

# Freedom and space-time in “Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea”: An examination of Miyazaki’s filmmaking, or how love can save the world

Wren Petkov

29.03.2024

## Introduction:

Even in the original Japanese title, "Gake no Ue no Ponyo" (“Ponyo on the Cliff”, hereon referred to as “Ponyo”) (Studio Ghibli. 2008), space-time is an essential element. The medium is the message, both literally and metaphorically—the space in which the story unfolds continually evolves and redefines its own premise. On a metaphorical level, this story could not take place in any medium other than animation. “Ponyo”s’ themes are uniquely expressed through the film’s single-level, frame-by-frame animation - something no other medium can replicate. The elegance with which this is all executed makes it look like nothing

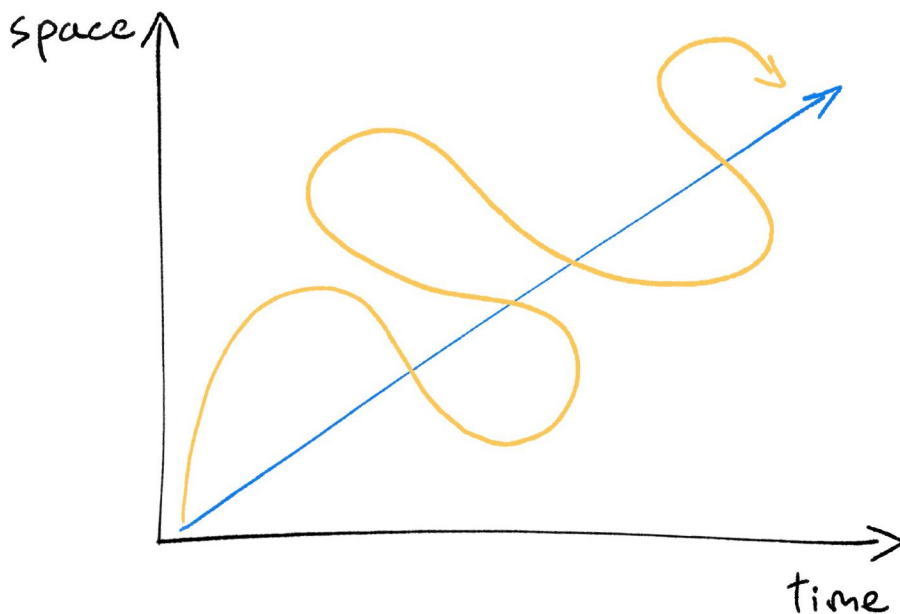
- in fact, as many reviewers have pointed out, this is “a film in which nothing happens”<sup>1</sup>, and yet, in this nothing, we can see everything. While Miyazaki’s filmography is widely praised and analyzed, “Ponyo” has been critically and analytically overlooked - despite being maybe the strongest representation of his unique world-view<sup>2</sup> put to film. In examining his production process, from idea inception through to release, I hope we can see why. Standing alone among his contemporaries as one of the greatest directors in animation, I believe it’s worth examining what about his way of working can produce films so different from the rest of the medium<sup>3</sup>. In his approach to storytelling, each element of a film takes advantage of the medium of animation, and is specifically built to convey his central thesis. Through this his films become more than the sum of their parts. In fact, if we were to describe a film as a line through time and space that defiantly moves forward until reaching its conclusion, his films would look uniquely “wiggly” and defiantly non-straight - something Jenny Odell discusses in her book “Saving Time”(Odell, Jenny. 2023):

---

<sup>1</sup> Walker, Doug. Nostalgia Critic Episode 200. 2012

<sup>2</sup> Child, Trenton Truitt Ben. "Hayao Miyazaki: 'We need to liberate our children from nationalism!'" The Guardian, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Talbot, Margaret. "The Auteur of Anime." January 9, 2005.



*Graph: In blue we see a standard narrative, moving through space and time at an even, straightforward pace  
**In yellow we see miyazakian narratives expand, wrap around themselves, and pause as they move through time***

*“The originality of Miyazaki lies precisely in his ability to weave, from this basic narrative model, spatial structures that will become more complex as his career progresses”<sup>4</sup> It is within this framework that his stories come to life - everything from his story design & narrative structure, storyboarding style through to production methodology emphasizes the three-dimensional nature of both plot(time) and space. The fundamental building blocks of his stories become the physical structures the characters seem to inhabit.*

In a medium where spontaneity and intuition are notoriously impossible to maintain<sup>5</sup>, Miyazaki stands alone in his approach to animation. By continuously listening to the story’s direction and being endlessly curious about the worlds he’s creating, he is able to make works that stand as separate from the rest of the medium. Not only that, being notorious for how

---

<sup>4</sup> Trouillard, Emmanuel. “Animated Geography: The Experience of the Elsewhere in Hayao Miyazaki’s Work.” 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Gadassik, Alla. “Assembling Movement: Scientific Motion Analysis and Studio Animation Practice.” 2015.

much freedom he allows his animators<sup>6</sup> while always being open to personal interpretations, the film's "trunk" - his term for "theme" or "armature", becomes expressed not just through his work, but through that of everyone who works on it. Studio Ghibli films come more alive than most for a reason - they are always in constant conversation with themselves.

All this is built on top of Miyazaki's unflinching idealism - his desire for freedom, equality, and environmental justice<sup>7 8 9</sup>. Cinema becomes the perfect vehicle for this - as Roger Ebert's "Empathy Machine"<sup>10</sup>, Miyazaki's films become vehicles for his ideas, and transform animation into a radical force for change<sup>11</sup>.

All of this is precisely what I want to examine here - the way in which every element of the production process is arranged to best fit the stories Miyazaki is telling, as well as its impact on the films themselves - there is no better place to examine this than in Ponyo.

So it's here we begin - with the start of his process.

## Chapter 1 - Miyazaki

*"And then you start to draw. The story will follow"*

A great starting point to examining Miyazaki's process is the documentary<sup>12</sup> "10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki" (Arakawa, Kaku. 2019), which follows the making of "Ponyo", and is a great look into Miyazaki's creative process.

The first episode of the four-part documentary on the making of "Ponyo" opens with Miyazaki and an assistant setting up a camera in his car in an attempt to film his daily drive

---

<sup>6</sup> Arakawa, Kaku. 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki: The Making of Ponyo. 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Arakawa, Kaku. Never-Ending Man: Hayao Miyazaki. 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Miyazaki, Hayao. Turning Point: 1997-2008. 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Napier, Susan. "The Anime Director, the Fantasy Girl and the Very Real Tsunami." 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Ebert, Roger. "On Empathy". 2005

<sup>11</sup> Gliner, Ezra. "The Revolution Will Be Animated." August 28, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> having watched essentially every documentary ever made about him, I've chosen to specifically look at Ponyo's one because it covers the whole process of the making of the film, as opposed to focusing on one specific aspect of it

to work. While we don't yet realize it, this reveals a key tool in his methodology: the "three-meter-radius".

An approach he developed while working at Toei Animation, the appropriately called three-meter-radius means he's always trying to source inspiration from his immediate surroundings, as opposed to other films or far-off places - even with his adaptations of Western literary works: "*Hayao Miyazaki's adaptation of Western literary works is another theme for consideration. According to the artist's biography, he has never limited his work to 'borrowing images', both from literary sources (for example, Sherlock Holmes, a famous English detective created by A. Conan-Doyle), and from European folklore or urban landscapes.*"<sup>13</sup>. Even then, he insists on maintaining a small, knowable setting that he's able to be intimately familiar with<sup>14</sup> - he traveled to Colmar in France while making "Howl's Moving Castle"(Studio Ghibli. 2008), insisting on drawing inspiration from its primary source<sup>15</sup>.

This means the scope of his work is inherently limited, which ends up being one of its defining features<sup>16</sup>. As Robert McKee writes in "Story" "*the smaller the world you are creating is, the more familiar you're able to be with it, and thus the more creative your ideas within it*"<sup>17</sup>. And so, Miyazaki continually chooses to draw inspiration from what he knows best, looking at it from new angles - hence, the car-camera filming something he's seen a thousand times to get a new perspective on it. A great example of this is a run-down bus stop in Miyazaki's family neighborhood, that ended up becoming the starting point for "My Neighbor Totoro" (Studio Ghibli. 1988) - a film universally praised for its originality and the specificity of its world-building.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Kuzmina, E. V. "Representation of Western and Eastern Culture in Hayao Miyazaki's Animation." 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Arakawa, Kaku. 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki: The Making of Ponyo. 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Anime tourism in Italy: Travelling to the locations Lavarone, Giulia, and Marco Bellano. "Anime Tourism in Italy: Travelling to the Locations of the Studio Ghibli Films." 2021

<sup>16</sup> Torgovnick, Kate. "Can Limitations Make You More Creative? A Q&A with Artist Phil Hansen." 2013

<sup>17</sup> McKee, Robert. Story. 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Wu, Valerie. "The Timeless Worldbuilding of Studio Ghibli." 2020.

This, of course, applies to “Ponyo” as well. *“This is my response to the afflictions and uncertainty of our times”* writes Miyazaki in an internal document describing the film to the rest of the studio. At the time he had just come back from a research trip to the Tate Museum, where he’d seen “Ophelia” (Millais. 1852), where he recognized many of the themes<sup>19</sup> he’d set out to explore with what would end up being his interpretation of the little mermaid<sup>20</sup>. Armed with inspiration and in need of a main character, it’s no surprise that the first image of “Ponyo” - the driving force behind the entire film, comes from the daughter of one of the key studio Ghibli staff - Fuki, an energetic 5 year old girl. And so, Ponyo’s armature is born - “a little girl, a little boy, and the ocean”<sup>21</sup>.



Hayao Miyazaki in “10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki”. Image: NHK

---

<sup>19</sup> “The artistic achievements of these interpretations of Ophelia lie in the rich and complex pictures of love, social responsibility, and transcendence that they can offer”

Entin, Nicole. "Ophelia and Ponyo, Millais and Miyazaki: How the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood Influenced the Animated Films of Studio Ghibli." 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Ross, Deborah. “Miyazaki’s Little Mermaid: A Goldfish Out of Water.” 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Miyazaki, Hayao. Turning Point: 1997-2008. 2014.

Having found the core elements of the story, he distills them into their clearest form - what he calls the “trunk of the story”. *“What catches the audience’s eye is the treetop, the shimmer of the leaves. What is most required of a scenario are roots that spread deep into the earth and a strong trunk hidden by the mass of shimmering leaves. (the film will work) as long as there is a trunk strong enough to support branches and leaves”*, writes Miyazaki in “Starting Point” (Miyazaki, Hayao. 1996) - *“One must have the clear core of what one wants to convey. This is the trunk of the story that penetrates throughout in a strong and simple way.”* This is a common approach among film directors - writer Brian McDonald talks about a similar process in his book *Invisible Ink* (McDonald, Brian.2009) - *“you have to have something to say, something you’ve learned about yourself about being human. but it has to be true - emotionally”*<sup>22</sup>. However, where other directors would approach this by applying structure to the image, Miyazaki seems a little more comfortable with the discomfort of not knowing - he is ready to start drawing despite it.

*“From within the confusion of your mind, you start to capture the hazy figure of what you want to express. And then you start to draw. It doesn’t matter if the story isn’t yet complete. The story will follow. Later still the characters take shape. You draw a picture that establishes the underlying tone for a specific world”*<sup>23</sup>

The pictures he’s referring to are his “image boards” - a technique he developed while working on *Horus*<sup>24</sup>, they’re a series of rough sketches on large sheets of paper that capture the main events of the story. With each one he tries to capture raw emotion, looking for the underlying connective tissue that allows him to realize the story’s armature.

As he finishes each one, he hangs them up on a communal wall for the rest of the team to see and comment on - a feedback loop of mutual inspiration that we further examine later on. As he does this he already has a rough idea of where the story will go - the “tree trunk” that he’s

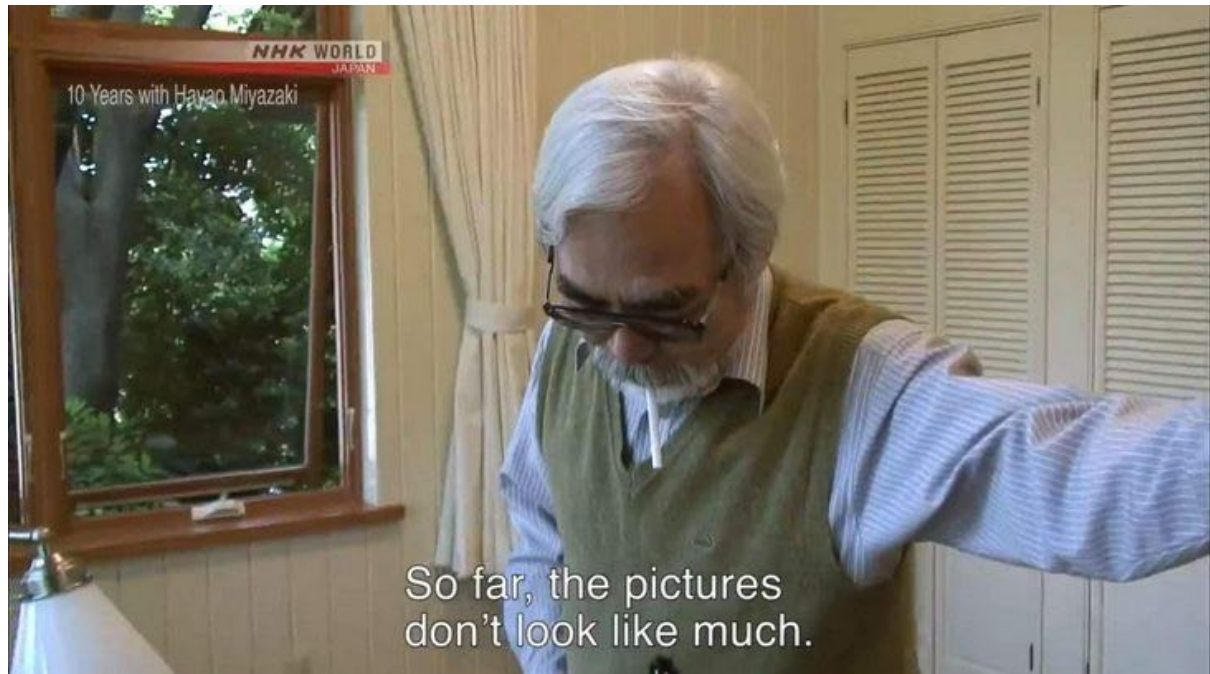
---

<sup>22</sup> McDonald, Brian. *Invisible Ink*. 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Animation Obsessive. "Hayao Miyazaki's Image Boards: From the 1960s to Now." 2023.

set out is there to guide him, but the details are still vague, and each image board helps clarify the rough strokes of the story. It's up to his imagination to bring them forth and capture them on paper.



Hayao Miyazaki in 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki. Image: NHK

This plays a key role in why his films have such unique story-structure - rather than beginning with a pre-defined structure, he lets the story unfold organically through the image boards. His goal is to make each beat have a strong emotional impact, without worrying too much about the way they connect - those empty gaps left between each key moment are a key feature of his work. “*We have a word for that in Japanese, he said. It's called ma. Emptiness. It's there intentionally. ... He clapped his hands three or four times. The time in between my clapping is ma. If you just have non-stop action with no breathing space at all, it's just busyness, But if you take a moment, then the tension building in the film can grow into a wider dimension.*”<sup>25</sup> writes Robert Ebert in an interview from 2002. As a concept,

---

<sup>25</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Hayao Miyazaki Interview." 2002.



“Ma” has defined Japanese culture and storytelling for millennia. It informs the narrative structure and pacing of films and novels, and traditional performances, as well as architecture and city planning, where spaces are intentionally built to encourage pause and reflection. It’s also key in Studio Ghibli movies more than most other forms of Japanese animation, where (largely due to animation budgets) stories are packed with action throughout. As a defining feature of Miyazaki’s work, it has in turn inspired western film-directors like John Lasseter, who has written that “ (*ma is*) one of the ways Miyazaki-san’s films have inspired me. (They) have balance—both fast and slow moments”<sup>26</sup>. So, what makes Miyazaki’s later filmography stand out most is its insistence on “Ma” despite budget or taste concerns.

This, however, wasn’t always the case <sup>27</sup>. After all, most directors can’t afford to “waste” money on empty space when they’re just starting out, and Miyazaki isn’t an exception. Early on, Miyazaki’s films had to conform to tight screenwriting standards - specifically the Japanese four-act structure of “Kishotenketsu”.

## **Kishotenketsu & screenwriting**

Kishotenketsu is a story structure that originates in Japan and East Asia as a whole<sup>28</sup>. It’s usually driven by “Causality, rather than conflict”<sup>29</sup>, which “*unlike the traditional 3 act structure, allows for a more wandering pace for the story*”<sup>30</sup>.

The focus of most Kishotenketsu stories is self-realization and growth, which is why *Spirited Away* (Studio Ghibli. 2001) is often cited as an excellent example of it in screenwriting courses. Breaking down its four-part structure (Ki-Sho-Ten-Ketsu), each part contributes to the overall narrative without relying on conflict. The four acts are: Introduction (Ki), Development (Shō), Twist (Ten), and Conclusion (Ketsu) - which leaves us with an extra act

---

<sup>26</sup> Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Masiel, David. "From the Editor: Reconciliation in Four Acts." 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Barrett, Rudy. "The Skeletal Structure of Japanese Horror Fiction." 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Animation Obsession. "What Makes Ghibli Storytelling So Different?" 2021.

when comparing it to the three-act structure: Introduction, Development, and Resolution - (Ten), or the twist. The absence of direct conflict in Kishotenketsu stories allows for the opportunity to explore subtler themes than in typical three-act structure stories - specifically through the twist, which allows the reader/viewer to re-contextualize what came before. I explore this further in Chapter 2, through the lens of “Ponyo”’s narrative twist.

As Miyazaki developed his film-making style, and the studio’s budgets expanded dramatically, his work slowly moved away from traditional story-structures, becoming something of their own, completely molding the story structure around the requirements of the narrative & thematic content: *“The one-of-a-kind, home-brew stories of Miyazaki’s latter-day films bear the traces of kishōtenketsu — but they’ve morphed into something else entirely.”*<sup>31</sup> “Ponyo”, then, is Miyazaki’s first attempt at completely abandoning the notion of a story structure - something he’d been dreaming of doing since “Lupin III: Castle of Cagliostro”(Studio Ghibli. 1978)<sup>32</sup>.

It’s also worth mentioning here that story structure isn’t the only facet of his work that has evolved over time - in fact, his unique animation style that has, in many ways, defined the current era of Japanese feature animation <sup>33</sup> was only a product of rebellion and perseverance against norms created by western (Walt Disney) animation: *“One of the examples is the trademark pupils and oversized eyes prevalent in the Japanese animation. Classical Japanese drawings of the previous era have Eastern’ narrow eyes. Some researchers believe that these huge pulsating pupils common in the Japanese animation are a result of the influence by Betty Boop and other classical Disney characters, such as Bambi or Mickey Mouse. Indeed, Hayao Miyazaki’s early works of 1970s–1980s are almost identical to the US animation.”*<sup>34</sup>. This evolution in his animation style has allowed him to develop a unique style that matches the specific stories he’s trying to tell.

---

<sup>31</sup> "Animation Obsession: What Makes Ghibli Storytelling So Different?" 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Miyazaki, Hayao. Starting Point: 1979-1996. 1996.

<sup>33</sup> Doucet, Ron. "The Cinematography of The Incredibles." 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Kuzmina, E. V. "Representation of Western and Eastern Culture in Hayao Miyazaki’s Animation." 2018.

So, if not a story structure or a script, what drives his work - what pushes him on from one image-board to the next? *“Surprise, total discovery, therefore seem to be at the heart of Miyazaki’s poetic journeys even within the seemingly most everyday environments.”*<sup>35</sup>. “he wants to encounter scenes that he has never imagined before”.<sup>36</sup> And so, after completing the image boards, production simply begins.

## **Production: an endlessly improvised performance**

*“To this end, even a single moving sequence had to be divided into stages: animators planning and roughly sketching the most important poses or turning points of a gesture (the essential “keyframes”), assistant animators filling in some of the intermediary keyframes, junior assistants completing all of the required drawings (the “inbetweens”), and finally a range of “cleanup” employees turning the sequences into fully rendered images with uniform bold lines.”*<sup>37</sup> *X on the factory-like setting of animation studios past.*

Unlike traditional studio work<sup>38</sup>, production at studio Ghibli begins as soon as Miyazaki’s image boards and the general story outline for the film are completed. *“he then begins to create storyboards while doing all his other work, from key animation on down. Using his powers of continuous concentration, the production starts to take on the elements of an endlessly improvised performance”*<sup>39</sup>

As soon as Miyazaki begins storyboarding the film, animators at the studio begin animating them - which creates a film that is given free rein to change as it progresses, allowing the story to react to itself. So, as the film’s animation and backgrounds are put into place, Miyazaki’s storyboards are allowed to organically change direction to match that better - further allowing the story’s course to be shaped by its own devices. This is similar to how

---

<sup>35</sup> Trouillard, Emmanuel. “Animated Geography: The Experience of the Elsewhere in Hayao Miyazaki’s Work.” 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Arakawa, Kaku. 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki: The Making of Ponyo. 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Gadassik, Alla. “Assembling Movement: Scientific Motion Analysis and Studio Animation Practice.” 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Gadassik, Alla. “Assembling Movement: Scientific Motion Analysis and Studio Animation Practice.” 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Animation Obsession. “What Makes Ghibli Storytelling So Different?” 2021

Pixar story artist Ronnie Del Carmen describes his own process of crafting stories - scaled up to the whole production: *"All of those things just based on, how I feel about this character (...) And then because of those kinds of feelings and choices that I'm imagining is happening, I draw the set. ... this is all I'm doing."* Miyazaki, for his part, seems happy with this: *"The reality is that only as I work on a film do I, myself, gradually come to understand the content of the film. That is why I consider films not to be something I am making, but something that is the result of mixing many different elements together. (...) I don't have the sense that "my own ideas are at the core."* It is very nebulous as to whether it was my idea or whether someone else's idea came flowing in."

This sense of freedom extends to the film's animators, in defiance of standardized animation practices among Disney, as well as Ghibli's contemporaries in Japan. Ghibli animators are given almost complete creative freedom over frame counts, character movement, and key frames<sup>40</sup>. Each sequence is shot and animated not to reflect the timing and pacing of its equivalent live-action version, but to embody and personifies what the character is feeling<sup>41</sup> - taking full advantage of the film's animated medium and each animator's unique vision of the film. "Whereas photographic live-action cinema begins by breaking down and stilling real movement, animated movement is not re-constituted by projection: it is created on the screen for the first time."<sup>42</sup> Freedom is key in every element of production.

---

<sup>40</sup> Webster, Andrew. "Goro Miyazaki on What Makes a Studio Ghibli Film" 2021

<sup>41</sup> Arakawa, Kaku. 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki: The Making of Ponyo. 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Gadassik, Alla. "Assembling Movement: Scientific Motion Analysis and Studio Animation Practice." 2015.



Image: Studio Ghibli

## Chapter 2 - “Ponyo”

*“A little boy and a little girl, love and responsibility, the ocean and life”*

Knowing that “Ponyo” started off as a loose adaptation of “The Little Mermaid”<sup>43</sup> and was inspired by “Ophelia” (among other Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood influences)<sup>44</sup> are a great starting point, but I’d like to take a step back and examine its place within Miyazaki’s overall filmography. As mentioned previously, Miyazaki is generally admired for his ability to blend Western and Japanese influences<sup>45</sup>. Here, “Ponyo” is really able to shine as one of his most intricate takes on a Western Literary work. It integrates the theme of rebellion and want for freedom of the original story while letting go of a lot of its Western baggage present in

---

<sup>43</sup> Arakawa, Kaku. 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki: The Making of Ponyo. 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Entin, Nicole. "Ophelia and Ponyo, Millais and Miyazaki: How the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood Influenced the Animated Films of Studio Ghibli." 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Kuzmina, E. V. "Representation of Western and Eastern Culture in Hayao Miyazaki’s Animation." 2018.

Disney's adaptation: "whatever experiences we provide for children are in a sense stealing time from them that otherwise might be spent in a world where they go out and make their own discoveries or have their own personal experiences.' Whereas Walt Disney's distrust of his own medium arose from his growing conservatism—his biographies reveal a man who sought an ever-tighter hold on his staff and, as many believe, on the subconscious of his young audiences—Miyazaki's unease arises from an opposite ideological tendency. Instead of wishing for more discipline and control, he has spoken of the need to liberate both his team and the 'over-managed, overprotected, suffocated' children they serve."<sup>46</sup>. This ideological tendency for freedom is something we see throughout the production - from the lack of writing and insistence on creative independence, through to the animation production process and collaborative environment at the studio, *this* is what shapes Studio Ghibli films more than anything else.

Examining "Ponyo" within that context, we can more clearly see its place in Miyazaki's exploration of freedom and rebellion, and their clash with the "real" world, which often serves as an antagonist in the story<sup>47</sup>. At a press conference held just after "Ponyo"'s release, Miyazaki said this: "*The nationalistic view suggests the problems in the world come from its multi-ethnicity. (it) creates a possibility for (Japan) to turn into something negative for the world as a whole. This is a lesson we learned from the past war and which we cannot forget*"<sup>48</sup>.

Lastly, I also want to discuss the film's unique story structure, and its departure from the four-act structure present in past Studio Ghibli films. A great place to start is examining the overall story beats, which are as follows:

### *Table 1*

---

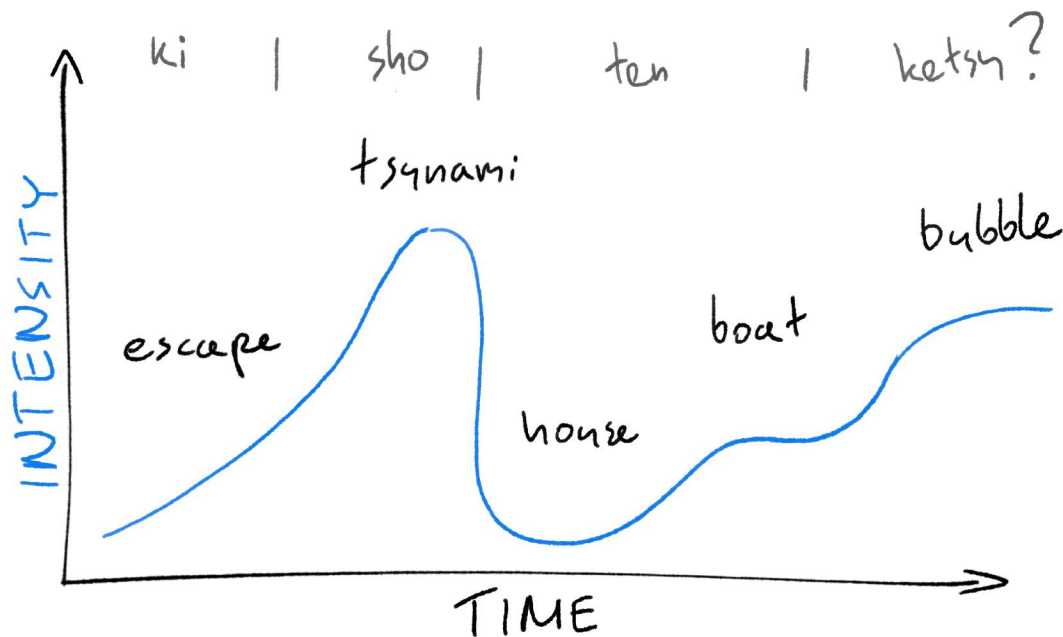
<sup>46</sup> Ross, Deborah. "Miyazaki's Little Mermaid: A Goldfish Out of Water." 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Child, Trenton Truitt Ben. "Hayao Miyazaki: 'We need to liberate our children from nationalism!'" The Guardian, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Child, Trenton Truitt Ben. "Hayao Miyazaki: 'We need to liberate our children from nationalism!'" The Guardian, 2008.

- *Ponyo escapes her father and meets sosuke, his mom, and the elderly his mom cares for.*
- *She is recaptured.*
- *She escapes again, unleashing a tsunami.*
- *Lisa and Sosuke escape to the house, where they meet ponyo - now human. <-  
Tension peak*
- *They spend the night at the house, ponyo exploring the human world for the first time*
- *With Lisa having gone off to help the elderly, ponyo and sosuke wake up in a submerged world.*
- *They travel by boat, meeting the townsfolk (largely unbothered by the disaster).*
- *Fujimoto takes them underwater, where sosuke promises ponyo's mom to take care of her, resolving the looming threat.*
- *They kiss <- Emotional peak*

Examining this table, we notice that there is very few typical story beats - for one, the intensity of the story seems to peak around the midpoint, then slowly rise to a less-intense true climax (the kiss) at the very end of the film. The main reason the film diverges from a traditional Kishōtenketsu structure lies in the timing of its twist, which happens early in the narrative rather than in the third act. So the film's emotional peak does not align with its intensity peak - if we were to map the film's structure along a timeline, plotting the intensity and emotional arc, it would look something like this:



- Graph: Intensity over the film's runtime. While the film's opening and development resemble ki and sho, we can see that after ten (the tsunami) its intensity almost starts over, building up to another, smaller peak after the underwater sequence at the end.

Here lies the difficulty of fitting "Ponyo" into a traditional story structure<sup>49</sup>. As the story progresses, it detaches further and further from a three-act structure or a kishotenketsu one; it becomes something of its own.

And so, the film's intensity is built up organically and through causality - there are no arbitrary story points<sup>50</sup>. And yet, while watching it, it all flows together so well that, if we were to re-arrange it for consistency, we would be taking away the heart of the film - in many ways, the story structure itself supports its "armature".

The film's narrative is driven by Ponyo's desire for freedom, and as she and Sosuke learn more about each other and the world, we become more emotionally invested in the surrounding "plot". It's almost like the overarching story is de-emphasized in favor of

<sup>49</sup> Animation Obsession. "What Makes Ghibli Storytelling So Different?" 2021.

<sup>50</sup> McKee, Robert. Story. 1998.



experiencing the characters' journey through the world <sup>51</sup>. This is one of "Ponyo"'s crowning achievements - a way of telling stories Miyazaki had been developing for since "Lupin III: Castle of Cagliostro" <sup>52</sup>, it feels like it peaks with "Ponyo". *"Miyazaki's cinema places little value on subjectivity and introspection, and even less when these threaten to lead to paralysis. He differs in this from other (great) directors of animated films for whom space is often used as a malleable support for exteriorization and exploration of the psychological state of the characters"*<sup>53</sup>.

As by E. Trouillard writes, *"Miyazakian space is fundamentally three-dimensional, and grounded in its own reality"*<sup>54</sup> Within his work, spaces become lived in and inseparable from time - the town in Ponyo, sunny and bursting with color during the film's opening, becomes subdued and tranquil after the first act. The events of the story are all enmeshed and deeply grounded within its three-dimensional world - more than a background setting, the environment becomes an active character of its own (both literal, with the fish-waves that come to life, or metaphorical, as an ever-evolving presence in the narrative). We can also see this in the graph, as almost all the key story events are linked specifically to new and distinct locations that vary both in physical location on a 2D plane, but also in a very 3 dimensional sense, in height, going from underwater to above water to the top of the hill. Miyazaki is always very careful to ground the story in a specific location that matches the narrative beat emotionally:

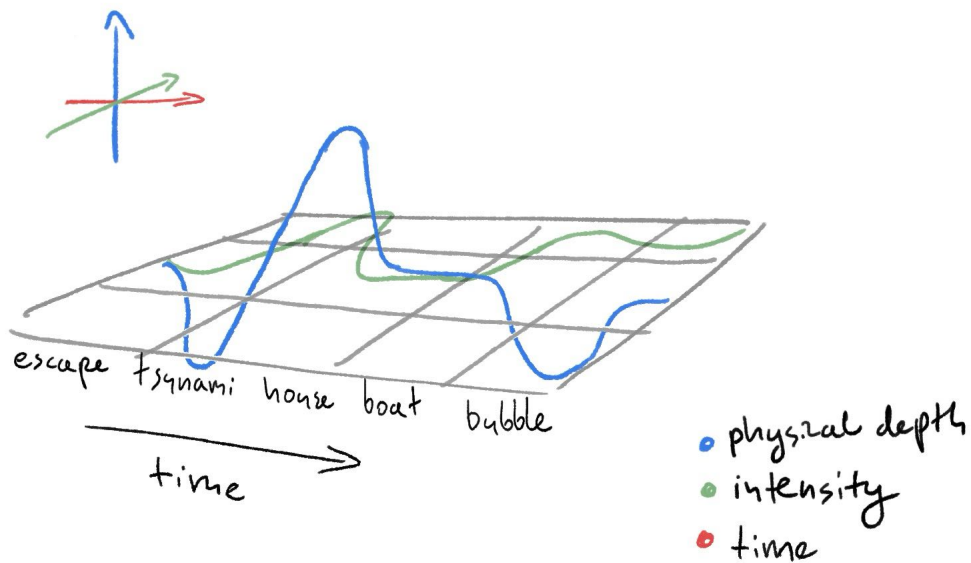
---

<sup>51</sup> Ross, Deborah. "Miyazaki's Little Mermaid: A Goldfish Out of Water." 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Trouillard, Emmanuel. "Animated Geography: The Experience of the Elsewhere in Hayao Miyazaki's Work." 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Trouillard, Emmanuel. "Animated Geography: The Experience of the Elsewhere in Hayao Miyazaki's Work." 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Trouillard, Emmanuel. "Animated Geography: The Experience of the Elsewhere in Hayao Miyazaki's Work." 2014.



The intensity and the physical elevation of the story are tied to one another, as shown in this 3D graph.

This stems back to the film's creative development: While building the story, Miyazaki will frequently visit his friend's house near Tokyo, a tranquil seaside house (a notable shift in elevation<sup>55</sup>). Observing his surroundings for inspiration, he is able to bring the environment to life by knowing its exact limits <sup>56</sup>.

## Examining the narrative

The film's central tension is set up in the opening shots, which, while reminiscent of Miyazaki's 3-shot <sup>57</sup>, are set up to unseat the viewer from the foreground - cel animation - background layer structure of traditional animation<sup>58</sup>. While cel animation is usually limited

<sup>55</sup> Arakawa, Kaku. 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki: The Making of Ponyo. 2020.

<sup>56</sup> McKee, Robert. Story. 1998.

<sup>57</sup> Humber, Jace. "Howl's Moving Castle - an Underrated Masterpiece." 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Entin, Nicole. "Ophelia and Ponyo, Millais and Miyazaki: How the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood Influenced the Animated Films of Studio Ghibli." 2020.

to characters and occasionally props<sup>59</sup>, in *Ponyo* every frame comes to life - in many shots as much as 80-90% of the screen-space is taken up by moving objects. The environment, rather than a passive set-dressing, is given the same treatment as a character: *“By distorting normal space and contorting normal shapes, the sea is animated not as a backdrop to the story but as one of its principal characters.”*<sup>60</sup>. Many sequences of the film feel almost like single level animation - in which the entire scene is re-drawn every frame. This is especially emphasized during the opening of the film - as the camera pans over the sea, it feels as though the screen itself has come to life as it bubbles and moves under the waves.

And so, we begin on a peaceful shot of the ocean, disturbed only by Fujimoto’s ship. As Fujimoto, who in many ways represents Miyazaki himself<sup>61</sup> tries over and over to save the ocean through pragmatism and decisive action, Ponyo playfully escapes her bubble and sets the events of the story in motion - Fujimoto and any other adult’s attempts to save the world through pragmatism are bound to fail - it is only through pure, child-like love that it can be saved.

After Ponyo escapes and meets Sosuke, the film introduces the viewer to the peaceful life in the town. As people try their best to care for one another, Miyazaki lays the foundation for the rest of the story’s narrative arc. Ponyo is captured again, then escapes, unleashing a giant tsunami along with her. As this happens, the film’s intensity peaks in the escape sequence - Lisa and Sosuke frantically drive through the town in an attempt to get to the house before the town is submerged. Every shot comes to life, and you can almost hear Wagner’s “Flight of the Valkyries” (which inspired the sequence)<sup>62</sup> playing in the background. *“Ponyo herself can be read as a force of nature since it is she who triggers the ocean to let loose its*

---

<sup>59</sup> Gadassik, Alla. “Assembling Movement: Scientific Motion Analysis and Studio Animation Practice.” 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Napier, Susan. “The Anime Director, the Fantasy Girl and the Very Real Tsunami.” 2012.

<sup>61</sup> “He has to work with his characters for such a long time during productions, and he can’t stand the idea of creating any with whom he cannot identify emotionally” Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. 1996.

<sup>62</sup> Arakawa, Kaku. *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki: The Making of Ponyo*. 2020.

*apocalyptic power.*”<sup>63</sup> And as the tsunami subsides, Ponyo, in human form, is introduced to the next significant location in the film - the house.



Image: Studio Ghibli

The sequence in the house is one of the film’s primary examples of Jenny Odell’s “outward movement through time” captured on film. As the pacing slows down and the characters relax in Sosuke’s house, Ponyo experiences her first hours as a human. When the film was first released, the scene was found controversial because of its slow pacing<sup>64</sup> and can be criticized for being an “empty digression”<sup>65</sup> in the story. I would, however, argue the opposite - that it is necessary and even critical to the core of the film. I would argue that nothing in the scene feels excessive or unnecessary in the story’s context. While the scene in the house might initially seem like an empty digression, it ultimately serves as the heart of the story - the driving force for the second arc and an explanation for her overwhelming desire to be human,

---

<sup>63</sup> Napier, Susan. “The Anime Director, the Fantasy Girl and the Very Real Tsunami.” 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Walker, Doug. Nostalgia Critic Episode 200. 2012

<sup>65</sup> Saunders, George. To Swim in a Pond in the Rain. 2021.

as well as the reason behind the devastating tsunami - a peaceful life in the idyllic house above the restless sea. "*We automatically expect that new element to alter or complicate or deepen the situation.*", writes George Saunders<sup>66</sup>. And I believe that scene really fulfills that purpose. The situation is deepened through the raising of its stakes. Ponyo doesn't just want a human life for no reason - *this*, is what she wants. It brings about a realization that, just maybe, everything she's been through to get to where she is has been worth it, mirroring the central theme of the story.

Following the film's general approach to pushing each moment beyond the ordinary, the scene in the house feels magical and revelatory in its execution, grounding the viewer in its magical reality. A great example of this is the ramen scene. As she waits for her ramen to cook, Ponyo picks up a dropped ramen crumb, shaking the packet before consuming it. This small action, while inconsequential to the overarching narrative, deepens the scene's physicality and allows us as the viewer to *feel* what the character is feeling, bringing a new dimension to the story. In many ways, its essence its existence for its own sake. This approach closely mirrors that of a live-action film, where a great back-and-forth between the director and actors allows characters to just exist within the story, taking the viewer with them. On that note, the camerawork in this scene and the film as a whole is notably restricted, despite the fantastical subject matter<sup>67</sup>. Dramatic camera angles are reserved for special moments in the story that really call for it. Camera movements are used sparingly and without flare, an exception to that is the opening pan of the jellyfish, which is pure magic and sets the scene for the rest of the film perfectly. Point-of-view shots, which, though always present, are also subdued and don't tend to call attention to themselves—we never, for example, see Lisa from an up-angle, or at least not a true point-of-view shot. Both her, Sosuke, and Ponyo are mostly shot head-on, with slight variation. This ends up grounding the

---

<sup>66</sup> Saunders, George. *To Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Salman, Maryam. "Hayao Miyazaki's Impact on Animation and Filmmaking." 2023.

viewer in the story—rather than being told what to feel through obvious camerawork, they are left to figure that out for themselves.

After Ponyo and Sosuke fall asleep, having experienced the simple joys of human life and exactly around the time a typical 3-act-structure film would usually be hitting the "crisis" at the end of the second act, Miyazaki instead chooses to swerve in the opposite direction—with the kishotenketsu twist: *"The extra act, then, is the Twist. In this context, it's essentially a chance in perspective which makes you reevaluate the events that have preceded it"* <sup>68</sup> - The twist here being that everyone survives the end of the world, and the story doesn't end there. While the moon continues approaching the earth in what is promised to be an apocalyptic end-of-the-world event, we are told by everything but the characters that this is actually unimportant and not the most urgent question. After the tsunami, things largely relax, and while there is still tension, the movie never reaches that same intensity again. So, why is this? And what are we concerned about instead? As the world ends around them, Ponyo and Sosuke are largely concerned with things a real-life 5-year-old would be, meaning each other, and Lisa, Sosuke's mom. As the second major arc of the film begins, they set off to find Lisa in what should be a post-apocalyptic world. However, we find it to be mostly fine. The colors are vibrant and happy, and nothing beyond the looming giant moon in the sky suggests anything worth worrying about. The world is submerged, but instead of being presented as horrific, it is vibrant and bursting with life—in many ways more so than before the tsunami. Citizens are being evacuated, yet their spirits are high and joyful.

Much of the film's wandering structure stems from his lack of an antagonist (which, while a common feature of Kishotenketsu narratives, is rarely found in animated films <sup>69</sup>). It also perfectly aligns with his story's "armature": *"what I see as Miyazaki's clear ideological agenda throughout the film, an anger and bitterness towards human waste and destruction embodied in the resentful character of Ponyo's father, who has literally left behind his*

---

<sup>68</sup> Masiel, David. "From the Editor: Reconciliation in Four Acts." 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Masiel, David. "From the Editor: Reconciliation in Four Acts." 2014.

*humanity out of his anger towards how the human race has devastated the planet.”*<sup>70</sup>

Another explanation is his compassion for his characters: *“Miya-san therefore empathizes with each character designed to play a specific role in the overall drama, gives that character its appeal and its problems, and lets it have its say. And one result is that even his “bad guys” tend to suddenly stop being bad guys ... he can’t stand the idea of creating any with whom he cannot identify emotionally”*<sup>71</sup>. So, the only villain in “Ponyo” is humanity’s blind course into the unknown future, reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s “Angel of History” - *“Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress is this storm.”*<sup>72</sup>. *“It is up to our children, with their upbeat and pragmatic mindset and who still retain vestiges of respect for and wonder at nature, to stop this threat.”*<sup>73</sup> It makes sense, then, why Miyazaki chose Ponyo as the protagonist for his “response to the current times” - who can save the world but a child full of love, curiosity, and endless optimism.

The film ends somewhat abruptly, as most Miyazaki films do - having delivered his message (or run out of money<sup>74</sup>), there is nothing left to do but leave the audience to consider what they’ve just seen. As Ponyo and Sosuke come to the end of their journey, the world coming a hairs-width from ending, everything is fixed through a kiss. While a lot of Miyazaki's films end abruptly, for this one, it actually feels quite appropriate as it matches the ending of both the Disney adaptation and the original story<sup>75</sup>. It also thematically reflects the film's

---

<sup>70</sup> Napier, Susan. “The Anime Director, the Fantasy Girl and the Very Real Tsunami.” 2012.

<sup>71</sup> Miyazaki, Hayao. *Turning Point: 1997-2008*. 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Benjamin, Walter. “On the Concept of History.” 1942.

<sup>73</sup> Napier, Susan. “The Anime Director, the Fantasy Girl and the Very Real Tsunami.” 2012.

<sup>74</sup> McCurry, Justin. “Studio Ghibli to be acquired by Nippon TV after struggle to find a successor to Miyazaki.” 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Ross, Deborah. “Miyazaki’s Little Mermaid: A Goldfish Out of Water.” 2014.

“armature” - complex problems suddenly disappearing when viewed through the power of child-like love and wonder - in the face of calamity, when society is falling apart, all we need to do is look at the world through a child’s point of view.



Image: Studio Ghibli

## Chapter 3 - Animation as a radical force

*“Empathy is the most essential quality of civilization...And for me, the movies are like a machine that generates empathy...It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us.”*<sup>76</sup>

There is a moment, during that 2002 Robert Ebert interview - just before Miyazaki claps, it is almost as if time itself extends, shifts and moves to accommodate the pause - something Jenny Odell describes as *“a movement outward and across, rather than shooting forward on*

---

<sup>76</sup> Ebert, Roger. “On Empathy”. 2005



*a narrow, lonely track*”<sup>77</sup>. This is what Miyazaki movies feel like to me, and touches the heart of why they have such widespread appeal. *“Though we may seem to be living lives of routine each day, each experience is a once-in-a-lifetime event. Yet it is incredibly difficult for us to perceive the significance of the experiences in our own lives.”* writes Miyazaki in *Starting Point*: *“But when we look at children, for them each day is full of new things. For children, these are a series of significant events, and it is a delight to be able to witness these dramatic scenes.”*<sup>78</sup>. Submerging the audience in so deeply into a kid’s point-of-view, he is able to shake the viewer from their pre-existing worldview, allowing their ideals to be shifted. As we watch Miyazaki storyboard in *“10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki”*, constantly switching between trying to capture his life experiences and putting himself inside his characters’ minds. At one point, as he tries to imagine what happens next in the story, he asks himself *“what would a 5 year old do? (its) meaningless, writing logical lines for old men”*<sup>79</sup>. Instead of creating a logical, solid plot, he subverts expectations and chooses to portray the world as seen through the eyes of our 5-year old protagonists. His reasoning is simple - *“when we look at children, for them each day is full of new things. ... these (experiences) are a series of significant events, and it is a delight to be able to witness these dramatic scenes.”*<sup>80</sup>. Empathy is what defines his work. This approach also leads to a much more natural flow of action-consequence than most films, even animated ones, are able to produce. As actions unfold on screen, each one has follow-through and clear consequence in following shots - *even* when they have an impact on the overall story (like we saw with the ramen crumbs earlier). This ends up allowing the world to feel richer, *more alive*. A viewer ends up feeling as if the world being shown could really exist. And it’s one worth saving.

What comes after the end of the world in *“Ponyo”*, it turns out in the film’s *“twist”*, is compassion - the love of two kids, of a community caring for one another, and that of the

---

<sup>77</sup> Odell, Jenny. *Saving Time*. 2023.

<sup>78</sup> Miyazaki, Hayao. *Starting Point: 1979-1996*. 1996.

<sup>79</sup> Arakawa, Kaku. *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki: The Making of Ponyo*. 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Miyazaki, Hayao. *Turning Point: 1997-2008*. 2014.

very earth for its offspring. The twist in the film's kishotenketsu structure, then, is that everyone survives the end of the world, putting its original state that we experienced at the start of the film into question. And as the characters progress through the story, it is not them who have to change, but the world around them - in a reversal of roles, they are tested by the world, but instead of a traditional character arc, the world itself is broken and has to change in order for it to survive. Miyazaki's films speak to so many because they allow for the radical possibility that nothing is wrong with us — that, often, it is the world itself that needs to change to accommodate our being. More than just the space between claps, Miyazaki's "Ma" is a radical political stance that defines not just the pacing of his works, but also the spaces his characters live in, and with that the narrative itself seems to shift to something more than a story.

Jenny Odell's quote from "Saving Time" - "*a movement outward and across, rather than shooting forward on a narrow, lonely track*" ends with "*maybe the point isn't to live more ... but to be more alive in any given moment*"<sup>81</sup>. And I think that's what "Ponyo" is about in the end - even as the world ends around them, Sosuke and Ponyo are enamored with the beauty of the world they find themselves in. Every moment, every "everyday experience" becomes a significant event in these children's lives - and as the movie progresses, we are allowed to step into their shoes and truly see things from their perspective - what Robert Ebert called the "empathy machine". Rather than being a film "in which nothing happens", "Ponyo" is a politically radical statement, delivered in such bold strokes as to shake-up even the most dormant of us into "waking from our slumber"<sup>82</sup>. Every element of the film, from the animation and design to the story structure and production, works to inspire in the viewer a sense of awe for the ordinary - to move outward and across. If we truly decide to do that, and look at the world through Ponyo's eyes - full of wonder, maybe we too could see that love can save the world.

---

<sup>81</sup> Odell, Jenny. Saving Time. 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Perce, Georges. "An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris." 1982

In “10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki”, during the depths of “Ponyo”’s production Miyazaki says “*movies show what’s inside you no matter how hard you try to hide it*”<sup>83</sup>. If that’s true, what we see inside him through his films is an overwhelming desire to make the world a better place. And, for what it's worth, I think he is able to make it so.

---

<sup>83</sup> Arakawa, Kaku. 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki: The Making of Ponyo. 2020.

# Bibliography

- Arakawa, Kaku. 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki: The Making of Ponyo. 2020.
- Arakawa, Kaku. Never-Ending Man: Hayao Miyazaki. 2016.
- Ebert, Roger. "On Empathy". 2005
- McKee, Robert. Story. 1998.
- Entin, Nicole. "Ophelia and Ponyo, Millais and Miyazaki: How the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood Influenced the Animated Films of Studio Ghibli." 2020.
- Miyazaki, Hayao. Turning Point: 1997-2008. 2014.
- Miyazaki, Hayao. Starting Point: 1979-1996. 1996.
- Saunders, George. To Swim in a Pond in the Rain. 2021.
- James, Steven. Story Trumps Structure. 2014.
- Cahill, David. "The Myth of the 'Turn' in Contrastive Rhetoric." 2003.
- Masiel, David. "From the Editor: Reconciliation in Four Acts." 2014.
- McDonald, Brian. Masters of the Craft. 2017.
- McDonald, Brian. Invisible Ink. 2009.
- Dies, Barbara & Kinder, Bill. Making the Cut at Pixar. 2022.
- Ross, Deborah. "Miyazaki's Little Mermaid: A Goldfish Out of Water." 2014.
- Thomas, Frank & Johnston, Ollie. Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life. 1981.
- Gadassik, Alla. "Assembling Movement: Scientific Motion Analysis and Studio Animation Practice." 2015.
- Trouillard, Emmanuel. "Animated Geography: The Experience of the Elsewhere in Hayao Miyazaki's Work." 2014.

Fiedler, Emma. *The Angel of History and the Ruins of Paris: Walter Benjamin in France*. 2020.

Odell, Jenny. *Saving Time*. 2023.

Benjamin, Walter. "On the Concept of History." 1942.

Perec, Georges. "An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris." 1982.

Napier, Susan. "The Anime Director, the Fantasy Girl and the Very Real Tsunami." 2012.

Napier, Susan. "Matter Out of Place". 2006.

Wolf, Mark. *Imaginary Worlds*. 2012.