The struggles of independent critical filmmakers in India

In the summer of 2019, when the central government under Narendra Modi declared a new and expanded ‘veteran’ documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan’s latest film Vivek (Rezon) (2018) to be screened at the renowned International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala, the organizers of the festival, together with Patwardhan, did what he often did when his earlier films faced state censorship. They took the battle to court, won the case, and finally gained permission to screen the self-funded and seemingly critical documentary at the festival in Thiruvanthapuram. Structured in eight parts, Vivek scrutinizes the mainstreaming of violent Hindutva ideology and majoritarian nationalism in India during the last decade. While the successful litigation in Kerala could be seen as a glimmer of hope for the continued possibility for audiences to engage with critical independent documentaries in India, the fact that Vivek, along with a number of other critically acclaimed films, was not screened at the 15th Mumbai International Film Festival in January this year (MIFF 2020) may not have come as a surprise for many.

MIFF was launched in 1992 as Bombay International Film Festival. It is the largest international film festival of non-feature films in South Asia, organized by the Films Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. In the aftermath of the violence in the western Indian state of Gujarat, a censor requirement for Indian films at MIFF was introduced which, in turn, led to the organization of the alternative Vikalp Film Festival in 1994, which ran parallel to it and where all the films rejected by the MIFF were screened (for a vivid account of this festival and its politics, see Thomas Waugh’s article ‘Miff’d or ‘Gosped for (polluted?) air’, BioScope 3(1), 2012: 87–93). Thereafter, the critical independent documentary at MIFF has been withdrawn; of late, however, some notice a new form of indirect censorship vis-a-vis independent documentaries that simply do not get selected.

Not one, but many forms and practices

Instead of a universal understanding of the term ‘independent’, which is often used loosely by many, Nadja-Christina Schneider argues for a localized perspective that needs to be contextualized historically and spatially. Thus the opening paragraph of her book starts with references to these two ‘icons’ of independent documentary filmmaking, Vivek, and Anand Patwardhan. It may be difficult to imagine another Vikalp Film Festival in the current situation. But it continues to exist as an important platform for “over 300 documentary filmmakers dispersed across India” (p.4) who communicate through the Vikalp Films for Freedom listserve. Not the cornering of the term ‘independent’ documentary filmmaking that dates back to the mid-1970s, when the Emergency declared by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi threatened the democratic political
Hayao Miyazaki
Exploring the early work of Japan’s greatest animator

Mari Nakamura

Review: Hayao Miyazaki: Exploring the Early Work of Japan’s Greatest Animator

Raz Greenberg, 2018.
New York: Bloomsbury Academic
ISBN 9781631490039

Still from ‘Spirited Away (2001)’. Reproduced with permission. © Studio Ghibli.

S

Studio Ghibli, led by Hayao Miyazaki and the late Isao Takahata, is one of the most celebrated Japanese animation studios and has attracted a global audience for over 30 years. Many books and articles have been written in English about Studio Ghibli’s works, including Susan Napier’s Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke (Palgrave, 2001), Helen McCarthy’s Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation (Palgrave, 2001), Thomas Lamarre’s Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation (Palgrave, 2001), Helen McCarthy’s Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation (Palgrave, 2001), and Rayna Denison’s edited volume Ghibli’s works, including Susan Napier’s Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation (Palgrave, 2001), Helen McCarthy’s Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation (Palgrave, 2001), and Rayna Denison’s edited volume Anime Machine (Stone Bridge Press, 1999), which has been less explored by scholars outside of Japan.

Yet very recently, Miyazaki’s early work has been less explored by scholars outside of Japan. A notable exception is Susan Napier’s recent groundbreaking autobiography, Miyazakworld: A Life in Art (Yale University Press, 2018), Raz Greenberg’s new book, Hayao Miyazaki: Exploring the Early Work of Japan’s Greatest Animator, is a welcome volume filling this gap in the literature in English. In this book Greenberg aims to offer “Miyazaki in context” in its reflection of how Miyazaki grew within the emerging post-World War II Japanese animation industry and how his rise within the same industry is a very important part of his country becoming an animation superpower” (pp.xii-xiii).

The book showcases the richness of styles, narratives and themes in Miyazaki’s works and how his creativity has evolved over the 50 years of his career. It starts by tracing Miyazaki’s early life – his childhood dream of becoming a manga artist, his encounter with Toei Animation’s first featured animated film Panda and the Magic Serpent (1958) – and his early years as an animator at Toei, the first largescale animation studio in Japan, between 1962 and 1971. The first chapter examines many works that Miyazaki was involved in and the studio veterans he collaborated with, including Takahata, Usui Katabe, Yasu Mori, and Yasuo Osaka. Greenberg also discusses how Miyazaki was profoundly influenced by Paul Grimault’s The Adventures of Mr. Wonderful (1952) and Lev Amatov’s The Snow Queen (1957) in terms of conceptual, visual, and narrative styles.

The second chapter examines Miyazaki’s role in the animated adaptations of classic children’s literature in the 1970s, including Jules Verne’s The Adventures of the Alpha (1979), 3,000 Leagues in Search of Mother (1979), and Anne of Green Gables (1979) as well as the original short films Panda and the Magic Serpent (1972). Miyazaki’s first trip abroad was an important source of inspiration, and his great love for the European landscapes were integrated into these shows. Linking these early television series and short films to Miyazaki’s later films with Studio Ghibli, Greenberg argues that Miyazaki started practicing new forms of narratives, styles, and themes through these projects. The third chapter focuses on Miyazaki’s directorial debut feature film The Castle of Cagliostro (1979) as well as the preceding animated television series Lupin the Third (1971, 1972), which are based on the popular action manga by Monkey Punch. The fourth chapter offers a close study of Miyazaki’s largest manga project, Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind (1979-1997) and the 1990s book adaptation of the manga. This chapter examines how the world of Nausicaa was built upon a wide range of the director’s inspirations from Japanese and Western literature and films. For example, Nausicaa’s character was inspired by the two literary classics The Lady who loved Insect from Helen Johnson (794-1185) and Homer’s Odyssey, while the post-apocalyptic world drew from American and British science fiction novels and films, including Brian Aldiss’s Hothouse (1962), Frank Herbert’s Dune (1965), and Douglas Trumbull’s film Silent Running (1972). Greenberg suggests that Miyazaki’s tendency to create strong female protagonists in his films can be traced to Nausicaa. Greenberg also finds a link between Nausicaa and the heroine of Influential works such as Panda and the Magic Serpent and The Snow Queen as well as Heidi and Anne.

The fifth and sixth chapters explore Miyazaki’s career as a feature–film director at Studio Ghibli: Castle in the Sky (1986), My Neighbor Totoro (1988), Kiki’s Delivery Service (1989), Porco Rosso (1992), and later works Princess Mononoke (1997), Spirited Away (2001), Howl’s Moving Castle (2004), Princess Mononoke (1997), Spirited Away (2001), Howl’s Moving Castle (2004), Porco Rosso (1992), and later works. Greenberg discusses how Miyazaki was influenced by the works of anthropologist Elöd Fujimoto, botanist Sasuke Nakao, and historian Yoshihiko Amino for many years. Princess Mononoke can also be read as an alternative historical imagination beyond the ‘national history’, as a Japan and its people that Miyazaki rediscovered and rebuit.

In short, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in Hayao Miyazaki and anime as well as animation studies and film studies. It is an accessible book that invites the reader into the worlds of Miyazaki and Ghibli, as well as exploring and expanding through the careful analysis of his works.

Mari Nakamura, Leiden University, The Netherlands