's early scenes. As romanticised in jingoist films like the Japanese produced *Taiheiyō no kiseki: Fokkusu to yobareta otoko* (*Oba: The Last Samurai*, Hirayama Hideyuki, 2011) and the American produced *Battle for Saipan* (Brandon Slagle, 2023), the battle on the Marianas Islands is known for its suicidal charges of Japanese tanks and infantry, with losses so undeniable that the Japanese military began acknowledging defeats publicly. [5]

These allusions serve as a backdrop for the film's fantastical turn, beginning with the introduction of a disturbing Heron who leads Mahito into the death-tinged "underworld."

[5] Edwin Palmer Hoyt, *Japan's War: The Great Pacific Conflict, 1853 to 1952* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986).

Suggestively, the word heron in Japanese is a pun for "trickster" or "liar" (*Sagi*), and Miyazaki plays with this theme in later dialogue alluding to the "liar's paradox", in which the Heron insists all herons are liars. The heron earns its double-name in coaxing Mahito toward a mysterious tower tucked away on the estate's grounds soon after he arrives. Later, the heron-creature's decidedly grotesque human form begins to emerge from under its beak as it tells Mahito that his presence is demanded to rescue his dead mother. When Mahito is eventually forced to explore the tower in search of a missing Natsuko, he confirms the heron-man's deceit when a melting water-coloured model of his mother melts under his touch. As the "heron" melts into the tower's floor upon being commanded by a shrouded figure to be Mahito's "guide," it cynically echoes a banner from the pitiful call-up parade earlier in the film: "*Go Buun O*" ("Good luck in battle"). By book-ending the film's first act with phrases suggesting Imperial Japan's cynicism in sending conscripts toward likely death, the Heron's Pied Piper act cues the audience to recall the film's wartime setting as the protagonist begins his hero's journey.

Miyazaki continues his avian motif in introducing a flock of Pelicans drawn toward and consumed by death. Mahito arrives in Miyazaki's "underworld" with a view on a fleet of sailing ships and three stone megaliths set behind a golden gate. These Dolmen recall historical tombs found across East Asian lands colonized by Imperial Japan, with the plurality found on the Korean peninsula.[6] Approaching this gate, Mahito reads its ominous inscription aloud ("Those who learn from me shall die"), before being swarmed by a flock of flightless pelicans pressing through the gate, urging each other to "eat" Mahito and "go" into the tomb. Mahito is barely saved by a woman who wards the birds off with fire and scolds him for disturbing the dead. Resembling the strong Muromachi-era women of Miyazaki's *Mononoke-hime* (*Princess*

[6] Lee Young-Moon, "고인돌" ("Goindol" = "Dolmen"), *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*.

Mononoke, 1997), Mahito's saviour introduces herself as Kiriko, shows Mahito a scar on her own head matching one Mahito inflicted on himself earlier in the film, and tells Mahito the ghost fleet he had seen reflects a world populated by the already dead. Viewers familiar with Miyazaki's filmography may find resemblances between this scene's morbid romanticism and that of another from his *Kurenai no Buta* (*Porco Rosso*, 1992) set in Inter-War Italy, where the protagonist recalls a "glimpse of hell" watching his dead wingmen join an endless stream of ghost fighters above the clouds as he offers in vain to take their place.

As they proceed into the cursed sea, Kiriko introduces Mahito to formless, pre-born souls called “Warawara”, a possible pun for *wareware* sometimes translating as "we Japanese". It may also allude to a metaphor for humanity as a sea of inter-connected molecules made by the protagonist of *How Do You Live*.[7] The novel appears briefly as a long-forgotten gift from Mahito's mother, which he reads tearfully before beginning his own bildungsroman. While floating skywards to Mahito and Copper's "world above", the Warawara are preyed upon by another group of larger flying Pelicans. Before they can finish their feast, a mysterious girl

[7] Yoshino Genzaburō, op. cit.

named Lady Himi staves off the assault in brutal fashion, incinerating Warawara and Pelican alike. The innocent immolated Warawara recall Mahito's earlier imaginations of his mother consumed by inferno. After the literal firefight, a seething Mahito discovers a bloodied, broken-winged Pelican, begging like a wounded samurai to be mercy-killed. It explains that his kind had been brought involuntarily to the underworld's hellish sea, finding themselves starving and forced to prey upon the Warawara. Before the Pelican collapses dead, Miyazaki intercuts a scene of flying Pelicans again recalling the serene ghost fleet from *Porco Rosso*, as the pelican reminisces bittersweetly that his flock had flown as high and as far as their wings would carry them. The heron-man re-appears again surreptitiously to bid the pelican to paradise while offering a Japanese Pure-Land Buddhist vow with apparent self-satisfaction, his insincerity betrayed by his apparent shock at Mahito's intention to give it a dignified burial.

An interpretation of the film's underworld aviary as a critique of Imperial Japan’s ideology is suggested by an interlude in war-time Japan before the film's final act, explaining its genesis as a dangerous artifact brought to Japan from beyond. After a search-team in military fatigues fails to find the missing Natsuko and Mahito, Mahito's father Shoichi dutifully sends them back to his factory's furnaces, before one of the family's aged servants suggests the disappearances may be tied to the estate's mysterious old tower. In an earlier scene shortly after Mahito first discovers the tower, Natsuko explains to him and the audience that it had been built in the 19th century by a conspicuously European-styled great-uncle of hers who had gone mad from “reading too many books.” Now, in a fourth-wall break, Miyazaki has the servant correct her: the tower is a façade for a meteor that had fallen from the sky, destroying the countryside just before the Meiji Revolution in 1868 and left undisturbed until re-discovered by Natsuko's Grand-Uncle thirty years later. The granduncle became so taken with it, the servant explains

while looking directly toward an audience watching from Shoichi's perspective, that he built a tower around it at the cost of countless lives before disappearing into it himself. His bookish obsession with power from beyond and journey to the west recalls Japan's ruling Meiji-era Oligarchs like Itō Hirobumi, who lived through the west's "opening" of Japan just prior to the Meiji Revolution and travelled to Europe about thirty years later to study Constitutional Law, before returning to frame Imperial Japan's Constitution on the European empires' examples.[8] The granduncle's "discovery", obsession with, and eventual envelopment by the meteor coincides with this period and the 1890s, marked by the de jure founding of the Empire of Japan with this constitution's promulgation in 1890 and its de facto entrance onto the 19th century imperial world system with its victory in the first Sino-Japanese war in 1895, colonising Taiwan while emulating the European powers' expansionist militarism. Miyazaki uses this narrative break from the underworld between the middle and final act to ensure the viewer understands his world as allegory for Imperial Japan's ideology, imported and adapted by its ruling class.

This disclosure allows the viewer to reconcile the film's wartime setting and its dream-like underworld. The lying heron, who Miyazaki himself dubbed "a grim reaper leading one away to death,"[9] coaxes youth into the maw of Imperial Japan's ideological death cult while parroting vows honouring the dead. The older wounded Pelican and its flock evoke decimated cohorts of men led into a cursed sea at the cost of their lives and those of the masses of humanity they preyed upon. The impetuous younger Pelicans, who the older Pelican laments are "forgetting how to fly", evoke in their cultish devotion to death an indoctrinated youth who would gladly accepted suicide missions to serve the empire's ideological project. Lady Himi,

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[8] Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 92.

[9] *Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron*, op. cit.

revealed in this interlude to be Mahito's mother, is cast as both victim in the world above and stand-in for war's double effect in the world below, suggesting Miyazaki's pacifist interpretation of Japan's pacific war.

With the audience prompted to recognise allusions to Imperial Japan, the film's third and final act continues Miyazaki's avian motif with a society of militarist parakeets and their king, roosting in the Meiji-era meteor under the nominal reign of Mahito's grand uncle. Mahito first encounters parakeets in military-green plumage with permission to eat him because he can't bear children, evoking conscription's gendered ideology towards expendable youth.[10] Lady Himi saves him from this fate, and the pair sneak into the underworld's parallel version of the estate's mystical "tower", before winding their way carefully through the cavernous home of the parakeets in the meteor. In a long descending pan suggesting hierarchy, the viewer sees glimpses of a society dominated by green parakeets parading in the foreground before celebrating onlookers, passing down by a few birds engaging in cooking and agriculture, before settling on Japan's children -- Mahito and Himi descending further into the meteor's depths. After the pair are left captured and unconscious in their attempt to bring Natsuko back to the world above, Mahito encounters his maternal grand-uncle in a dream, before narrowly being saved by an unexpected ally in the heron-man. The pair watch as the Parakeet King triumphantly parades Himi's unconscious body, surrounded by a roaring parakeet crowd bearing banners alluding to European fascism with banners reading "Duch" (Duce) and emblazoned by parakeet versions of Nazi eagle symbology. The heron notes that though Mahito's granduncle is the parakeets' nominal "lord", the king plans to extort him with Himi in a bid to take control of the empire. For

[10] Japan' wartime Prime Minister Tōjō explained the empire's resistance to drafting women into factory labor let alone military service, calling child-rearing "the natural mission of the women in our empire and must be preserved far into the future". *A Modern History of Japan*, op. cit., p. 220 citing Thomas R. H. Havens, *Valley of Darkness: Japanese Society in World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 108.

a viewer attuned to interpreting the meteor's parakeet society as an allegory for Imperial Japan, the Parakeet King evokes its fascistic military ruling class embodied in figures like Tōjō Hideki, while the grand-uncle's nominal but limited sovereignty aligns with folk historiographic understanding of Japan's imperial family.

Mahito's recognition of his human "malice" and refusal to continue his Grand-uncle's legacy make Miyazaki's allegory for Imperial Japan's theocratic monarchism explicit. When the grand-uncle first appears to Mahito in a dream, he explains that his world and power are given to him by the Meiji-era "stone" from beyond, under the condition that his successor come from his bloodline. This mirrors the Japanese empire's foundational "*kokutai*" or "national structure/substance/essence" ideology: A belief in the inviolable male-line blood succession of Japan's monarchs as heavenly gods, as enshrined in the Meiji Constitution and used as a pretext for political repression by Japan's militarist government.[11] Tellingly, when the true-believing Parakeet King's subordinates first enter the great-uncle's domain carrying Himi as a tribute, they

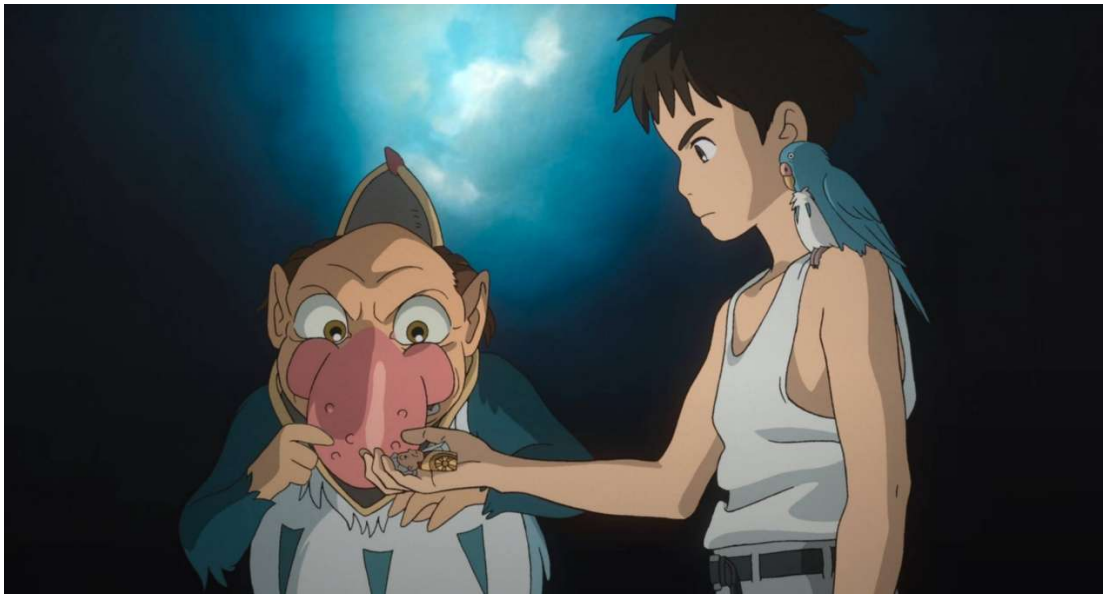
[11] Federico Lorenzo Ramaioli, "Unbroken for Ages Eternal: The Concept of Kokutai in Japanese Constitutionalism," *Journal of Comparative Law*, Volume XV, Issue 1 (2020).

burst into tears and ask if they have entered heaven (*Tengoku*, literally heavenly kingdom), evoking a typical Japanese soldier's genuine belief in their divine emperor (*Tennou*, literally heavenly sovereign). By contrast, the king's sharp annoyance at their reverence despite his outward deference before the grand uncle and his cynical insistence on keeping "taboos" around a birthing ritual evoking imperial family Shinto practices suggests Miyazaki's views on the military elite's *honne* (suppressed inner feelings). When the great-uncle finally meets Mahito in person, he tasks his great-nephew with continuing his reign and preventing the collapse of the world by using the stone to build a new one free of "malice". Mahito refuses while pointing to his self-inflicted scar as a symbol of his earthly imperfection, intending instead to return to the real-world with friends like Kiriko who shares Mahito's scar despite a yawning class divide.

Under one interpretation, Miyazaki's allegory for the Japanese monarchy may be even more concrete in real world parallels to Mahito and the grand-uncle. Mahito is the same age as Crown Prince Akihito in 1944, and much like him was evacuated to an aristocratic countryside estate from Tokyo that year.[12] Akihito (or “Mei”-hito under an alternate reading of the first Kanji character) recently abdicated as Japan’s first emperor to have begun his reign as human rather than divine. He counted among his maternal grand uncles both Prince Asaka, the commanding officer overseeing the Nanjing massacre, and Prince Higashikuni, Japan's liberal-leaning first post-war Prime minister. A well-travelled Francophile opponent of Tōjō's militarism, Higashikuni sought to have imperial succession move to Akihito as a show of Japan’s commitment to national renewal but remained committed to *kokutai* ideology, resigning when the American GHQ repealed a ban on speech against it.[13] Incidentally, the repealed law is

[12] Tsukahara Tomoe, 日光田母沢御用邸を見守った人びと (*Nikkō Tamozawa goyōtei o mimamotta hitobito = The People who Watched over the Nikko Tamozawa Imperial Villa*) (Utsunomiya: Zuisousha, 2024).
[13] Dossier on Higashikuni, Prince Naruhiko, Army Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM), Box 288. Entry 134B: Security Classified Intelligence and Investigative Dossiers - Personal Files, 1939-76, File XA506518. Records of

precisely the one under which *How Do You Live* author Yoshino was jailed as an enemy of the state.[14]



With Mahito's return to Tokyo after the collapse of the fantasy underworld, Miyazaki leaves his audience with a sense of ambivalence towards both Japan's persisting nostalgia for its imperial period and the romanticism imbuing his own work. As Mahito and his newfound friends emerge from the tower's collapsing world, they are joined by throngs of pelicans and parakeets returning to nature. Unbound by the artifice of the underworld, the birds transmute from fantasy creatures recalling Miyazaki's earlier films into real-world birds. Coyly, given media embargoes in Japan on portrayals of its royal family, they shamelessly defecate on Mahito and his family on their way out, as simple birds might to simple humans. Before transforming back into a Heron and flying off, the heron-man tells Mahito he ought to forget the underworld he encountered, scolding Mahito for bringing a keepsake from it while turning to the audience. This last fourth-wall break suggests Miyazaki's message for his Japanese audience on their lingering nostalgia for

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the Investigative Records Repository (IRR), Records of the Army Staff (RG 319). National Archives II, College Park, MD.

[14] Navasky, translator's endnote in Genzaburō Yoshino, op. cit.

Imperial Japanese "greatness", embodied in its still practically untouchable imperial family. The film abruptly ends as Mahito narrates his return to Tokyo in 1947, coinciding with the official end of the Japanese Empire with the promulgation of a new democratic constitution, bringing with him a copy of Yoshino's eponymous novel. Miyazaki poignantly offers Japan a sense of continuity beyond empire inflected with humanist values, against present-day revanchism that would revive *kokutai* ideology in new guises. Nonetheless, in turning to realism and rejecting aspects of his signature natural romanticism by using it as an allegory for fascist nostalgia, Miyazaki leaves his audience on a note of self-critical ambivalence.

Studio Ghibli, Isao Takahata, and the Autobiographical Interpretation

Despite the resonance of this allegorical interpretation with the film's wartime setting, information about Miyazaki's creative process also supports interpreting it as an auto-biographical exploration of his life and career as a filmmaker. Miyazaki, like Mahito, evacuated to Japan's rural interior during the Second World War, brought by a father who worked for a warplane manufacturer.[15] Mahito's encounter with the film's namesake *How Do You Live* reportedly reflects a memorable encounter Miyazaki had with the novel's opening in an elementary school textbook.[16] Yoshino's grandson himself interprets Mahito's character as auto biographical, drawing upon a meeting with Yoshino's family in which Miyazaki shared his desire to write a boy like himself and those from the novel contrasting with his previous over-optimistic protagonists.[17] Likewise, in writing and designing characters for the film's fantastical underworld, Miyazaki seems to have drawn from impressions of colleagues at Studio Ghibli.

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[15] Bill Desowitz, "'The Boy and the Heron' Is So Personal, Hayao Miyazaki Needed a Year to Grieve Before Pivoting in a New Direction," *IndieWire*, 23 November 2023.
[16] Yoshino Taichirō, op. cit.
[17] Ibid.

Studio Ghibli co-founder and long-time producer Suzuki Toshio offered details on these inspirations in interviews, identifying the film's Heron as based on himself, the granduncle on fellow Studio Ghibli co-founder Takahata, and the Parakeet King on Miyazaki himself.[18] Suzuki suggests that Miyazaki intended to make the Grand-Uncle more of a narrative focal point, but that Miyazaki's grief at Takahata's unexpected death in 2018 led him to de-emphasise the Grand-Uncle's role in the narrative.[19] A making of documentary filmed across the film's production and narratively structured around Miyazaki and Takahata's relationship confirms Suzuki's impressions. Miyazaki describes being "haunted" by Takahata's ghost while struggling to "meet" him while storyboarding the Grand Uncle's character design and later describes drawing the Grand-Uncle's demise as finally "burying" Takahata.[20]

Understanding the film as creative auto-allegory suggests putting it in context of Miyazaki's career-long tension with his mentor and rival Takahata. For years after meeting at Tōei Animation in 1962, Takahata played the directing master to Miyazaki's animating

[18] Christian Holub, "How the Boy and the Heron Pays Tribute to Studio Ghibli's Founders," *Entertainment Weekly*, 6 December 2023.
[19] Desowitz, op. cit.
[20] *Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron*, op. cit.

apprentice in projects beloved by Japanese audiences like *Taiyō no Ōji: Horus no Daibōken* (*Horus Prince of the Sun*, 1968) and *Panda Kopanda* (*Panda! Go Panda!* or *Panda and child,* 1972). Even then, Miyazaki chafed at Takahata's philosophy of using child-like animation as a medium to confront audiences with real human misery in portrayals of often unsympathetic protagonists.[21] The pair co-founded Studio Ghibli in 1985 together with Suzuki after the massive success of Miyazaki's adaptation of his own allegorical graphic novel *Kaze no tani no Naushika* (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, 1984). Thanks to Suzuki's showman-like flair, Miyazaki's *My Neighbour Totoro* and Takahata's *Grave of the Fireflies* were released on the same day in 1988 in a commercial horse race. Miyazaki's comforting adaptation of a children's novel promoted respect for nature by appealing to the public's nostalgia for its idyllic countryside, while rewriting the source material's darker themes about environmental loss and emphasising his viewers' agency in achieving social change.[22] By contrast, Takahata's faithful adaptation of a wartime novel inspired by real events drew from his own traumatic memories of American fire-bombings, portraying his child protagonists' deaths while compelling viewers to explore the limits of romanticism and preconceptions about animation as a genre. Miyazaki was disturbed by the film's thematic hopelessness, calling it "not an anti-war film, nor… a film about the preciousness of life" but "a horrifying film about dead souls with no place to rest."[23] Takahata in turn criticised Miyazaki's demand "that the audience enter the world he has created

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[21] Koishi Teru, "高畑勲を失った宮崎駿は、どこへ向かうのか" ("Takahata Isao o ushinatta Miyazaki Hayao wa, doko e mukau no ka," = "Where Will Miyazaki Hayao Go Now that He Has Lost Takahata Isao?"), *Bunshun Online*, 20 May 2018.

[22] Seiji Kanoh, "「となりのトトロ」の自然観" ("*Tonari no Totoro no shizenkan*" = "*My Neighbor Totoro*'s *View on Nature*,"), unpublished manuscript, 15 July 1998.

[23] Seiji Kanoh, "弁証法的な緊張関係 －高畑勲と宮崎駿の 50 年" ("Benshōhōteki na kinchō kankei: Takahata Isao to Miyazaki Hayao no gojyu nen"="Dialectical Tension: 50 Years of Isao Takahata and Hayao Miyazaki,"), unpublished manuscript, 15 February 2015, revision of an article originally published in *Motto!*, Volume 4, November 2013.

completely,"[24] echoed in comments criticising popular cinema's "tendency to drive viewers into a position where they can only align themselves with the protagonist, without objectively indicating the hero's circumstances..." making it ineffective "as image training for the real world, for assessing the surrounding environment and living strongly and wisely."[25]

This creative dialectic also reflects in the auteurs' approaches to portraying gender roles: Takahata ambivalently portrays women living within Japan's hierarchical gender roles, while Miyazaki's films show heroines transcending such roles in fantastical settings. Takahata's slice-of-life *Omoide poro poro* (*Only Yesterday*, 1991) has his 27-year-old protagonist leave behind a career in Tokyo to pursue romance with a farmer in the countryside, an ending Takahata considered an ambiguous "mirror" to reality for the audience to interpret with nuance but Miyazaki rejected as "the director shouting at her to 'Go be a farmer's wife!'"[26] Takahata in turn viewed Miyazaki's heroines with scepticism, deriding his tendency for writing women "the way he believes they should exist,"[27] foreshadowing contemporary critiques of Miyazaki's women characters like the protagonist's wife in *The Wind Rises* as "overly convenient" and "created from men's hopes and delusions."[28] Takahata's last works by contrast offered an ambivalently nostalgic and critical portrait of traditional Japanese gender roles as in *Hōhokekyo tonari no Yamada-kun* (*My Neighbours the Yamadas,* 1999), and ambiguously captured suffocating expectations placed on girls in his adaptation of a classic Japanese folk tale, *The Tale of Princess*

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[24] Margaret Talbot, "The Auteur of Anime," *The New Yorker*, 10 January 2005.
[25] Andrew Osmond. "Takahata on Miyazaki," *All the Anime*, 19 July 2023.
[26] Studio Ghibli, ジブリの教科書 6 おもひでぽろぽろ (*Jiburi no kyōkasho 6*: *Omoide Poroporo*" *Ghibli Textbooks Volume 6*: *Only Yesterday*), Bunshun Bunko Editorial Department, ed. (Tokyo: Bungeishunju, 2014).
[27] Osmond, op. cit.
[28] Higuchi Naofumi. "樋口尚文の千夜千本　第１夜「風立ちぬ」（宮崎駿監督）, 宮崎駿のイノセント・ガーデン" ("Naofumi Higuchi no Senya-Senbon dai ichi yoru *Kaze tachinu* (Miyazaki Hayao kantoku): Miyazaki Hayao no inosento gāden" = "Higuch Naofumi's Thousand Nights and Thousand Books, First Night, *The Wind Rises* directed by Miyazaki Hayao: Miyazki Hayao's Innocent Garden"), *Yahoo News*, 26 June 2013.

Kaguya. As one Japanese source puts it, while Takahata aimed to create films thematically "returning to reality" with subtle and arguably immanently critical portrayals of Japan, Miyazaki aimed instead at "breaking away from reality" in his fantasy worlds.[29]

In a mirror of this thematic dialectic, Takahata's creative process was aesthetically idealist without concern for consequences, contrasting with Miyazaki's creative pragmatism. Takahata treated originality as his only aesthetic barometer besides "righteousness when viewed from a social context," expressing disdain for the film industry's commercialism.[30] His perfectionism in this pursuit led him to extend production timelines to the point of his staff's exhaustion, while his experimentalism with digitising watercolour from the *My Neighbors the Yamadas* onward broke the norms of Japan's communitarian culture by demanding more work from fewer talented artists.[31] In an interview after Takahata's death, Suzuki said Takahata showed no consideration for the people around him, leaving the studio a complete mess from staff departures.[32] Suzuki and colleagues even held Takahata responsible for the early death of Studio Ghibli animation lead and *Whisper of the Heart* director Yoshifumi Kondō, attributing it to overwork brought on by Takahata's brutal bullying.[33] Miyazaki, calling himself the only staff member in Studio Ghibli who survived Takahata, was so exasperated by Takahata's tendencies that he vowed to never let Takahata make another film with Studio Ghibli after the experimentalist *Yamadas*.[34] While Miyazaki also had a reputation for being demanding, his process reflected a closeness to the labour of animation that he cultivated while working as an animator under Takahata's direction.

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[29] Koishi, op. cit.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Studio Ghibli, ブリの教科書 19 かぐや姫の物語 (*Jiburi no kyōkasho 6*: *Kaguyahime no Monogatari = Ghibli Textbooks Volume 19*: *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*), Bunshun Bunko Editorial Department, ed. (Tokyo: Bungeishunju, 2018).
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid

Miyazaki remained stubbornly attached to traditional cel-animation that kept in-betweener animators employed, never failed to keep a production deadline despite potential aesthetic compromises and remained involved in the actual labour required to realise his directorial vision. In a telling anecdote, Suzuki describes how Takahata would come into work late in the day to berate the sole animator he allowed to work with him on *Princess Kaguya*, leaving Miyazaki to translate these demands more comprehensibly with Takahata out of the office despite nominally having no role in the project.[35] This pattern followed life-long tendencies: Takahata helped recruit an unsure Miyazaki into the Tōei Animation labour union where they became vice president and general secretary in the 1960s, but was known to sleep through the actual labour actions that Miyazaki organised, as shown in the Studio Ghibli documentary *Yume to kyōki no ōkoku* (*The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness* 2013).

Miyazaki seems to have been consumed by what Takahata himself characterised as their "dialectical tension" throughout his career.[36] In his eulogy for Takahata, Miyazaki recalled

[35] Ibid.
[36] Konoh, op. cit.

working through weekends at Tōei against the union's deal to realise Takahata's demanding aesthetic ideals.[37] He begged to have Takahata help him realise his own filmmaking vision as producer for *Nausicaä* after serving 15 years as a loyal apprentice, but found himself ripping a book in half in anger when Takahata gave the result a 30% score for not properly "illuminating social reality".[38] In a reflection that he had internalised some of Takahata's critique, Miyazaki came to loathe how Totoro's comforting romanticism led it to become a "video babysitter" of Japan's youth in lieu of inspiring social action to preserve nature,[39] while the realist Takahata came to praise it, if only because Miyazaki's donation of its lucrative licensing rights to a nature trust did save some real forests.[40] Takahata wryly inserted a Miyazaki-inspired character in his *Heisei tanuki gassen ponpoko* (*Pom Poko*, 1994), as the anti-hero Gonta so wrapped up in his romanticism about preserving nature that he dies fruitlessly in an eco-terrorist suicide attack, leaving Miyazaki in tears while recognising the one-sidedness of his admiration.[41] Suzuki had an opportunity to recreate Studio Ghibli's 1988 horse race in planning to release Miyazaki's romantic treatment of the Mitsubishi Zero's designer in *The Wind Rises* and Takahata's re-interpretation of a classic fairy tale in *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* on the same day 2013, as shown in *The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness*. Miyazaki announced his plans to retire with the film as his capstone, defending his protagonist's inspiration as beyond reproach in designing "one of the few things we Japanese could be proud of," amid voices highlighting that most of the

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[37] Amid Amidi. "Watch Hayao Miyazaki's Eulogy for Isao Takahata," *Cartoon Brew,* 16 May 2018.

[38] Seiji Konoh, "「平成狸合戦ぽんぽこ」論" ("*Heisei tanuki tassen ponpoko* ron" = "Essay on *Pom Poko*), originally in 平成狸合戦ぽんぽこ／解説図録 (*Heisei tanuki gassen gonpoko*: *kaisetsu zuroku* = *Ponpoko: Visual Guidebook*), Takahata/Miyazaki Art Research Institute, ed. (RST Publishing, December 1994).
…";*Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron*, op. cit.

[39] Konoh, op. cit.

[40] Talbot, op. cit.

[41] *Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron*, op. cit.

warplanes been assembled by forced Korean labour.[42] Takahata, characteristically blowing past the production deadline, saw Miyazaki's film first and called it interesting but admonished his complacent insistence that his work as an auteur was finished (*The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness*). When Miyazaki in turn finally saw *Princess Kaguya*, Suzuki relates that he realised Takahata's masterwork had surpassed his own, that Miyazaki remained the "entertainer" to Takahata's "artist."[43] Takahata remained the one character in Miyazaki's dreams and the one audience for his films (*2399 Days*), amid his return to feature-filmmaking in storyboarding *The Boy and the Heron* in 2016, just prior to Takahata's death in 2018.

The Boy and Heron as Double Allegory: Studio Ghibli's Self-Aware End of History

Given what's known about Miyazaki's creative confrontation with Takahata and the inspiration for his characters, *The Boy and the Heron's* underworld might plausibly be interpreted as Miyazaki's allegorical resolution to the pair's creative dialectic. In the heron-man, a Japanese source suggests we might see a stand-in for Suzuki coaxing Miyazaki into the world of directing at Studio Ghibli,[44] with pelicans perhaps standing in for impetuous young animators chewed up by its working environment, and characters like Kiriko and Himi stand-ins for less acknowledged women critical to Miyazaki's success at Studio Ghibli. The Grand-uncle's lonely and meticulous control over a world populated by allusions to Studio Ghibli's young and deathly disregard for the well-being of those he drew into it suggests a critical view on Takahata's callous aesthetic

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[42] Justin McCurry, "Japanese Animator Under Fire for Film Tribute to Warplane Designer," *The Guardian*, 19 March 2018.

[43] Suzuki Toshio, interview by Ōta Hikari and Tanaka Yūji,*Bakushō mondai no nichiyou Sunday*, TBS Radio, 9 March 2014.

[44] Asō Shin, "映画「君たちはどう生きるか」を、ある業界に生きた女性たちへの賛歌として考察する" ("Eiga *Kimitachi was dou Ikiru Ka* o, gyōkai ni ikita josei-tachi e no sanka to shite kōsatsu suru" = "*The Boy and the Heron* Examined as an Ode to Certain Real World Women"), personal blog, 23 July 2023.

idealism. Miyazaki self-critique then reflects in the fascist parakeet king, vainly cultivating a cheering romanticist cult of personality and jealously undermining the world's creative mastermind.

Mahito's rejection of the uncle's offer to take on his creative legacy and the Grand-Uncle's shouting at Mahito to return to his own time, a scene Miyazaki obsessed over getting right,[45] would suggest the director's final resolution for their fraught relationship. Suzuki himself, the observer closest to the arc of the auteur's dialectic, has suggested that with the film's conclusion, Miyazaki had finally finished his life-long dialogue with Takahata, or intended to.[46] However, an interpretation limited to viewing the film's fantasy-world alone as an allegory for Miyazaki's career at Studio Ghibli cannot bear the film's full interpretive weight. Miyazaki has denied that the film should be thought of as fully autobiographical, while acknowledging the inclusion of such elements.[47] An interpretation so introspective would seem to belie the social critique suggested by the film's wartime setting, it's allusion to its socially critical namesake, and Takahata's admonition to speak to present-day problems.

I argue instead that the film as a project in itself should be interpreted as Miyazaki's answer to Takahata's dialectical challenge, offering both in its political and autobiographical allegory a critique of inhumane idealism and defence of simple humanism, synthesizing the best of Studio Ghibli's two creative pillars. The film's impressionistic opening shocks any audience expecting a comforting Miyazaki by mirroring both Takahata's willingness to approach war

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[45] *Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron*, op. cit.

[46] Suzuki Toshio, "鈴木敏夫が明かした『君たちはどう生 きるか』のなかの '宮崎駿と高畑勲'"(" 'Suzuki Toshio ga akashita 'kimitachi wa dō nama kiru ka' no naka no 'Miyazaki Hayao to Takahata Isao'" = "Suzuki Toshio enlightens us on the theme of 'Miyazaki Hayao and Takahata Isao' found in *The Boy and the Heron*"), Interview, Originally in *Weekly Bunshun CINEMA*, 11 September 2023. .

[47] Miyazaki Hayao,"Animated Feature Films: 96th Oscars Nominee Program"Interview with Suzuki Toshio, live stream, 2 March 2024.

violence unflinchingly and to challenge the audience aesthetically, echoing the latter's masterworks *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Princess Kaguya*. This suggests a Miyazaki self-aware of the challenge his mentor's oeuvre posed to the nationalist nostalgia and creative complacency of his initially intended final work *The Wind Rises*, with the new film's opening acting as a thesis for the necessity of this last return. Mahito's sudden self-harm later in the first act recalls both Miyazaki's own adolescence and the stubbornly self-destructive protagonist Seita from *Grave of the Fireflies*, echoing Takahata's willingness to alienate the audience from a protagonist to confront them with reality. The film's fantastical turn by contrast confronts Takahata's challenge by bending an imaginative hero's journey to the ends of engaged social critique. In contemporary Japan, nationalism is not only latent but in power, with the majority of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party including its last three prime ministers belonging to the parliamentary association of a lobbying group espousing thinly disguised monarchist revanchism.[48] Takahata and Miyazaki were both critics of these groups' efforts to revise Japan's pacifist post-war constitution as reflected in their contributions to a Studio Ghibili pamphlet urging voters' attention on the issue before the 2014 election.[49] Miyazaki however did so reluctantly and exceptionally, given his aversion at the time to speaking publicly on politics.[50] Takahata, long a

[48] *A Modern History of Japan*, op. cit., p. 371. Scholarship based on primary sources notes parliamentarians' motives for participating range broadly from opportunism to ideological alignment but concludes that "the cult of the emperor is the principal federating axis" of this organization that exercises "a strong influence on the great conservative party", Thierry Guthmann, *Nippon Kaigi: Political Nationalism in Contemporary Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2024), p.97-132.

[49] "「改憲もってのほか」宮崎駿監督いま声を大に" ("Kaiken mottenohoka' Miyazaki Hayao kantoku ima koe o dai ni" = "Hayao Miyazaki is speaking loudly now: 'Constitutional Revision is out of the question'"). *Tokyo Shimbun.* 7 July 2013.

[5050] "宮崎駿「風立ちぬ」は「火垂るの墓」への回答　専門家が指摘" ("Miyazaki Hayao 'Kaze tachinu' wa 'Hotaru no haka' e no kaitō senmonka ga shiteki" = "Experts Point out that Miyazaki Hayao's *The Wind Rises* is a reply aimed at *The Grave of the Fireflies*"), *Shunkan Asahi,* 2 August 2013.

more vocal critic,[51] would perhaps have found in his protégé's new allegory for the brutal folly of Imperial Japan the "illumination of social reality" and "righteousness" he previously found lacking.

Miyazaki achieves this all while elevating his distinctive style to its creative culmination, rather than by adopting Takahata's restrained mirror to reality. He accommodates Takahata's critique of romantic hero narratives while honouring his own commitment to inspiring children by casting Mahito's humble humanity as true heroism. In its more violent portrait of both humanity and nature, the film rejects Miyazaki's early ecological romanticism, while offering hope for genuine reconciliation contrasting with Takahata's resigned conclusion to *Pompoko*. In Kiriko, Himi, and Natsuko, essential to Mahito's success but bound by expectations of maternity and servility, Miyazaki in an autobiographically apologetic mode seems finally able to depict women heroically while confronting his audiences with the consequences of Japan's restrictive gender norms. Finally, Miyazaki's willingness to accept a seven-year long production cycle to both ensure artistic integrity and leave room for his staff's human needs reflects a reconciliation of the two auteurs' expressions of creative integrity.[52] Miyazaki's definitive film stands as his testament to humanity over self-consumed militarist, romanticist, and aestheticist idealism.

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[51] Aoki Michiko, "高畑勲さん「９条は変えてはならない『歯止め』" ("Takahata Isao-san 'kyuu-jō wa kaete wa naranai "hadome"'"= "Takahata Isao: 'Article 9 is a "brake" that must not be changed'"), *Asahi Shimbun*, 9 July 2015.

[52] Chiba Eriko, "宮崎駿さん「いまわの際に」見る景色　独占インタビュー" ("Miyazaki Hayao-san 'imawa no sai ni' miru keshiki: dokusen intabyū" = "Exclusive interview with Miyazaki Hayao on the view he sees 'from death's door'"), *Asahi Shimbun*, 25 December 2019.

Yoshino Genzaburō's educational novel, briefly bookending Mahito's allegorical voyage, asks its young audience near its conclusion to consider what human "Greatness" is. In examining Napoleon Bonaparte's imperialist legacy, it acknowledges his relentless will to power as greatness in a certain sense but asks the reader what good it was for in its failure to protect human life. It offers an alternative vision of greatness instead: to be great is to be a fine example of a human being, to pour one's life in pushing the river of humanity forward rather than backwards, to be willing to apologise to those that one has wronged, and to build a better world by working together. The humanist allegory, quietly raging in dissent against the folly of Japan's imperial project at its futile last war's dawn in 1937, concludes with a single provocative question: "How Will You All Choose to Live"? In perhaps the last scene that Miyazaki will give his audiences, the question is shown on the cinematic canvas as Mahito puts Yoshino's novel in his bag, examining his powerless keepsake from the underworld one last time, before exiting stage left into Japan's future. Miyazaki as Studio Ghibli's Owl of Minerva spreads his wings at the coming of dusk as the screen fades.