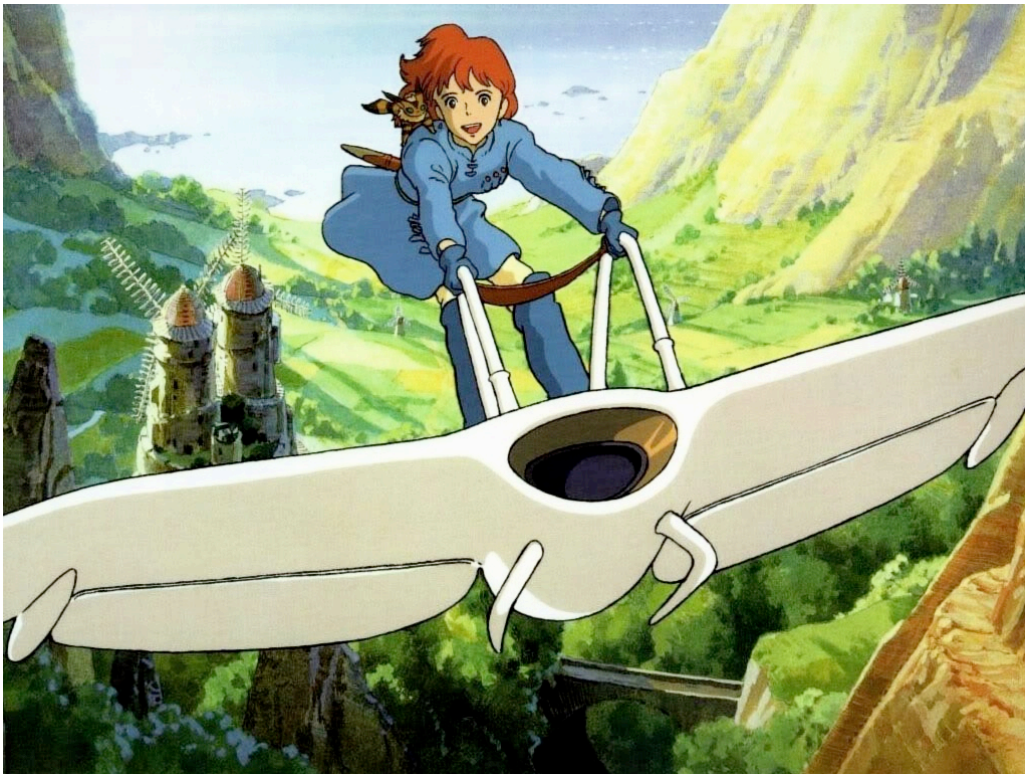


JAP2501 TERM PAPER

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The themes of Hayao Miyazaki

Wilhelm A. S. Damsleth



宮崎 駿

Front page picture: Nausicaä wind-riding on her glider in “Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind.”
 Front page text: “Hayao Miyazaki” in Japanese.

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I. Introduction

An environmentalist, antiwar feministic socialist – is that Hayao Miyazaki? Are there only either good or evil people in the world, and nothing in between? These are some of the questions I will be exploring in my term paper for JAP2501 this spring through my study question:

What are the central themes of Hayao Miyazaki’s films, and how are they presented?

As part of this I will also discuss some of the characterizations in Miyazaki’s films, and touch upon the narrative structure of his films. This paper will focus on the films “*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*” (風の谷のナウシカ), “*Laputa: Castle in the Sky*” (天空の城ラピュタ), “*My Neighbor Totoro*” (となりのトトロ), “*Kiki’s Delivery Service*” (魔女の宅急便), “*Porco Rosso*” (紅の豚), “*Princess Mononoke*” (もののけ姫) and “*Spirited Away*” (千と千尋の神隠し). While most of the source material is structured by film, I have chosen to structure this paper by theme so that I can pull in the necessary films in each theme and thereby create a flow better suited to answer my study question.

References to literature in the List of Sources will be given with the authors surname, year and page numbers in footnotes. References to sporadically used literature will be given in full in footnotes.

II. Discussion

Hayao Miyazaki's films are sometimes characterized as animated children's tales. Are they really no more than "just" childrens films? Much of Miyazaki's work has enjoyed both commercial success and critical acclaim, and the films have been found enjoyable, engaging and touching by children and adults alike. To what does these films owe their universal appeal? Might it be in the manner that they portray common themes and topics, that differ from other films? There may be more to Miyazaki's films than meets the eye, and I will now begin exploring what this might be.

II.1. AVOIDING THE POLARIZATION OF CHARACTERS

Driving the plot of a film forward requires characters or entities with different or opposing interests and objectives. In many cases these characters are portrayed through the classic "good guy/bad guy" stereotypes – the good guy, or the protagonist, which earns the audiences trust and support, fights against one or more bad guys, or antagonists, who seek to hinder the protagonist on his way to his goals. According to Napier, this simplistic approach can be typical for western productions like those made by Disney empire¹, but these roles are not so rudimentarily portrayed in the Ghibli works.

For instance in *Princess Mononoke*, Lady Eboshi, a major character in the film, is seen providing shelter for lepers and prostitutes while still being responsible for killing a Forrest God and thus setting in motion the apocalyptical events that take place in the film². The film ends not in her destruction, but in reconciliation and acceptance.

Similarly, in *Spirited Away*, the bathhouse's supervisor Yubaba is first shown as an evil ruler who steals our heroines name to control her, but whom ultimately gets put in her place and revealed as having a softer side³. The characters No Face and the Stink God/River God displays a similar character development in the film. While none of them start out as purely evil, they are both shrouded in mystery and only reveal their true selves at the end of the movie: No Face re-

¹ Napier 2000, p. 191, 249.

² McCarthy 2002, p. 196-198.

³ Sherwood 2006, p. 10-12.

verts from a grotesque monster to a quiet and friendly helper while the Stink God sheds his pollution and comes forward as a River God.

This pattern repeats itself through almost all of Miyazaki's works, and tells us of how people might not always be the person that their first appearance gives the impression of, and that all characters are prone to personal development during the film. According to McCarthy, this tendency of Miyazaki's is due to his wish to reflect actual Japanese culture and history, exemplified for *Mononoke*; "*Recent studies in history, anthropology and archaeology show that this country has had a far richer, more diverse history than the generally accepted images.*"⁴

Using actual period and social characteristics allowed Miyazaki to create characters more freely, breaking down stereotypes of the existing period dramas and thereby adding more depth and finesse to the characters. In this way, Miyazaki makes his characters undergo personal growth that tells a message of how even the worst criminals can seek forgiveness and become a good person.

II. 2 . F E M I N I S M A N D C H I L D H O O D

While the feminism wave experienced in the 1970s never reached the same heights in Japan as it did in the West, it still managed to penetrate the Japanese society to a never-before-seen extent⁵. There is little doubt that this movement made its impression on Miyazaki, at the time in his thirties and working as an animator for Toei Animation. McCarthy states that Miyazaki feared that his peers would judge his decision of making the lead character of *Nausicaä* a young woman as having "*another chance to drool over young girls.*"⁶

The truth is that this choice plays along the lines of that mentioned above regarding character development. Miyazaki felt that having a male lead implied too many conventional ideas and stereotypes, while having a female lead enabled him to create a character who could face immediate danger and convince the audience that this person would be able to handle it, similar to how his real-life views were as well:

"Miyazaki is actually a feminist. He believes that to be successful, companies must enable their female employees to succeed, too." – *Toshio Suzuki, Producer and President of Studio Ghibli.*

⁴ Miyazaki quoted in McCarthy 2002, p. 188.

⁵ Napier 2000, p. 146.

⁶ McCarthy 2002, p. 78-79.

⁷ *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, DVD Extras, Studio Ghibli, 2005 release.

This attitude is clearly present in *Mononoke*, where all the workers in the iron mine are women, or in *Porco Rosso* where Porco's plane is rebuilt entirely by women after having been destroyed. Ironically, several of Studio Ghibli's female workers expressed concerns⁸ that the latter implied that female workers are easier to exploit, and that it may deliver the message that women are less assertive and thereby a more easily controllable mass workforce. This is countered, though, by *Porco Rosso* also portraying several women as independent and capable leaders in business.

While the leading role often is filled by a woman in Miyazaki's works, we also get to see quite often that the lead character is a child or a young adult. Miyazaki, having nurtured a lifelong interest in children's literature, joined a research society devoted to studying this field at the university. Here he became exposed to a wide range of fantasy storytellers – particularly Western European writers like Rosemary Sutcliff, Phillipa Pearce, Eleanor Farjeon and Antoine de Saint Exupéry. According to McCarthy⁹, this influence might be among the principal reasons why he later chose to make films both for and featuring children:

“Well, yes. I believe that children's souls are the inheritors of historical memory from previous generations. It's just that as they grow older and experience the everyday world that memory sinks lower and lower. I feel I need to make a film that reaches down to that level. If I could do that I would die happy.” – Hayao Miyazaki¹⁰.

The fact is that an overwhelming amount of his movies feature children or very young adults in the leading roles. Of the seven films mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, six have girl leads that are “*extraordinarily gifted but plausibly awkward kids, testing their powers in tentative interactions with the world.*”¹¹ Chute holds that these abilities might ring truer than those of other characters because they are associated with the heightened sensitivities of adolescence. For example, the young witch in *Kiki's* loses her ability of flight during a moment of self-doubt, trying to act older than her age. Kiki forgets herself later on during a crisis, and the force of flying returns. Chute interprets this as a way of communicating the importance of believing in oneself, and staying true to that figure and building ones character.

⁸ McCarthy 2002, p. 171.

⁹ McCarthy 2002, p. 26, 29.

¹⁰ Brooks, Xan. “*A god among animators.*” *The Guardian*, September 14 2005. Available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2005/sep/14/japan.awardsandprizes> May 2009.

¹¹ Chute 1998, “*Laputa.*”

On the other hand, Sherwood claims that Miyazaki, filming through the eyes of children, introduces themes of the orphaned, homelessness, grace and love¹². These devices are then used to build a relationship of mutual trust and understanding between the characters and the audience, so that they will stay with him as he steers them through the hero's journey and bring forth the resolution. Napier holds that the child's viewpoint is crucial to the story of *Totoro*¹³. A young person's perception of and reflections on the world is fundamentally different than that of an adult; they can see things that those in control of society cannot, and since they often are young girls ("shōjo"), they can see the things that the boys who someday will rule society cannot see.

II.3. POLITICS – CLOSET MARXIST MIYAZAKI?

Miyazaki has on multiple occasions stated publicly that he considered himself a Marxist in his younger years¹⁴, but how has this influenced his films and the messages in them?

"Miyazaki's intellectual and political background still influenced his approach to his work. A strong believer in union involvement in the workplace, he was active in the Toei labor union, joining a demonstration over a dispute soon after he joined the company."¹⁵

However, Miyazaki officially renounced his Marxist view while wrapping production of *Nausicaä*. No-one can know if this is true or just a play to make his films more acceptable to the Japanese, and certainly the Western, audience where more democratic governments rule today. However, if we look closely at his films, we can discover several politically influenced messages, besides the apparent feminism discussed earlier.

Listing every political message in Miyazaki's works would require enormous amounts of space, so let us take *Spirited Away* as an example. In *Spirited*, Chihiro's parents are turned into pigs as a punishment when they greedily start consuming food prepared for the Gods, telling us how we should be wary of over-consumption and gluttony. Chihiro, being careful, does not succumb to this and she instead visits Yubaba to ask for work in the bathhouse. Yubaba reprimands her for being a "lazy, spoiled crybaby," (0:37:51) but in the end agrees to hire Chihiro, contrary to her dislike of the little girl. This peculiar action is explained as being a necessity as a result of an oath Yubaba had taken "to give work to whoever asks" (0:39:51), a characteristic of socialism.

¹² Sherwood 2006, section IV.

¹³ Napier 2000, p. 128.

¹⁴ Chute 1998, "Miyazaki."

¹⁵ McCarthy 2002, p. 30.

Sherwood chooses to view Yubaba as an allegory to the government¹⁶, whose responsibility it is to provide work to all its inhabitants. If Chihiro chooses not to work, she will be turned into a pig like her parents – freeloaders on society. While being a cruel leader, she is also fair and in the end keeps her ultimate promise to Chihiro of returning her parents to her, thereby strengthening Chihiro’s trust and respect for her.

According to McCarthy, Miyazaki himself is deliberate in communicating these political messages. McCarthy uses examples from *Porco Rosso*, *Kiki’s* and *Totoro* to illustrate how Miyazaki portrays government support as crucial to the success of any society, and how political forces have an effect on the lives of individuals. She states that the themes of community and brotherhood are central in the films, and that the films “*subtly emphasize the importance of the community*”¹⁷.

While calling the films Marxist propaganda is a huge stretch, we can clearly see how his earlier political opinions have affected his films. Subtly, Miyazaki’s messages often sympathize with those of socialists and the labour unions. The success of the films certainly show that the messages are not devastating to the stories themselves, even with the Western audiences.

II. 4. ANTIWAR MESSAGES

The distribution of wealth, the state of the working class and his Marxist history are not the only political themes found in the films. Born in 1941, Miyazaki grew up with the war and later the postwar situation all around him. While many years have gone by since the devastation suffered by Japan during the war, there still exists an awareness of deep-seated vulnerability to outside power, especially among the older generations whom we now might count Miyazaki as one of. Napier describes¹⁸ much of the postwar anime as “*elegiac*,” i.e. mourning or sorrow-laden, dealing with apocalyptic themes that most Japanese remember well, particularly from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

While most films dealing with themes of war and apocalypse might be considered “anti-war” solely because they are not pro-war (who on Earth would be?) and might portray images of desperation and destruction, only a few directors dare use their movies to take an active stand against such atrocities. Miyazaki went as far as to make *Nausicaä* an official part of the “No More

¹⁶ Sherwood 2006, section III.B.

¹⁷ McCarthy 2002, p. 190.

¹⁸ Napier 2000, p. 199.

Hiroshima” festival in London in 1995, marking the fiftieth anniversary of bombings¹⁹ – and the choice of film is not coincidental.

Nausicaä might be considered the most antiwar movie by Miyazaki, according to McCarthy²⁰. While the film takes place in the distant future, war has destroyed most of mankind’s technology and thrust the world into a near-medieval state. The huge war ended in a disaster called the Seven Days of Fire, reminiscent of the WWII bombings. The human’s war machines and flying ships are big and ugly; images that man does not bear to see. Only scattered human settlements remain, separated by the “Sea of Decay,” a jungle of plants and giant insects that are lethally toxic to humans, created as a result of poisons used during the war period. Continuing along these lines, Miyazaki spend a great deal of time depicting both the humans and nature suffering as a result of the war.

Similarly, in *Mononoke*, the visions of disasters and apocalypse are overwhelming. Napier holds²¹ that these pictures are optimistic in the sense that they do not seek to lecture humans on their wrongdoings but rather teach them of the possibilities of learning from their mistakes and give them appreciation of getting to have a second chance, as opposed to dark visions of the destruction of Tokyo in *Akira* and the social and psychological disintegration apparent *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Furthermore, in *Laputa*, the military powers are constantly portrayed unflatteringly. McCarthy quotes Miyazaki on what she feels was his primary influence for the military battles:

*“The Celts were conquered by the Roman empire as barbarians, and were continuously conquered thereafter ... my anger at the military superpowers when I read Caesar's Gallic Wars and Howard Furst's Spartacus, and the courage of the king of the barbarian Celts that comes out of Sutcliffe's Mark of the Horse Lord come gushing forth all in a jumble. [...] Although the film has been completed, the interest [in the Celts] continues to dog me.”*²²

Napier argues that there might also be apocalyptic elements in Miyazaki’s works not only explicitly like in the above mentioned films, but also implicit in his choice of not using contemporary Japan as a setting²³. This is most definitely a valid point, seeing as many of his films take place in a world where the structures of modern society either have broken down (postwar) or where mod-

¹⁹ Napier 2000, p. 79.

²⁰ McCarthy 2002, p. 72.

²¹ Napier 2000, p. 193-195.

²² McCarthy 2002, p. 97.

²³ Napier 2000, p. 123-124.

ern society not yet has taken shape (pre-modernization). According to Napier, this helps build the collective vision of hope and renewal, exemplified by the ending scenes of *Nausicaä* where there finally is peace between humans, the military and the giant insects that threaten to destroy their world.

II.5. VIEWS ON THE ENVIRONMENT, ANIMALS, NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY

I have previously mentioned Miyazaki's interest in nature and animals, relating them to both characters, politics and the antiwar messages. I will now take a closer look at how he deals with these topics in his films, and later discuss the representation of technology and its relation to humans and nature in his works.

Even the untrained eye can easily spot the beautifully painted backdrops and appreciate the immense attention to detail in animals, plants and outdoors scenery in any Miyazaki film. This is not meant solely to pleasure our visual senses, though: Napier writes that these films serve as "*a wake-up call to human beings in a time of environmental and spiritual crisis that attempts to provoke its audience into realizing how much they have already lost and how much more they stand to lose.*"²⁴ Miyazaki uses naturalistic elements and allegories to convey these messages. In *Totoro*, the family visits a shrine built under an ancient and huge tree, upon which the father exclaims (0:38:27) "*What a beautiful tree. This tree must have stood here for years and years. Trees and people used to be good friends.*" While this may be one of the more simplistic messages in the film, it serves the purpose of reminding us of a time when humans coexisted with nature in a more equilibrical state.

While most Miyazaki anime feature stunning pictures of nature, *Totoro* differs in that it is one of two anime that take place in what we might call modern-day Japan - i.e. not pre-modernization or post-apocalyptic, as described earlier. In this context, it is crucial to bear in mind that Miyazaki still chooses to let the story take place in the countryside instead of exploring the bustling metropolises that Japan has to offer. Napier writes: "*Totoro encompasses a world where nature and the rural scene not only play a significant role in people's lives but are also a bridge to the world of the supernatural and the enchanting.*"²⁵ This is a significant decision on Miyazaki's part: Instead of showing us what contemporary Japan has to offer, he guides us on a nostalgic trip exploring how we might have coexisted with nature had it not been for urbanization and modernization.

²⁴ Napier 2000, p. 18-181, 246.

²⁵ Napier 2000, p. 128.

Chute suggests²⁶ that the ecology, i.e. the interaction between the living organisms and the environment, of Miyazaki's films offer a more comprehensive view into the central storyline. He asserts that the ecosystems of the stories have a richer fictional reality than most of the people who live in them, arguing that the internal consistency of the natural world matters more than the characters that are present in them. This makes it easier to understand how Miyazaki builds his complex characters on this already existing layer of infrastructure in his ecosystems. McCarthy also underlines the presence of the ecological messages in these anime. On *Nausicaä*, she writes: "*The ecopolitical consciousness of the seventies [...] were influential in the development of the film story.*"²⁷

While naturalistic elements are prominently featured in his anime, Miyazaki also frequently portrays different technological devices. Would this not be a contradiction to his love for the naturalistic elements? While some of the technology and industrialized culture shown is "evil" in the sense that it is made by man to wreak havoc and destruction, like the Tolmekian war machines in *Nausicaä*. This could be considered directly in line with what one could expect from Miyazaki's love of nature. However, it is not the case that Miyazaki seeks to portray all technology as bad. *Nausicaä's* glider, pictured on the front page of this paper, is an excellent example of this. While being highly technological in the sense that it employs advanced mechanics and physics to operate, it is also the primary mode of transportation for our female protagonist, helping her through her entire quest²⁸. Not only is it a "good-natured" device, it makes use of one of the most fundamental elements of nature, wind. In this way, Miyazaki tells us that there is a possibility of a mutually benefiting coexistence between the forces of nature and the man-made technology.

One must also be wary of the fallibility of this modern technology. In the beginning of *Spirited Away*, Chihiro asks her father (0:02:30) if they are lost as they speed through the forest in their car. The father unsuspectingly answers "*We're fine, we've got four-wheel drive.*" However, the four-wheel drive offers no help when they shortly thereafter face a world of spirits and magic.

The previously mentioned glider in *Nausicaä* is also an image of another topic commonly found in Miyazaki films: Flying. In fact, every Miyazaki anime except for *Mononoke* and *Ponyo* uses flying as an important plot device. Napier suggests that the allegory of flight is meant to illustrate a search or longing of a world that extends beyond our own:

²⁶ Chute 1998, conclusion.

²⁷ McCarthy 2002, p. 41.

²⁸ Napier 2000, p. 124, 203.

“Most importantly, however, the image of the flying girl sends a message of boundless possibility in which emotions, imagination, and sometimes even technology [...] combine to offer hope of a potentially attainable alternative world that transcends our own.”²⁹

We can see, then, that the worlds Miyazaki encompass both nature and technology, and while the environment is mostly portrayed as fragile and waning, we see hope in that if we employ our technology in a way that does not harm nature, there can be coexistence and harmony.

II.6. MYTHOLOGY AND STORIES FROM THE PAST

Viewers of Miyazaki’s anime will take note of worlds that have a seemingly rich spiritual and mythological history, and Western viewers might be inclined to mistake these for actual deities from Japanese lore. This is not the case. In fact, most stories take place in worlds that have little or nothing in common with Japanese history.

For example, one might assume that the Totoro from the film with the same name is a spirit or god common to Japanese mythology when Satsuki exclaims *“We’re the wind!”* while riding on the flying Big Totoro through a rice field (0:58:07), thereby implying that the Totoro is a “Wind Spirit” or “Wind God.” As Napier points out, the word “totoro” is a more likely to be a corruption of the word “troll” from Norse mythology³⁰, in a variation invented by Mei from a picture book referenced in the film. This suggests that the Totoro in its entirety is a product of Mei’s imagination.

“Though nature and its spirits can express themselves in hurricanes and howling winds, the struggle and spite of human society are unknown to them, and the natural cycle of life and death is essentially a cycle of goodwill.”³¹

In this context, it is also interesting to note Miyazaki’s adaptation of the Norse word “troll” to this Japanese setting. This shows a willingness to adopt elements from non-Japanese cultures, in contrast to that of the American Disney corporation, whom I compare since both Ghibli and Disney produce family oriented films. Napier remarks that while both companies tend to feature characters that display personal growth and achievement, Disney’s films are prone to promote what she describes as *“blatantly American values”³²* such as individualism while Miyazaki’s films tell

²⁹ Napier 2000, p. 138.

³⁰ Napier 2000, p. 276.

³¹ McCarthy 20002, p. 123.

³² Napier 2000, p. 282.

tales of more universally accepted values such as humanity, courage and respect for the environment.

In this way, we can see that Miyazaki is not afraid to borrow elements and ideas from other cultures or another nations folklore – or simply make up his own.

III. Conclusion

When writing about Miyazaki, the biggest challenge is not finding material but rather trying to limit oneself purely because of the sheer amount of material available. When researching this paper, I came across an enormous amount of material that I simply had to disregard in order to make this look like a bachelor's paper rather than a small bible.

Despite this, with the time and resources available to me, I have managed to provide answers to my study question, backed up by meanings from the leading researchers in the field. I have shown how Miyazaki portrays multi-layered characters that develop through his stories, and how he employs themes of childhood to offer an alternative view on society. We can also see how his own personal beliefs regarding feminism is apparent in his works, often by witnessing the success of strong women and failure of the weak men in his films.

Nor is Miyazaki afraid of embedding politically weighted messages in his plot. While he no longer claims to be a Marxist, we can still see how all of my four main source writers Napier, McCarthy, Chute and Sherwood agree that his earlier political afflictions still color his work, regarding both the general political messages of distribution of wealth and power, and specifically his antiwar point of view. In line with this, I have also shown how he cares strongly for the environment and how he reprimands exploitation of technology for warfare purposes. In closing, I have touched upon Miyazaki's merging of lore and traditions from different continents to create films that are not necessarily mythologically Japanese and promote more universally or internationally accepted values and beliefs through magical and enchanting settings.

With the recent surge in interest in the Ghibli films in the West, I can only hope that we get to see more of this wondrous director in the future. While Hayao Miyazaki's career might soon be reaching it's end due to his age, we can only hope that Ghibli and in particular his son Gorō Miyazaki is ready to secure his legacy and give future generations of children and adults the delight of enjoying more films in the spirit of this great director. I will be waiting.

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MIYAZAKI’S WORKS FOR STUDIO GHIBLI

FILM	RELEASE DATE
Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind *	1984 March
Laputa: Castle in the Sky	1986 August 2
My Neighbor Totoro	1988 April 16
Kiki's Delivery Service	1989 July 29
Porco Rosso	1992 July 18
Princess Mononoke	1997 July 12
Spirited Away	2001 July 27
Howl's Moving Castle †	2004 November 20
Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea †	2008 July 19

* While released before the formation of Studio Ghibli, *Nausicaä* is considered the first film made by the company since the company’s early workforce consisted of a significant number of the people involved in the production of *Nausicaä*. † Not dealt with in this paper.