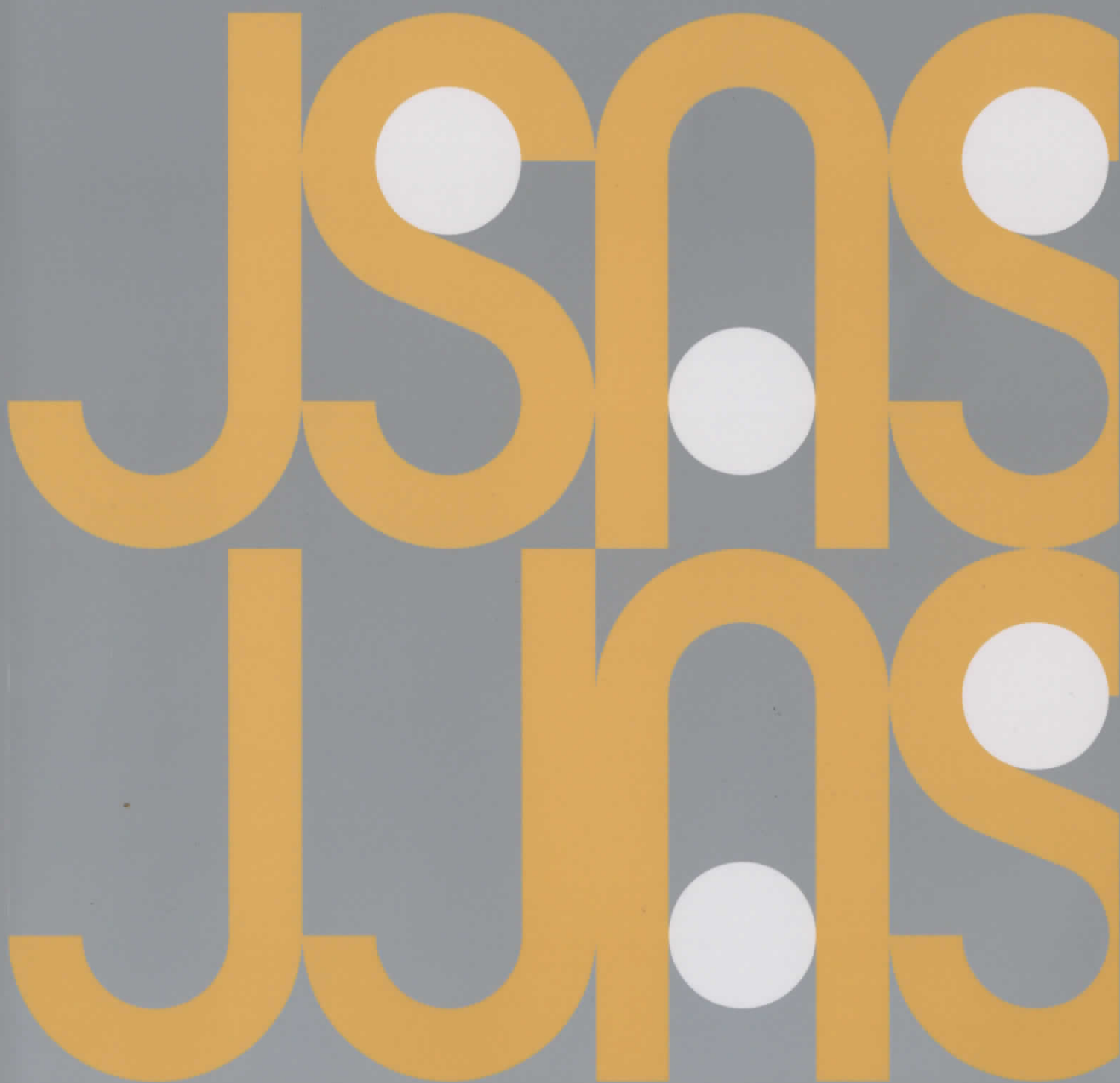


# アニメーション研究

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## Stimulating Thought Rather Than Appetite: On TAKAHATA Isao's Animation Aesthetics

Gan Sheuo Hui

### ■ Stimulating Thought Rather Than Appetite: On TAKAHATA Isao's Animation Aesthetics

#### Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that Takahata's works possess aesthetic qualities that have not been addressed sufficiently, partly due to the lack of an overall recurring theme and specific visual traits that allow viewers to easily identify with the characters. The impact of Takahata's work rests on their narrative meaning rather than centering on the personalities and visual charm of the key characters. The meaning stays within the animation itself, rather than branching out through merchandising or fan activity. Takahata contested the way viewers often engage with the animation medium in a popular context. He went beyond the light-hearted genre framework to produce narratives that do not lead to happy, emotionally satisfying endings. Neither did he glorify the enchanted transformative potential of the animatic image. To address his aesthetic qualities in context and examine his construction of character and their worlds, this paper analyzes his works, including *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* (1974), *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (2013), *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), and *Only Yesterday* (1991). Through close examination of selected sequences, Takahata's challenge to the norms of anime structure and aesthetics are shown to be a part of his creative production process that resulted in the distinctive impact of his work.

#### 抄録:

本論文は、何度も繰り返される主題や、キャラクターに観客を同一化させる固有の視覚的特徴を持たないがゆえに、十全に論じられてはいない高畑作品の美的資質に着目し、彼の作品におけるキャラクターと世界の構築方法を明らかにする。高畑作品の意味は、作品関連グッズ販売やファン活動から派生していない。それはアニメーション自体に内在している。高畑は、お手軽なジャンルの枠組みのなかに留まらずに、幸せで、感情的に満足できる結末には至らない叙述を生み出し、アニメーションの大衆的な魅力とその消費に異を唱えた。本論文は、『アルプスの少女ハイジ』(1974)、『かぐや姫の物語』(2013)、『火垂るの墓』(1988)、『おもひでぽろぽろ』(1991)のシーケンスを詳細に検討し、アニメの構造と美学に関する規範に対する高畑の挑戦が、彼の制作過程の一部であり、彼の作品を際立つものにしてきたことを明らかにする。

There is an established convention when considering Studio Ghibli, that is, to focus on the historical association of Takahata Isao and Miyazaki Hayao, their encounter at Toei, which led to their collaboration at A Production (later Shin-Ei Animation, later Nippon Animation) and finally co-founding Studio Ghibli together in the mid-1980s. This perception has gradually become a fixed narrative. Takahata is considered an important branded figure but nonetheless alienated in the popular reception and critical study of Studio Ghibli that emphasize Miyazaki's qualities and their impact on a variety of putative successors. In this paper, I argue that Takahata's works possess aesthetic qualities that have not been addressed sufficiently, partly due to his works' lack of an overall uniform and recurring theme and visual traits for easy identification. Discussing his work as a whole has always been a challenge due to the diversity of his roles, themes, styles and formats (TV anime series, animated feature-length films, live-action documentary).

The impact of Takahata's career rests on the works themselves as the relation of character to narrative is hard to break, making cross-platform activities difficult. Takahata's works exemplify an inward movement, often bringing the attention back to the work itself. To a certain extent, he managed to disregard the trending marketing strategy that clings to reducing risk by diversifying the engageability of the products. That said, the interrelation of his characters with the narrative often stays within the animation, in a one-off sealed setting, rather than branching out through merchandising or fan activity. The scarcity of Takahata-related products at Ghibli Donguri Republic is ample evidence of this. Takahata epitomizes the well-informed, not too cost-effective side of Studio Ghibli's work that is less susceptible to commercialization. He employed animation to deal with sophisticated thoughts and experimented with the medium, resisting consumption as sheer entertainment. Watching Takahata's work demands attention that then prompts thought to assess the meaning of the work. The deeper engagement with his works comes from multiple viewings and reassessments, an old-school single channeled



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engagement.

The methods of animation employed in his work are visually arresting, but the themes often explore gloomy aspects of life. The direct emotional satisfaction of enjoying the art and characters' relationships is colored by content that needs time to be digested intellectually. In this sense, Takahata contested the way viewers tended to engage with the animation medium in a popular context. Studio Ghibli is famous for their high-quality animation, yet Takahata pushed this parameter beyond the light-hearted genre framework to produce narratives that do not lead to happy, emotionally satisfying endings. Neither did he glorify the enchanted transformative animatic image. The understanding of his works involves many different aspects, including a deeper awareness of social and historical situations, and how they transform the individuals within them.

Studio Ghibli is often considered part of Toei lineage, that Miyazaki (and the famous veteran animator Otsuka Yasuo) would call 'manga eiga' (cartoon film), a form of animation that emulates some aspects of the early Disney productions (up to the late 1940s) that aimed for smooth and realistically rendered movement, and was considered the real goal of animation. Takahata was less vocal about the concept of 'manga eiga' and his works were usually a complex mixture of both full and selective animation that are less influenced by the Disney approach. Takahata considered animation in a wider sense, from his attempts to understand its history and medium specificity to his discussions at length about the moving image, culture, art and everyday life in various essays and talks (see Takahata 1991 and 2014). Even though he maintained a realistic approach in his handling of weight, volume, shape and shade, his aim was always to prioritize an emotional realness, a strong sense of presence, impressions and experiences that would fit the overall narration. Thus, it is not exaggerated to say that most of his works drove towards his own form of a mediated cinematic language and used conventions that drew from a variety of narrative formats (live-action feature, documentary, animated films, experimental shorts

etc.). Takahata's world is multifaceted and complex when one looks beyond the standard promotional media discourse that reduces the complexity of his work to simple genre tropes. Aside from the close tie between character and narrative, his under-discussed qualities also include how he created new combinations of filmic elements rather than aiming at the creation of a Studio Ghibli style.

My so-called signature titles, like *Only Yesterday*, and *Grave of the Fireflies*, aren't in the genre I wanted to work in. When comparing myself with other creators, I had a genre that I thought I was good at, like making people laugh. But when Miyazaki came up with fun titles, I'd want something different. I mean, I've had no choice. Because no one needs a copy. No point in making an imitation. So it may be fair to say I had to work with a different approach. (Takahata, "The Making of Only Yesterday")

This paper aims to revisit his works and emphasize these qualities in context. The quotation above points to the necessity of looking at Takahata's works in the context of Studio Ghibli's production process as well as taking into consideration the anime industry as a whole in order to better understand the issues Takahata was confronting. Takahata responded to other creators, their themes and genres, when developing his own approach. There was always a sense of fluidity in his production methods and aesthetic choices. For example, Takahata employed highly individualized (rather than conventional) visual approaches, more commonly visible in animated shorts than in commercial feature animation. These efforts are meaningful in a broader context, as his response to the Japanese animation industry where the production system established by the Production Committee (*seisaku iinkai*) has become institutionalized, leading to a homogenized approach to cross-platform development and reliance on the ever-changing digital technologies. The productions of this system often employ high quality industrial-

standard imagery with much smoother animation of movement, but for him, they were apparently nothing more than a time- and cost-effective template that formed an established style to regulate a certain archetype of character development that results in a character-world that would restrict his ambition to creatively design a unique approach for each of his various endeavors.

Some recent writings have discussed Takahata's determination to challenge the conventional look and expression of celluloid animation. These discussions focus on simplified backgrounds, coloring choices, movement design and character outlines in *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* and *My Neighbor the Yamadas* (see Kiridoshi 2018; Ishioka 2018; Hosoma 2018). These analyses are stimulating because they point out how Takahata attempted to move away from the norms of both industry and Studio Ghibli, by reinterpreting various basic elements, such as filmic spatial design, line work, and coloring. All in all, these discussions on forms complement other discussions on Takahata that were focused around themes (see Swale 2017; Goldberg 2009), and genre (see Denison 2015:181-203). Takahata's animation is capable to express complex thoughts about life, family and society, and this paper applies a textual approach to look closely at how Takahata challenged the anime norms structurally and aesthetically, as a creative production process for him and a visual experience for the viewers.

#### **Heidi, Princess Kaguya and character-world**

Takahata crafted an animation world wherein much is not depicted or told directly. The recognition of subtle visual cues is often essential for grasping the full meaning of his works. The following section focuses on Takahata's aesthetic approaches by looking at examples of his construction of character-world and the depiction of food in several of his most recognized animations, *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* (1974), *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (2013), *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), and *Only Yesterday* (1991). Characters, character-world and depictions of food are prominent elements in the presentation of

characters, character-world in contemporary Japanese anime. As there is often a stereotypical expectation of Studio Ghibli imagery, as there is for the overall sphere of Japanese anime, examining these aspects provides a common entry point to illustrate how Takahata approached them in a distinctly individual fashion. The intent is to go beyond the cover of Studio Ghibli branding by close examination of a few sequences to demonstrate how Takahata opens up the imaginative possibilities of animation narrative to focus on different forms of engagement that challenge the norms for attracting the broad public.

This section looks at two distinctive characters, Heidi and Princess Kaguya, and the portrayal of their respective worlds. The settings of Heidi and Princess Kaguya are separated by great differences in time and culture. Heidi is a fictional character created by the Swiss author Johanna Spyri in 1881. Princess Kaguya, on the other hand, is a protagonist from an anonymous 10th-century Japanese tale, *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*. Both have distinctive geographical and cultural backgrounds and the millennium that separates their societies. However, in Takahata's screen adaptations, these two characters share some similarities, especially in their temperament. Kiridoshi Risaku observed that the tale of Princess Kaguya eventually comes to resemble Heidi's longing to be free of all social constraints and expectations, as illustrated in the dream sequence where Kaguya runs into an open field while removing layers of clothing (2018, 175-176). That emotional sequence shows Princess Kaguya's dissatisfaction with the custom of remaining isolated even during the celebration for her entrance into adulthood. Her frustration comes from not being able to act as freely as she wanted. These animations were produced in different formats at opposite points in Takahata's career. Despite the resemblance of the heroines pointed out by Kiridoshi, there is another profound layer shared by these two productions, which is their nonconformity to the industry tendencies of their days.

The adaptation of Heidi was in many ways a response to the enormous popularity of Japanese anime series on sports, magic and



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SF themes in the 1970s. It was a conscious decision of Takahata and the team to produce *Heidi* as an inspiring and free-spirited work for Nippon Television's 'World Masterpiece Theatre' children's program that was intended to diversify the choices for anime series by bringing out meaningful adaptations of world literature. The design of its production and distribution did not rely on achieving commercial success by the merchandizing of character goods. Rare as it was for a TV production to incur additional expenses for a children's program, Nippon Television funded a location-hunting trip to the Alps for Takahata, Miyazaki Hayao and Kotabe Yoichi. This overseas journey reflected the commitment of the sponsor and creators to produce a work of high quality in believable settings. These efforts resulted in a 52-episode TV anime series, *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* (1974) that relates the story of the cheerful main character Heidi and her grandfather in the idyllic landscape of the Alps. *Heidi* is unique in its detailed depiction of discovering things (including joy) in an everyday life setting that is closer to reality than was customary for children's anime at that time. The simplicity found in the idyllic rural setting of this series made a stark contrast to life in Japan where people were enduring a series of critical incidents of environmental pollution due to the rapid pace of urbanization and industrialization. The severe reality of the viewers' lives stood behind the tranquility of *Heidi*, allowing for an implied critique in the guise of a Swiss fantasy.

The program's format of weekly 24-minute episodes allowed time to develop a tightly woven character-world wherein Heidi and the mountain environment are of equal importance. As viewers gradually come to know and care for Heidi as each episode progresses, they also deepen their appreciation for the mountain landscape. The effect is twofold. The once-a-week serial structure allowed the character to develop and mature gradually in the minds of the viewers. The time invested by the viewers deepened their engagement with the work. This is true for most serial TV dramas and anime, but the way the narrative time is expanded demonstrates a key difference from other works.

The narrative time evolves as Heidi introduces her surroundings, experiencing varied activities in the mountains with her grandfather Alm-Ohi and her same-aged neighbor Peter who becomes her best friend. The process of mapping out the terrain and the construction of the character-world is largely conveyed through Heidi's perspective. Her activities, whether making her bed or eating warm cheese on bread, coupled with daily excursions to play in the nearby meadow's stream or watch the mountain birds convey Heidi's infectious excitement about the small events of daily life. Intertwined with episodes of Heidi's positive attitude are omnipresent cuts of the appealing landscape. There is no anthropomorphizing of the mountain in any cartoon-like or abstracted manner, instead there is a more neutral depiction of the seasonal changes, weather conditions and the lush wildlife of the flora and fauna. The landscape is treated as an equal to the depiction of the character's growth. The multiple non-verbal aspects of nature radiate their attractiveness (and occasional eeriness), which are reflected in the reactions of Heidi and Peter. Through these arrangements, viewers are invited to experience narrative time from two perspectives.

In this TV series the character-world evolves from an unknown nebulous background into a concrete mountain landscape, a countryside that acts as a repository of freedom for Heidi as well as an independent entity. To reiterate, in the *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* series, Takahata constructed the equal standing of characters and their world, without prioritizing the cuteness of the characters as the chief engagement of the narrative. Their world is more than a background where actions take place. There is a growing relationship between the narrative time and the character-world as each episode progresses. In this manner, characters and their world are solidified, developing a richer sense of existence that enriches the viewing experience. For viewers who followed it weekly, a growing sense of familiarity was at play, in the sense that Heidi becomes a fully developed character rather than a stylized protagonist, and the mountain landscape becomes an indispensable embodied element of the storytelling.

Coming back to the issue of how the time is spent within the series, new viewers today are not bound to the weekly viewing pattern of the original broadcast. Faster modes are available, including binge-watching on streaming websites. In these new viewing situations, a non-linear way of consumption can alter the manner and speed of narrative development. Contents can now be fast-forwarded, paused, rewind and above all, compartmentalized in ways outside the original intents of the TV broadcast. The intensive watching of episodes one after another ultimately prioritizes a narrative focus. Plot development and the consequences for the characters become the purpose and final resolution of the work. Attention is focused on anticipation of "what happens next" in the series rather than "how it happened". The latter question requires thought over time to give the gradual unfolding of the visual presentation a chance to achieve its deeper impact. For the *Heidi* series, uninterrupted viewing potentially demotes the carefully orchestrated everyday life activities in the Alps to a muted background. The mountain scenery and animals could become reduced to a static stage where characters perform, or a simple location where an event took place. Even though the current online platforms provide an opportunity for the rediscovery of Takahata's older TV works, including this *Heidi* series, unless viewers recreate the old time-consuming mode of viewing, they may miss the initial intention of the narrative design to engage more deeply with the characters and their world at a slower pace.

Moving on to *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*, an exceptionally beautiful hand-drawn animation, Takahata struggled to build upon his earlier work while maintaining a balance between good storytelling and further exploration of the expressive potential of animation. His rejection of standardized line work, especially the use of outlines for characters demonstrate his search for new directions. Despite its varying thickness, the uniformly drawn outline for characters and the placing of coloring within its allocated space is among the most distinctive characteristics of 2D celluloid-style animation. Takahata wanted to do something different in *Kaguya* than that

found in most commercial productions. As Takahata remarked in an interview, he wanted to rebel against the current celluloid-style animation storytelling design (see Nichibi interview 2019). This is remarkable because early in his career Takahata had played a role in creating systematic role divisions for the purpose of standardization in anime series production process while at Toei and subsequently at A Production. Tateno Hitomi, a veteran who worked as an animation checker at Studio Ghibli, wrote that it was Miyazaki and Takahata who invented such posts during their production of the *Heidi* series. The necessity came from the need to monitor the quality while rectifying the 'mistakes' of in-betweens based on the key drawings before they were passed onto the coloring department (Tateno 2015, 23). Takahata's input had increased the production efficiency, yet its wide-spread adoption also led to a standardized procedure that leaves little room for creativity. In this sense, Takahata was also reacting against his earlier experiences when he had enthusiastically endorsed the hand-drawn quality of character outlines in *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*.

Takahata referred to the character outlines in *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* as *yosuga* (縁), emphasizing their fluid incompleteness intended to amplify the essence of the scene. As Katabuchi puts it: "the line work that Takahata desired is not limited to giving shape and form to an object, but are emotions themselves" (see Nichibi interview 2019). Katabuchi's acute observation can be extended even further. In principle, the outline gives shape and existence to a drawn object. It also separates the character from the background for the convenience of creating animated motion. Standardized outlines are easy to duplicate and ensure a consistent appearance. Lines with individualistic qualities (for example, having different thickness and pressure) require much more time and skill to reproduce, thus increasing the workload and complicating production. Takahata took this approach to such extremes that Suzuki Toshio was prompted to comment, "Takahata was especially concerned with line: its lightness and darkness, its thicknesses, the beginning and ending of individual



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strokes of the brush. The in-between animators practically had to trace the lines of the drawings done by the key animators. This process verged on madness, and it was terribly time-consuming. It might take twice as long to finish, or three or four times as long" (Suzuki 2018, 204). These difficulties among others resulted in *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* becoming at the time of its release the most expensive anime in Japanese history.<sup>1)</sup> Therefore, Takahata's approach is usually avoided in mainstream productions. The sketchy line work in *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* that is the visual highlight of some scenes are not just aesthetically appealing and emotionally enriching, it also physically lessens the distinction between characters and their background (character-world). The color scheme and the watercolor background also reinforce these qualities. Put differently, drawing on the meaning of *yosuga* which also means margin, connection and relationship, this new approach to line invites us to see the character and background as interrelated features of equal importance. This is different from most productions that aim to project the main characters and their stories on top of an unformulated background. Here, the priority of the character is blurred and background is as important literally. The highlight of the background or locale does not connect to any attempts to promote an actual place for tourism or other purposes.

Feature-length *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* is meant to be watched in one sitting, yet it demands time to reflect on the story, similar to the *Heidi* series. Primarily, the narrative structure is different from the familiar patterns found in anime. The story starts with the bamboo cutter's discovery of Princess Kaguya and ends with her loss when she returns to the moon. The narrative is mainly structured as a chain of actions and reactions as one event leads to the next. There are no actual villains, and the confrontations do not lead to resolution. Takahata used many sequences to depict her isolation which are contrasted with the comical marriage proposal segments. Even though there are a few climactic moments, none leads to an explanation of why Princess Kaguya came to earth.

However, by employing Takahata's idea of *yosuga* to portray the animated narrative, a new perspective arises that *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* is not focused on the titular character. This is in line with the principle that Takahata developed during his career as director:

"What I intended in my work, including *Grave of the Fireflies*, and *Only Yesterday*, was not, as I had until then, to have the audience become totally absorbed in the story, but rather to have them observe it from a certain distance. I have attempted not to get them to forget themselves entirely, but to leave some room for rational thought. .... Sometimes I even want them to take a critical view of the protagonist" (qtd. in Suzuki 98).

Thus, when the characters and the background or their world are equally important and subject to interchange, as seen in the growing of plants and the changing seasons, this adaptation of *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* is about Princess Kaguya but it also becomes a story about the passing of time. The sad transience of things (*mono no aware*) becomes more prominent than the characters.<sup>2)</sup> The passage of flowers from the plum, camellia, magnolia to cherry; the sounds of the cicadas in summer; the way Princess Kaguya grows and how the shadows fall visualize time and contrast it with character dynamics and endurance. The passage of time is shown in a concentrated fashion, appearing only to disappear. Takahata summed up this point in the leitmotif song, "The Child's Song" and the "The Celestial Maiden's Song" (by Takahata and Sakaguchi Riko):

Round, round, go round, waterwheel go round

Go round, and call Mr. Sun

Go round, and call Mr. Sun

Birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers

Bring spring and summer, fall and winter

Bring spring and summer, fall and winter

Round, round, go round, waterwheel go round

Go round, and call Mr. Sun

Go round, and call Mr. Sun

Birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers

Flower, bear fruit, and die

Be born, grow up, and die

Still the wind blows, the rain falls

The waterwheel goes round

Lifetimes come and go in turn

Lifetimes come and go in turn

The discussion above illustrated some observations about Takahata's fundamental approaches towards character portrayal and the construction of its respective character-world that defy standard norms. In the character-world of *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*, the mountain landscape is further strengthened and treated like a non-verbal character of equal importance. It disturbs the established idea of character as the main and the 'background' as the subordinate. Furthermore, it emphasized a path to discover various engagements in everyday life setting (no magic or exaggerated appeals to emotion)

against the backdrop of a mountain landscape. As in *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*, Takahata discarded the standardized line, most notably for the character outlines. The overall outcome has an individualized aesthetic appeal. Following this interpretation of *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*, it makes sense to consider that Takahata has again treated the 'background' here as a non-verbal character. But there is more to it. Considering *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* and *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* are almost four decades apart, it appears that Takahata wanted to challenge an aspect of his earlier work.

One key characteristic of recent Japanese anime industry is the creation of works using the Production Committee (*seisaku iinkai*) in order to lessen financial risk by co-sharing the work on multiple platforms. All components (the character, the voice actor, the locale and so on) are subjected to monetization and there is a constant outwardly directed movement during the collaboration for the production, maintenance and the engagement of a work (Steinberg, 2012). Given these circumstances Takahata had tried to escape from that established pattern for both character and the character-world in this, his last work. With its ambiguous plotting, neither the character nor its 'background' became the concrete focus. It is the passing of time itself, a concept, an intangible thought, that requires contemplation rather than the promotion and marketing of merchandize. This can be regarded as a fresh departure from the character star system Tezuka Osamu established in his manga, which took root in anime series thereafter. It was Takahata's attempt to separate anime storytelling from the need to service other sectors, such as promoting certain locales for tourism and other purposes. Takahata's accomplishment in deviating from the norms and expectations in anime expressions is remarkable in today's corporate environment.

***The barely-filled rice bowl***

The depiction of food in animation is one of many aspects of Ghibli productions that has fascinated people. Studio Ghibli's food portrayal



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tends to be associated with a whole range of positive emotional appeal from the palatability (the bacon and eggs in *Howl's Moving Castle*), healing power (Chihiro and the rice balls) to warmth and transformation (Ponyo and the ham). Internet content-sharing sites, such as Pinterest or bilibili display videos, and still images are clipped from animations and uploaded by fans who share their passion or in hope to earn advertisement fees. Food images have migrated out of their initial animated context into a medium for re-experiencing portrayals of succulent food in pleasant surroundings. Some commonly appearing titles include: "food that increases appetite", "scrumptious food", "temptation food", "food that heals" and "food that sparks happiness". In real-life, there are cafés and Airbnb that have based their themes on Ghibli's food imagery. Many of these locations have capitalized on the cuteness, innocence, fluffiness, warmth and nostalgia, often decorating their interiors with an atmosphere that resembles the original source animation. The food served in these places may or may not be inspired by the animation. But, they capitalize on providing an environment to share good moments with others in a non-daily life setting engulfed with coziness that is bracketed by references to animation narratives.

But the image of food is relatively difficult to isolate from its narrative in Takahata's works. There are only few exceptions and one of them is the famous cheese sequence in *Heidi*. Tsugata Nobuyuki (2018) writes that he still remembers vividly the delicious atmosphere of the melting grilled cheese on a steel skewer over the fireplace and later served on a bread in Episode 2 of *Heidi*. He was about 5 or 6 years old at that time. Impressed with what he saw, he tried to grill his cheese for a similar effect but unfortunately it did not work out. Interestingly, when he shared this episode in class, some of his university students from a different generation (four decades later) also recalled their own fond memories of that delicious-looking cheese sequence. That sequence was a collaboration between Miyazaki and Takahata. Although the series was directed by Takahata, the layout and the sequence were drawn and animated

by Miyazaki. Upon close inspection, one would notice the overall characterization and animation (rhythm) lean towards Miyazaki, the layout and world-view setting lean more towards Takahata. Miyazaki and Takahata continued to work together on other TV series such as *3000 Leagues in Search for Mother* (1976) and *Anne of Green Gables* (1979) but the cheese sequence from *Heidi* remains the most unforgettable food-related sequence.

For Takahata, a rejection of the positivity of food and its tactility can constantly be observed. Food is employed as a plot device that can serve as reminders of unpleasantness and bitterness. The question of Takahata's food-related depictions can be well explored in examples from *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) and *Only Yesterday* (1991). In a short dinner sequence of *Grave of the Fireflies* (see 00:29:47-00:30:36) where Seita and Setsuko are having dinner with their aunt and her family, we see a conversation between the aunt and her husband. It is about the dire circumstances of the war that led to a severe shortage of food. Their conversation displays features of the overall war atmosphere, including the fear and uncertainty of the adults. The highlight, though, is illustrated through an interplay of an unspoken visual exchange that heightens the selfish culpability of the aunt, the guilt of the daughter and the grievance of Seita as shown through the device of a rarely-filled rice bowl. The sequence starts with a medium shot, tilting down to show the aunt serving the family dinner at a *chabudai*, a short-legged dining table. We can see the aunt serving her husband a full bowl of porridge, mixed with sweet potatoes, rice and seaweed. There is still a fair amount of white rice in it, despite the difficult times. When Seita hands his rice bowl to the aunt to get another bowl of food, we are shown him looking briefly in the husband's direction, then towards Setsuko at the other side of the table. When Seita gets his rice bowl back from his aunt, it is a watery porridge with only some seaweed in it. Seita looks perplexed, pauses for a moment, and then accepts it without saying a word. We are not shown what Seita saw when he looked towards the husband and Setsuko. Takahata's restraint in not providing a return shot invites the

viewer to imagine what Seita saw. Setsuko was likely given the same thin gruel even though we see her busy slurping from her rice bowl whose contents are not revealed. The subsequent shot is followed by a cut where the daughter enters the room, sits down and joins the table. Again, there is a brief look from Seita, this time a quite conscious gaze at the daughter's fully-filled rice bowl as her mother serves her. The next shot illustrates the daughter and Setsuko in a medium shot, sitting side by side. This time, the interior of Setsuko's rice bowl is visible. Like Seita's, her bowl is filled with brownish rice water and seaweed.

This visual juxtaposition enhances the narrative on different levels. It first confirms that Seita and Setsuko are not provided with enough food. It then contrasted Seita's aggrieved expression with the innocence of Setsuko. Finally providing the visual reaction of the daughter blushing as she notices the discriminatory treatment of the "guests". This realization happens in the same shot where she is portrayed sitting next to Setsuko. However, instead of having the daughter react to Setsuko in the same frame, the audience sees her looking outside of the frame in Seita's direction. This performance provokes our curiosity with what she saw. However, her glance was not answered with an instant reverse-shot. Instead, we merely saw her lower her head with reddened cheeks and continue eating after exchanging a glance with Seita. The awkwardness is well revealed through her extended reactions without spoken dialogue. All these visual juxtapositions can be reproduced in live-action footages seamlessly except the reddened cheeks reaction. A post production job (maybe some sort of compositing) will be required to produce this reddened cheeks effect in a live-action film. Here, the subtle reddened cheeks is a small visual climax accomplished by careful use of the animated images.

All these imageries are carefully sequenced to be unobtrusive yet engaging. From the small element of reddened cheeks within the longer sequence, the impact of the story is intensified by contrasting the unspoken tension between Seita, the aunt and her daughter. For

example, the immediately previous sequence depicted the aunt's suspicions that Seita and Setsuko's father might have died in the war. This had already amplified her stress as his death would remove any hope of quickly shedding responsibility for the unwanted children. If he has died, she feels that taking care of these children from a distant relative will be a liability that brings no reward. The dinner sequence about the rarely-filled rice bowl capitalizes on the need to somehow find more money and food, and the uncertainty of the food supply for the household. This complexity of meaning is achieved with a delicate balance between the verbal (short conversation between the aunt and her husband) and the visual (the distribution of food at the dinner table and the resultant reddened cheeks). The aunt's selfishness at the dinner table reveals her inner anxieties and growing disgust towards the unwanted children. The dramatization of the characters in this everyday life setting at a dinner table non-verbally conveys the aunt's bitterness and the pathos of the youngsters' plight. The complexity of the characters' situation is used initially to generate a rationalized background atmosphere for the story more than providing a nuanced characterization, only gradually does it deepen awareness of the unfolding tragedy of the children.

Such attention to detail is a regular feature in Takahata's works. The deployment of details within the dialogue, diegetic sounds (Setsuko's slurping), non-verbal imagery (the exchange of gaze between Seita and the daughter with reddened cheeks) as demonstrated above all carefully considered for their overall effectiveness in a narrative that does not convey everything in words. This requires the audience to pay close attention to the imagery to grasp fully the emotional complexity of his approach. Thus, the multifaceted emotional feelings at the dinner table feel real, generating sympathy and angst in the audience. The rarely-filled rice bowl episode associates the image of food to a realistic depiction of the brutality of the war on families and foreshadows its resultant casualties as Seita and Setsuko later die from hunger and malnutrition.



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The sense of presence created by Takahata's depiction of the children is two-fold: 1. The realistic representation of their day-to-day environment through well selected background drawings and props, 2. The character portrayal of Seita. This is best illustrated by Seita's decision to move out from the aunt's house to stay independently with Setsuko in one of the riverside bunkers. Even though this evolves into a fatal decision, this setting prompts the viewer to consider what if Seita had endured life with the aunt? Would that have led to a happier ending, and if so, how would it alter the meaning of the narrative? The plain visual depiction of Seita without the conventional cuteness of children in animation does not make him automatically lovable. The emotional distance of viewers from his actions produces a more documentary effect, lacking the attractions of harmonic resonance and easy satisfaction often found in Ghibli works.

This attitude appears in a recent interview with Takahata about children's literature. In *The Phantom Pippi Longstocking*, that retains various sketches, storyboards, scripts and detailed notes from 1971 in preparation for the adaption of Astrid Lindgren's children book, *Pippi Longstocking*, Takahata stated his adoration of Pippi's playful, yet strong and unpredictable character. However, he also asserted the need to go beyond this cheerful story in making an animation for children. Takahata appreciates stories, whether in books or movies, that deal with unpleasantness, frustration, or the depressing aspects of growing up if they are presented as one of the valuable experiences of everyday life (2014:136). In a separate interview, Takahata also emphasized the importance to produce animations that prompt the viewers to ponder on the interactions among individuals, not just limited to depicting courage and hope (2019). Inspired by Paul Grimault, Takahata intended to give a characters a sense of existence by paying close attention to the portrayal of their consciousness, be it realism or symbolism, to produce works that have substance, with sincere, strong presence of interiority and social dimensions. The story of Seita and Setsuko echoes these thoughts and remains a uniquely powerful viewing experience. Takahata unpacked

the conventional cuteness, desirability and adorability of anime characters and objects. He reconstructed images of food to tie them to the desolation of the narrative, showing that the severity of war can overcome our abilities to adjust, as can be seen in this barely-filled rice bowl episode.

**The candy tin that is hard to be commodified and the sour pineapple**

The food depicted by Takahata does not arouse appetite as they are not represented as lusciously as those seen in Miyazaki's works. The rice bowl episode above illustrates this point, where the sense of taste and its eating experience are not meant for visual indulgence as they don't stimulate appetite. This same perception can be seen in the use of a tin of candy drops in another sequence of *Grave of the Fireflies*. This candy tin was modeled after the Sakura drops made by Sakumaseika which contains hard candies with different fruity flavors. This item is not a simple plot device, as it has a strong symbolic undertone and appears multiple times at crucial moments throughout the animation. We first see it in the opening sequence when a worker at a train station picks up the candy tin beside Seita's malnourished and dying body. He first wonders what it is before finally pitching it away into the station courtyard like a baseball. When the candy tin hits the ground, its lid detaches and some fragmented bones spill out in a close up. Then some green-and-yellow dots slowly appear and multiply on the screen in a full shot. These dots gradually resemble glowing fireflies. Against this backdrop of drifting fireflies (00:02:34), we hear the introduction music and see Setsuko rise from the ground where the bones had been. Setsuko's ghost reunites with Seita's ghost, now looking entirely renewed as a healthy teenage brother as opposed to his emaciated body. They hold hands, walking off screen as the animation title appears (00:03:27).

The story starts with a vision of the past. The candy tin is introduced as an abandoned object, then as a container for cremated remains. In both events, it is associated with waste, death and

in many ways mirroring the transience of life. As the narrative progresses through a series of recollections, we learn that the candy tin is the sole surviving item from their burned-out family home. Seita had shared the reserved food resources that he had dug up from the burned family garden with his aunt's family as soon as he and Setsuko moved in with them. He too eventually has to sell all their remaining personal belongings (including their mother's kimonos) in exchange for food. Thus, the candy tin is the only remaining material item, the only tie to his past and his memories of home. In this manner, the role of the candy tin is varied and complex from the very beginning. It is also shown to be an object that is loved and cherished. On multiple occasions, the candy provides tangible comfort and a sense of normality for Setsuko and Seita. There are vivid depictions of how Setsuko consumes the candies, from sucking and chewing on a whole drop in the beginning, to finally drinking the water that Seita poured into the container to extract any remaining flavors from the empty tin. These candies do not stimulate appetite, but do function as a meaningful object that enriches the story, increasing the audience's sympathy with the characters.

The sense of nostalgic connections, happiness and the poignancy surrounding the candies become enmeshed with Seita and Setsuko's experiences. This way of portraying the candy cannot be incorporated into the trendy food images found in the light-hearted fan-made clips, or cozy cafés of the real world. The candy tin's complex associations with sadness, bygone happiness, and even ashes are antithetical to the commercial fantasies of delicious sweets. The breakdown of food images in *Grave of the Fireflies* points to Takahata's interest in the philosophical depiction of food. Takahata's depiction of food can feel different even if it is not a war-related topic linking food to hunger and suffering.<sup>3)</sup> These instances can be usefully compared to sequences involving food in *Only Yesterday*, that revolves around Taeko, a female office worker in Tokyo, who finds her dream of life and love fulfilled in the Japanese countryside.

The animation follows the process of Taeko reviewing her

memories which stands out due to the juxtaposition of on-screen images of her twenty-seven-year-old and as ten-year old self. We not only see her past life as a child, we also experience the vivid portrayal of her imagination. In one of the famous scenes, a boy of her age from another class waits to confess his feelings towards her on the way home. Even though Taeko is shy, she is engulfed in such warm feelings that she is illustrated happily immersed in fantasies while walking on an invisible staircase towards the sky. The sequence ends with Taeko dreamingly gliding down from the sky onto her futon, her eyes shining while she puts on her pajamas. The final cut shows the exterior, where there is a pink love sign glowing from inside her house. These depictions playfully illustrate Taeko as a romantic, imaginative child. This kind of juxtaposition and the visualization of dream sequences reveals an imaginative fantasy that utilizes the animation properties, such as defying the gravity by walking in the sky and gliding into the futon. In fact, it was Takahata's idea to pair the twenty-seven-year-old Taeko character with her younger self to perform on the same shots. They understood the potential of the animation medium to depict fantasy and desire. In animation, the present can meet the past not bound by the constraints of physical camera lenses, real sets and finding pairs of actors who can believably represent the same character at greatly different times in their life. Brightness and shadow, weight and lightness can be manipulated and layered through the multiplanar camera.

The depictions of food in *Only Yesterday* were also being carefully planned with the same level of imagination. There are several key techniques that make food look and feel delicious on screen. For instance, the combination of sight and sound in portraying steamy, sizzling food. A large part of successfully conveying the aura of good food depends on the reactions of the character to the food. Displays of enthusiasm tend to make the food feel more exciting. In *Only Yesterday*, a most memorable scene shows Taeko and her family having their first experience eating a pineapple. One December day in 1965, Taeko successfully persuaded her father to



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purchase a pineapple, which was then an exotic and expensive fruit sold in Ginza. As they had never tasted a fresh pineapple, Taeko is sitting excitedly at a kotatsu together with her two sisters and grandmother. Taeko places both of her hands on the pineapple waiting enthusiastically. However, this pineapple eating sequence does not build to a climax because none of them knows anything about the fruit. The mother decides to postpone the event, and she interrupts Taeko's admiration for the fragrance of the fruit by removing the pineapple from the table. This sequence ends with Taeko and the younger sister each having a banana while still sitting at the kotatsu looking bewildered at the distant pineapple. Taeko's first attempt at tasting a pineapple met with this delay and soon a week has passed. This time, the excitement builds up again as Taeko's elder sister happily announces she has learned how to eat a pineapple. There is a ceremonious gathering at their kitchen table where the whole family quietly watches how the elder sister carefully removes the pineapple's crown and thorny skin until the bright yellow color of the fruit slowly appears in close-ups. One by one, Taeko requests to have the crown, the skin and the central axis. She bursts with energy, brings her nose close to these parts, skipping around the house while shouting out repeatedly "what a good fragrance". The whole family finally sits down at the kotatsu to admire this rare tropical fruit. This prolonged episode of anticipation finally approaches its climax with about twenty seconds of soundless (see 00:10:38-00:10:58) close-up intercuts of Taeko as she observes each of family member tasting the pineapple. Blinded with her own excitement, Taeko does not sense that they seem confused, until she also takes her first bite, instinctively crying out the fruit feels stiff. Nevertheless, Taeko does not want to give up. She is now the only one in the family trying hard to finish her pineapple. It must have tasted sour judging from the close-ups of her facial expressions. Upon finishing, Taeko pauses, seems relieved and quietly announces it tasted delicious. She then picks up and chews on another piece left by her sisters, as if insisting on making this pineapple eating event into a sweet and pleasant

memory, something eventful in her mundane everyday life, despite its bitterness. This food sequence is remarkable because it strays away from the duality of delicious or non-delicious food, and instead focuses on the contrast between expectation and disappointment that can often happen in life.

Another noteworthy food-related sequence occurs when Taeko is supposed to go with her family to a Chinese restaurant. A small verbal fight with her sister concerning a red handbag triggers her tantrum. She curls up disappointedly at a wall next to their genkan and decides not to go. However, when the family is about to leave, she rushes out and cries agitatedly that she wants to join them. The father suddenly loses his patience and slaps Taeko across the cheek. Perhaps it was because Taeko did not put on her shoes, or maybe it was merely her indecisiveness that made her look spoiled. The Chinese restaurant episode ends with Taeko collapsing at the genkan, sobbing in disappointment. This episode concerning eating, yet with the absence of food, fully captures the nuances of Taeko's distress and the subsequent regret of her father despite their inability to express their state of mind through words. Taeko ends up looking spoiled and the father abusive. The reference to food acts more as a catalysis for conflict than as a communal meal. It does not transform her character by fulfilling her hunger, desire or forging a friendship with others. But it plays a role as a process wherein the adult Taeko can now rationally deal with complex entwined emotions, including the resentment and awkwardness that once made her isolated.

In works such as these, the food images of Takahata do not instantly charm the eyes or incite the appetite unlike those in Miyazaki Hayao's works. The above examples illustrate that Takahata approached food and taste in his visual storytelling not as static objects of desire, but as key narrative elements that keep evolving in different states of mind and memories. Miyazaki is renowned as a natural-born animator with a genius for depicting movement (Oshii, 2017:49). Takahata on the contrary, was not as skillful in drawing. He had a *jikonte* (written storyboard), instead of the conventional

*ekonte* (drawn storyboard), that was filled with various instructions for camera work or blocking of the characters for the overall atmosphere. Takahata was critical of using motion indiscriminately and thought carefully about the meaning of movement. He did not want to just depict, but to address ideas and to respond to situations. Putting his depiction of food into this context, it is not surprising that the image of food and its associations in Takahata's works are almost the antithesis of Miyazaki's depiction of food. In a manner very characteristic of him, Takahata's use of food is for stimulating thoughts rather than appetite, becoming a feast of impressions and thoughts rather than enjoyable flavors.

Outsider on the inside

Looking beyond Studio Ghibli as an animation studio to view it more broadly as a cultural institution helps to make sense of the reception of Takahata. Miyazaki's overwhelming popularity and influence have dominated the public perception of Studio Ghibli. In contrast to such accolades for Miyazaki's renowned abilities to create lovable characters in entertaining narratives, Takahata was presented as a rational intellect; although falling short in the practicalities of drawing skills, he is seen as a well-read director with a strong interest in visual experimentation in animation storytelling. His visual experimentation is most characterized by its departure from the norms. At the tip of the triangulation that constituted Ghibli's power structure, was Suzuki Toshio. A well-connected resourceful man, famous for being an effective producer who keeps operations in check for Ghibli while helping to maintain a balance between the work and attitudes of Miyazaki and Takahata. The Ghibli establishment is celebrated for its extraordinary dedication and love for animation. Their works are exceptionally well crafted. Ghibli also keeps bringing out new productions by young directors, in addition to their museum and short animations which attempt to keep the studio relevant and exciting. Yet this aura of greatness has diverted attention from the individual differences among its creators.

The discussions of specific sequences from Takahata's works above examine his storytelling through narrative forms with a focus on the textual and visual elements of animation. This is an effective way to view a creator like Takahata who always paid close attention to minute details of how a story could be unfolded differently from others. This analysis illustrates how Takahata reflected on the construction of key premises in Japanese animation industry, the character and character-world format and presentation, which over the years have become more institutionalized. Takahata's rigorous approach that resisted easy commercialization was almost antithetical to the usual fantasy world of Miyazaki, yet it contributed to diversifying the Ghibli brand, preventing it from being limited to a specific visual and narrative style and viewership. Takahata's animations require attentive engagement to find pleasure and meaning. His animation storytelling relies on visual juxtaposition and editing to narrate the story. Animation was employed not just in a narrow sense. The enjoyment of his animation is about discovery through unfamiliarity. He was good at providing stories with hints that allow room for his viewers' interpretative responses. Like a complex live action film, his animations are multilayered visual narratives whose engagement is formed beyond the familiar character and character-world in order to energize repeated viewings.<sup>4)</sup> His characters are not as adorable as those found in Miyazaki's world that lend themselves to the production of figurines for adoring fans. The engagement with his characters is encapsulated in the narrative. As a result, his central characters tend to pale when separated from their narratives. They possess more subdued aspects when compared to Miyazaki's penchant for representing fun (Totoro), innocence (Mei), cuteness (Susuwatari-dust-sprites), braveness (Nausicaa) or showiness (Howl) that have caused them to be deeply loved outside of their narrative contexts. Takahata's characters may seem dry and less inviting even though works like *Pom Poko* (1994) involve much innocent humor and cuteness. Takahata desired an audience for his works that would share his ideas and observations at a slower



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pace, forming connections less reliant on their commodification into merchandise. Thus, it is not surprising that Takahata's works are mostly absent from the typical merchandise circuit where it is rare to come across items drawn from his works. Takahata's absence in the world of Ghibli marketing reflects the different approach of his animations that were intended to be savored within the context of their original narratives rather than generate semi-independent figures for a "star system" as initiated by Tezuka Osamu decades earlier. As has been shown above, Takahata was a genuine outsider inside Ghibli. Yet this outside status is not a mere metaphor as was pointed out by Suzuki Toshio:

Takahata was never an official member of Ghibli, which might surprise some people. ... In fact, some are of the opinion that a film director should not be a member of any studio. ... on the day of the official signing ceremony, everyone was supposed to bring their personal seal, but of course Takahata didn't bring his. Takahata said, among other things, 'a real creator shouldn't place his seal on a document like this.' ... Thereafter, while he offered advice, he was not an official member of Ghibli. (Suzuki 99)

Despite his many roles with Ghibli as producer, advisor and director, among others, Takahata held to his independent status while simultaneously lending his full support to Ghibli. The importance Takahata gave to maintaining his own vision of animation was essential for his vision of himself as a creator. The more deeply one analyzes his work the clearer it becomes that Takahata, while borrowing ideas and suggestions from others, tried to create and maintain his own approach within the world of animation at large and even within the circle of his friends and associates in Ghibli. In the ongoing struggle between the creative intents of animation directors and the complex commercial forces represented by representatives of the cross-platform companies commonly found on the production

committee that shape the form and content of most animations and films, Takahata remains an important example of a creator who was able to maintain much of his intended meaning and approach and still reach a broad audience.<sup>5)</sup> Yet, to achieve that end required Takahata to maintain an "outsider" stance even within the comparatively comfortable situation at Ghibli.

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Notes

- 1) The total cost was 5 billion one hundred million yen. See <https://dogadata.com/497>
- 2) Mark Schilling also recognized this in his review of the work; "it exemplifies better than any film in recent memory the aesthetic of mono no aware — the pathos inherent in all things" Japan Times, 12/26/13. [missing in the Bibliography...]
- 3) Even though the tanuki in *Heisei Tanuki* show a rapturous delighter obsession, for many types of food ranging from tempura to hamburgers, the portrayal of the food is simple with the focus being on humor rather than the food itself.
- 4) Some viewers, while declaring that they like *Grave of the Fireflies*, state that it was just too painful for them to ever watch it again.
- 5) Takahata's films sometimes drew huge audiences in Japan. Only *Yesterday* was the highest grossing Japanese film in 1991 and ranked

"I've Seen this Place Before." Memory, Exile and Remembrance in *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*  
Susan Napier (Tufts University)

third when foreign films are included. See Eiga rankings dotto komu [www.eiga-ranking.com/boxoffice/japan/yearly/total/1991.html](http://www.eiga-ranking.com/boxoffice/japan/yearly/total/1991.html)

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