

# Riding Through Air and Water – The Relationship Between Character, Background, Fantasy and Realism in Hayao Miyazaki's Films

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The viewer's belief in fantasy is a requirement for animation to work. Seen from another theoretical viewpoint, cognitive pattern recognition allows us to see shapes and forms in a minimalistic set of clues, thereby allowing us to recognize humans and other objects even in non-realistically drawn animation, and human actions in fantasy creatures. Given these preconditions, what is the role of background drawings as opposed to the characters in animation? Here I want to briefly address a few issues connected to background design and characters in Miyazaki Hayao's animation films produced by Studio Ghibli. Due to shortness of time, today I will mainly compare two child- and family-oriented films: *My Neighbor Totoro/Tonari no Totoro* from 1988, and *Gake no ue no Ponyo/Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, released twenty years later in 2008. In the following, I want to address a few issues related to realism and fantasy in animation, as depicted in the character and background drawing of Hayao Miyazaki's animation.

Both stories feature a rather realistic everyday setting and small children who come into contact with the magical. Both films are also hand drawn. In-between these two films, five long features and seven short films were created, with the latest ones, *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* getting some help from CG animation in the background creation and coloring. When I visited the Ghibli storyboard exhibition at the Tokyo Modern Art Museum in 2008, I noticed how Japanese visitors paid attention to the details of the sets, and different objects in them, and pointed them out to their friends. Obviously this realistic and nostalgic orientation towards detail forms one level of pleasure with the films. On the level of style, the aspiration to create detailed background painting results in vivid, realistic looking objects. On the level of story content, Ghibli films create fantasy worlds which sometimes go hand in hand with 'normal' everyday life. These two trends, I claim, form a continuing thread in Miyazaki's work, but they are resolved through different means in each film. As Paul Wells states, in animation, which defies the realistic representation of live cinema, it can easily depict different states of consciousness, such as fantasy, dream and memory (Wells, 2002, p. 49).

Two things about the backgrounds of such films as *Tonari no Totoro* strike the viewer: first, the immense beauty of Oga Kazuo's watercolor backgrounds, and secondly, the realistic, detailed care with which 1950s Japanese suburban life is created in the film. Miyazaki is notorious for how he studies and draws drafts of buildings, objects and sceneries both in Japan, and earlier, during the pre-Ghibli period, in Europe, and how he studied archeology for the creation of *Princess Mononoke*. Are his backgrounds therefore realistic?

Realism, of course, is a loaded and much-discussed concept when it comes to live cinema, and with animation it gets even more complicated. Midhat Ajanovic lays out different suggestions related to the levels of realism in animation: visual similarity, a realistic soundtrack, movement realism, narrative and character realism (events and characters could really exist), and social realism: the world depicted in the films is as complicated and nuanced as the real world (Ajanovic, 2004, p 261). Many of these certainly apply to Miyazaki's films, but manifest themselves in varying measures in each film.

*Tonari no Totoro* and *Gake no ue no Ponyo* have a very realistic setting built around the protagonists: a family living its everyday life in different historical periods, the former set in the 1950s, the latter in present-day Japan, though within a very idyllic seaside scenery. Both films, as is typical of Miyazaki's films, have scenes where the plot is not so much carried forward, but where instead an everyday activity is depicted in detail. In *Totoro*, these would include the scene where the girls bring water to the neighbor's grandma, or do laundry, and in *Ponyo*, the careful preparation of cup noodles for the kids by Lisa, Shosuke's mother. In a sense, *Totoro* could be interpreted as a realistic human drama in the sense that Totoro's appearance, seen only by the children, can be interpreted as their fantasy, a replacement for the mother who is in hospital as well as for the father who is tied up with his scholarly work, and a necessary psychological tool for the two girls to get through this difficult time in their life. In this sense the character of Totoro, though a completely fantastic, non-existing "animal" or "troll" creature, is more realistic than its predecessor, Papanda from *Pandakopanda* (a pre-Ghibli film from 1972-73), who, though a really existing animal, a panda, is depicted as a creature that actually enters the life of a small town and is seen by everybody, who talks the human language, and starts to live as a commuting salariman father for the main character Mimiko. *Pandakopanda* thus poses a more non-realistic premise than *Tonari no Totoro*, where the fantasy is integrated into a visualization of the theme of the film.

*Ponyo*, on the other hand, relies heavily on the fantastic as existing side by side with the real. Ponyo, the little fishgirl or mermaid, enters the life of 5-year-old Shosuke, and not only his, but his mother's as well. Thus a magical world that exists in the sea is seen to exist side by side with the everyday world of Shosuke and his community. *Totoro* and *Ponyo* can, however, be discussed together on another level than just their both being children-oriented or similar in terms of plot: they are both hand-drawn works. Having experimented with digital and CG technology on *Howl's Moving Castle*, Miyazaki has returned to basics with *Ponyo*, which is made up of a 170,000 individual hand-painted frames. As a preparatory work for Ponyo, Miyazaki experimented with *Monmon the Water Spider* (*Mizugumo Monmon*, 2006) a short film screened at the Ghibli Museum, which consists of 50,000 frames – a lot for a 15-minute film. The depiction of the sea, the most important element in the story, is not created in the photorealistic style of the Pixar animation *Finding Nemo*, but rather, in Miyazaki's hands, the sea becomes one of the main characters.

At the start of *Ponyo*, the story world is split into two: the everyday world of Shosuke, which includes his house, kindergarten, and next door to the kindergarten a modern elderly care center where Shosuke's mother Lisa works. Under the sea is another world where Ponyo's magician father Fujimoto, sea goddess mother Gran Mamare, and the little mermaid princesses live. This world also merges together different time periods, including pre-historical, as, for example, the Devonian sea is mentioned, and pre-historic sea creatures and fish linger through the water. This was also the case with *Mononokehime*, where the story, set in the Muromachi period, placed a nation of Emishi, who disappeared when the Yamato nation took over Japan, in the middle ages, and brought carefully researched archeological sites, such as the Jomon period site Sannai maruyama in Aomori (dated to 3000 BC), into the set design, thus again moving between realistic details and a story premise where historic truth is stretched. Similarly, as Andrew Osmond states, *Spirited Away & Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* refers to at least three different times: the present time, the 1980s bubble era, and, through the buildings, to the Taisho period (Osmond, 2008, pp. 12-13, 56, 71). In *Gake no ue no Ponyo*, Ponyo's escape from the sea and metamorphosis into a human girl (to which I will return below) triggers the merging of two co-existing but separated worlds as Shosuke's village is flooded by the sea. This stretching of time within the fantastical worlds created by Miyazaki, is another common feature of his films.

A notable shift can be noted in how the famous flying scenes of previous Miyazaki animations have here evolved into images of sea and water, though *Spirited Away* combined both flying and gliding over the water, and the Adriatic Sea featured as a setting for *Kurenai no buta/Porco Rosso*. What is common to the use of these elements, air and water, is the movement across it, which is, as Thomas LaMarre has noted in his discussion of *Laputa*, often a sideways seen movement as opposed to the animation movement deep into the space that is typical of the science fiction genre (seen for example in Oshii Mamoru's *Skycrawlers*, 2008) (LaMarre, 2008, pp. 329-67). In *Ponyo*, this sideways movement can be seen in Ponyo's cheerful rush over the stormy waves, as well as Shosuke and Ponyo's sailing over the flooded village.

## Character design

Although early Japanese animation was rife with animal characters performing in a human way, a characteristic which for the wartime film critic Imamura Tahei brought to mind references to *Chojugiga*, it is really the depiction

of humans on which Japanese animation centers. As Takahata Isao noted just recently, the animators in the Japanese industry aim to draw humans, pointing out that “At Ghibli, when they made *The Cat Returns/Neko no ongaeshi*, the animators squirmed about having to draw cats.”<sup>1</sup> This despite the fact that in animation it is easier to draw animals in a natural way than to depict human characters realistically. So, early animation took the easier route by predominantly using animals during a time when resources and technique were sparse, but later, Japanese animators preferred to depict humanlike creatures.

As is often notable in today’s anime, the 2D, very flat-looking characters seem to stand out against the very detailed, CG-enhanced background. This is evident with the abovementioned Oshii film *Skycrawlers*. In the hand-drawn *Totoro*, the characters, though of course placed in separate cells on top of water-colored background cells, do not stand out as strikingly as in Miyazaki’s later films. *Totoro*’s characteristics of being connected to the woods, trees and the air make him a part of the traditional countryside scenery, and thereby his character fits into the water-colored backgrounds. Meanwhile, with *Spirited Away* and *Howl’s Moving Castle* the backgrounds developed into more detailed ones – so that, in a festival press conference, Miyazaki was asked a question about a certain vase’s computer drawing, even though the vase was a hand-drawn one – and sometimes, a weird sense of disconnectedness between the detailed backgrounds and the characters would emerge. On the other hand, designing the characters with great resemblance in the style of *Final Fantasy* to make the fantasy work might fit in with the photorealism of the backgrounds, but creates an uncomfortable feeling in the viewer which was labeled as the ‘uncanny valley’ problem by Mori Masahiro in 1970. This photorealistic resemblance is used in certain 3D or mixed media animation, such as Chris Landreth’s *Ryan* or *Madame Tutli-Putli*, in order to exploit this uncomfortable viewer response for a certain artistic or thematic effect, but with animation such as Miyazaki’s, which relies on the relationship of the viewer’s trust in the fantasy to develop and be solved within the narrative, this kind of character design would not work.

As in *Gake no ue no Ponyo*, where several characters seem to be based on recycling previous Ghibli characters, stylistic variation amongst the characters is striking: The elderly at the Himawari old people’s care center are reminiscent of the sturdy obaasan characters of several previous films, including *Tonari no Totoro*, whereas Ponyo’s parents Fujimoto and Gran Mamare refer more to the pre-Ghibli period style when it comes to character design. This results in a film where the character design in some parts fits with the hand-drawn water-colored background, but sometimes stands out – perhaps for specific thematic reasons? There is also an additional character in the film: the sea, which here does not only form a background and setting for the events, but starts to act like a thinking, living creature. When in the preceding short film, *Monmon the Water Spider*, the water still forms a part of the background, in *Ponyo*, it takes the role of an active protagonist.

Metamorphosis, as well as squeeze and stretch techniques, are some of the central aesthetic and technical characteristics of animation. Generally, in order to bring life-likeness and an organic feeling to any simple object, it can be molded with squeeze and stretch technique in order to depict organic movement. With Miyazaki’s animation, this is usually not used excessively for the depiction of human characters, but rather in depicting the animal-like fantasy creatures. For example in *Spirited Away*, the little ants carrying the coal to Kamaji are depicted this way, as they might get crushed flat under a piece of coal, but soon pick up their work in a perfect shape. In *Tonari no Totoro*, the little black creatures called Makkuro Kurosuke who reside in the attic are a similar example, a foreshadowing of the magical. The little *Totoro*-like creatures are similarly squeezed and stretched when they escape Mei. In *Gake no ue no Ponyo*, the little fish girl Ponyo is depicted with this squeeze and stretch technique when she is still a water creature, and there is a metamorphosis scene where she grows hands and feet to become human. As a human she is not depicted with so much stretch and squeeze, but in the same, more consistent shape as Shosuke and Lisa. Thus, Ponyo not only connects the everyday world of Shosuke’s village and her own underwater magical world as a character passing from one world to another on the story level, but also in how she is drawn. Ponyo’s character and her fluidity as a mermaid and sturdiness as a human girl combine these two contrasting worlds on a stylistic level. A key scene is one where we see the masterfully created sea, actually a living character in the film, with Ponyo riding the waves, now as a human girl. For these kinds of key scenes Miyazaki, who trained as the key scene animator at Toei doga, brings together a large number of cells depicting the movement, the stylized sea, and the storm. Similarly to *Tonari no Totoro*, where the painterly countryside is connotative of *Totoro*’s existence, here the stormy sea brings Ponyo to Shosuke’s life.

Consequently, I see *Gake no ue no Ponyo* as a stylistic attempt by Miyazaki to tackle several problems with style and technique. As noted above, Miyazaki returned to complete hand-drawing with this film. He used painterly water-coloring for the backgrounds, and, balancing the style, came up with a more simple, smaller-scale adventure than with his three previous films. And as the sea is not just a background in this film, but a living creature, the

hand-drawn style, reserved for human characters in the previous films where backgrounds were CG-enhanced, is perhaps the most appropriate style here.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Takahata, Isao. Eisenstein Club talk event , 5/16/2009. Bunkyo Civic Center, Tokyo.

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