

Studio Ghibli: What Next for the Animation Giant?

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Studio Ghibli has had a rocky half-decade, but things are looking up. What's currently happening at the house that Miyazaki Hayao built? (Picture: Frazer Harrison/Getty Images)

By [Noah Oskow](#)

In terms of cultural, artistic, box office, and merchandising impact, there's no question: Japan's Studio Ghibli is a giant. The animation studio (whose legendary film catalog has [just recently been released on Netflix throughout much of the world](#)) was founded in

1985 by master-directors Miyazaki Hayao (宮崎駿) and Takahata Isao (高畑勲) alongside company president and publicity maven Suzuki Toshio (鈴木敏夫). Since then, Studio Ghibli has managed to deeply and consistently influence Japanese (and later world) culture for over three decades.

The characters, settings, and music of Ghibli's films have become ingrained in the minds of people worldwide. Kiki flying on her broom; Mei and Satsuki clutching at Totoro's fur as they catapult into the sky; Princess Mononoke charging into battle atop a giant wolf; Chihiro riding a ghostly train with the unsettling No-Face and her tiny entourage. Such imagery only scratches the surface of the cultural impact of Studio Ghibli's 21 films (22, if we count *Nausicaa*).

In fact, I likely would have a very different life if not for Studio Ghibli.

And yet, it's been nearly six years since the release of Studio Ghibli's last film, 2014's *When Marnie Was There* (思い出のマーニー). This marks the longest gap in feature film production for the studio, which since '85 had been regularly putting films out every one or two years (even releasing two films in 2013). So, what happened? How did this legendary studio, its properties seemingly evergreen, slink into a seeming production standstill? And what of Miyazaki's new film, [announced in](#)

[2017](#), but of which we still know so little?

Let's take a look at just what's been going on at the famed studio to get a glimpse of what Ghibli has in store for its millions of fans worldwide.

Ghibli and I

I have to admit to feeling a certain personal investment in Ghibli's future. The studio's output has been very meaningful to me. In fact, I likely would have a very different life if not for Studio Ghibli.

Back in early 2000, when I was in fifth grade, my parents brought home a VHS rental copy of Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (もののけ姫). I'd already been flirting with an interest in Japan and anime (mostly via books on Japan checked out from the library and by renting [bad 80s OAVs](#) from Hollywood Video), but something about this fantasy epic was different. I watched the film on repeat, sometimes more than once per day; there was something in the images of ancient forests inhabited by wild animal gods, the questions raised about humanity's eternal struggle with nature, [Hisaishi Joe's elegiac score](#), and the extremely bittersweet portrait of a lost, imperfect world which spoke to me like no visual media really had before.

Mononoke helped turn my passing interest in Japan into a passion. If I had never seen the film, I likely would never have gone on to study Japanese in high school. I

wouldn't have spent extensive time studying abroad in Japan in high school and university; I wouldn't have taught English in Japan for four years nor become a successful translator. Very probably, I wouldn't have made the hundreds of Japanese friends I've known over the years, nor met my soon-to-be-wife. (Nor would I be writing for this website — which is all to say, thanks, Miyazaki!)

Ghibli's Appeal

Ghibli films have been a constant in my life, and their appeal is far from limited to childhood nostalgia. So many of their films improve with knowledge and age, or with increased familiarity with Japanese culture.

For example, take *Pom Poko* (平成狸合戦ぽんぽこ).

Takahata's incredibly creative, yet strangely grounded pseudo-documentary is about (raccoon dogs) waging various campaigns against human encroachment.

Tokyoite developers, you see, are intent on turning the animals' rural woodland home into a new Tokyo bedroom community. (This is the real-life Tama Hills, 多摩丘陵, the fully-developed version of which would feature in 1995's *Whisper of the Heart*.)

At first brush, the movie is already a multi-layered, emotionally resonant environmental story that features more references to Japanese folklore than you can shake

an [Ōnusa](#) at. However, once you learn about the movie's meta-narrative — that it serves as a portrayal of the energetic, passionate, and ultimately failed leftist student movements of the '60s and '70s (which Takahata and Miyazaki were both deeply involved in) and that movement's [shift to self-destructive violence](#) — the film becomes an even deeper representation of Japanese grassroots political movements.

Of course, this is just an especially academic view of part of what makes Ghibli films so mesmerizing. At its base, the studio's appeal is much more naturalistic. Beautiful animation; appealing character designs; immersive worlds; strong characters (including some of the best female characters in media); meaningful messaging; a deep sense of adventurous wonder and nostalgia; thematic complexity that doesn't talk down to its audience yet remains optimistic; and, vitally important for branding, cute and iconic monster/animal design. And unlike some other entertainment you may have watched as children, Ghibli movies actually stand up to subsequent viewings once you've grown up.

A Cultural Behemoth?

It's easy to see how Ghibli has developed such an immense following. It's a success which, from the outside, seems only to grow with each passing year. In the US and Europe, Ghibli is on the upswing. Its

popularity once relegated to word-of-mouth and worn-out childhood VHS tapes of *Kiki's Delivery Service* and *Totoro*, the Ghibli movies of the past decade and a half have all received at least limited theatrical runs. Indeed, Ghibli fandom has now become so normalized overseas that theater chains regularly run Miyazaki/Ghibli marathons.

So how could a company this successful and culturally ingrained very nearly cease to exist as a film studio?

It's also well known that Miyazaki, in particular, has long been a major box office draw in his native Japan. *Spirited Away* (千と千尋の神隠し, 2001) is famously the top all-time film at the Japanese box office. (While Shinkai Makoto's *Your Name* is often reported to have unseated *Spirited Away* in Japan, this is untrue — Shinkai's blockbuster is the highest-grossing Japanese film worldwide, but in its native box office it still trails *Spirited Away* by around \$45 million.) *Princess Mononoke* (1997) also briefly held that top-spot; it was the biggest-ever local box office draw until dethroned by James Cameron's *Titanic*.

Master of the Japanese Box Office

What's important here, however, goes beyond just Miyazaki's greatest hits. For much of their existence, Ghibli films were reliably the biggest films to come out in any given year in Japan. This domination started in **1989**, when *Kiki's Delivery Service* (魔女の宅急便) was the biggest Japanese film of the year. **1991** saw Takahata's feminist masterpiece *Only Yesterday* (思い出ぽろぽろ) repeat the trick; a mere year later, Miyazaki's *Porco Rosso* (紅の豚) reigned supreme. (This time beating out all foreign as well as domestic comers.) Takahata came back the next year. **1994** to once again claim top Japanese film with *Pom Poko*.

From there, **1995** (*Whisper of the Heart*, 耳をすませば by Kondo Yoshifumi), **1997** (*Princess Mononoke*, breaking all records), **2001** (*Spirited Away* becoming reigning king), **2002** (*The Cat Returns*, 猫の恩返し by Morita Hiroyuki), **2005** (*Howl's Moving Castle*, ハウルの動く城), **2006** (*Tales from Earthsea*, ゲド戦記 by Miyazaki's son, Goro), **2008** (*Ponyo*, 崖の上のポニョー), **2010** (*Arrietty*, 借りぐらしのアリエッティ, Yonebashi Hiromasa), **2011** (*From Up on Poppy Hill*, コクリコ坂から, Goro), and **2013** (*The Wind Rises*, 風立ちぬ) all saw a Ghibli film at the top of the domestic box office or as the highest-grossing Japanese-made film that year. That's **24 years** of dominance. During this period, every single year a Ghibli film was released, it became that year's most-seen Japanese movie (save one: Takahata's 1999 slice-of-life comedy vignette, *My Neighbor's the*

Yamadas, which was a minor flop despite being well-reviewed).

A Remarkable Success Story



Image for post

Statue of the robot from the Studio Ghibli film 'Laputa: Castle in the Sky' on the rooftop of the Ghibli museum. (Picture: [pio3](#) / Shutterstock)

This incredible run of box-office success, lucrative deals for annual TV screenings (which received record ratings), and home video and merchandising made Ghibli an unparalleled success. This allowed the studio to function in a way most Japanese animation companies couldn't. Most anime studios only hire animators on contracts that

last for the length of a production cycle; Ghibli, however, was able to take on a large, permanent animation staff. Although the workload was often harsh, the pay was good by industry standards. The actual Ghibli office, located in the Tokyo suburb of Koganei, includes a screening room and a terrace on the roof complete with grass and a stegosaurus skull. Ghibli even had a nursery — which made sense given the studio's permissive attitude towards office romance. (Miyazaki had actually met his wife when they were both fledgling animators; who was he to judge?)

Over the decades, Ghibli permeated deeper and deeper into Japanese culture. To this day, it's common for nearly every Japanese school child to experience performing a recital of [Kimi o Nomete](#) from *Castle in the Sky* (天空の城ラピュタ, '86) for their parents. When I worked in the public school system, every lunchtime was accompanied by Ghibli piano arrangements played over loudspeakers, and you could often hear snatches of [Mononoke-hime](#) filtering down the hallways as students practiced on the recorder. The world record for most simultaneous tweets was twice broken by fans watching *Castle in the Sky* during its annual TV broadcast. The Ghibli Museum, opened in Tokyo suburb Mitaki in 2001, consistently sells out of tickets shortly after each month's go on sale. Meanwhile, overseas distribution deals with Disney and other major companies have spread the studio's movies far and wide.

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Ghibli's Anticipatory Anxiety

These hopes, alas, were tragically dashed. Kondo passed away suddenly in 1998. His death was caused by an aneurysm that doctors believed had come on from overwork.

Through all of Ghibli's history, one issue has weighed particularly heavily on Suzuki Toshio's mind: cultivating the next generation.

Even in the '90s, Miyazaki and Takahata were no spring chickens. Eventually, the company which had so relied on these men's visions would have to go on without them. Up until the late '90s, however, there actually had been an heir apparent. This was none other than Kondo Yoshifumi, director of the classic coming-of-age film *Whisper of the Heart*. Kondo was younger than Miyazaki (and especially Takahata) and had proven himself creatively, becoming only the third Ghibli theatrical director.

These hopes, alas, were tragically dashed. Kondo passed away suddenly in 1998. His death was caused by an aneurysm that doctors believed had come on from overwork. This was a huge blow to Miyazaki in particular, who partially blamed himself; he also saw a similar fate in his own future if he didn't reduce his own famously massive workload. This resulted in Miyazaki's first retirement announcement, made after the release of *Mononoke*.

However, Miyazaki was soon back in the saddle — he simply couldn't resist the siren call to create. The anxiety regarding Ghibli's future persisted, although it moved to the background. Miyazaki would direct a film, consider or announce impending retirement, and then start up a new one. Between Miyazaki (or the rare Takahata) films, new directors would be allowed to test their skills. Some new talents were assigned short films for the Ghibli Museum, while others were allowed to helm major motion pictures. (In fact, Hosoda Mamoru of *Summer Wars* fame was brought on to direct *Howl's Moving Castle*. Miyazaki, critical of Hosada's vision for the film, decided to take the reigns.)

Attempts at Finding the Next Generation

Through this process, two directors emerged who seemed most likely to succeed the Old Masters. First

came Miyazaki's own son, Goro. Miyazaki Senior was famously against allowing his inexperienced son to direct, but Suzuki overruled him. The result of this troubled production was 2006's *Tales from Earthsea*, a confused fantasy well-known as Ghibli's sole critical dud.

However, the father and son would bury the hatchet. *Up on Poppy Hill* released in 2011, written by Miyazaki Senior and directed by Junior. (A very timely film for the moment given its focus on the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.) Although this movie was much better received, Goro has not directed a film since.

The second scion seemed to be one Yonebashi Hiromasa. Yonebashi had been with the studio since 1996, and applied a deft directorial hand to Miyazaki and Niwa Keiko's script for *Arrietty* in 2010, bringing a sense of wonder to the protagonist's insect-sized world. *Arrietty* was a success, and Yonebashi would go on to direct what is so far the last true released Ghibli film, *When Marnie was There*.

The Cracks Begin to Show

Despite all its success, Ghibli in the early 2010s had another problem: diminishing returns. While their films still did well by Japanese box-office standards, their streak at the top faltered in 2013. Miyazaki's reported final film, *The Wind Rises*, came out that year, winning the

box office but not smashing records. Takahata's final film followed hot on its heels; the painterly, ephemeral *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (かぐや姫の物語). A masterpiece, the film nevertheless crashed in theaters. Miyazaki had now retired, and Takahata, who was entering his 80s having taken over a decade to make his pet-project *Kaguya*, seemed unlikely to direct another film.

Ghibli may have been a household name, but producing films in the meticulous, artful way Miyazaki and Takahata did was expensive and time-consuming. The company needed proof that the style of filmmaking the Ghibli legacy demanded was still viable without Miyazaki (specifically Hayao)'s name as a guaranteed moneymaker. Thus the Old Guard, now out of the game, both purposefully avoided assisting Yonebashi with *When Marnie was There*.

Everything was riding on Yonebashi's new film. And while *Marnie* was generally well-liked, it finished a disappointing 9th for domestic films. With no new films scheduled, Ghibli's future now seemed as uncertain as it ever had.

Production Ceases

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Alas, the uncertainty only worsened. In 2014, Suzuki announced that “Ghibli’s production department will be going on hiatus.” (「ジブリの制作部門の休止。」) The announcement sent shockwaves through the media and social networks. This shock worsened when Suzuki announced that complete restructuring of that same production department; almost the entire staff, many of which had for years been salaried workers, were let go. This was followed by an exodus of higher-up Ghibli talent, as Yonebashi and producer Nishimura Yoshiaki led a team of former employees to form a spiritual successor company, Ponoc. (“Ponoć” is the Serbo-Croatian word for “midnight,” in answer “Ghibli,” an Italian word for the hot winds which blow off the Sahara.)

For all intents and purposes, this seemed to signal the death knell of Ghibli as a film production company. Miyazaki, forever restless, came somewhat out of retirement in 2015 to direct a short film for the museum — the charmingly winsome *Boro the Caterpillar*. However, with the shorts locked behind the museum gates in Mitaka, few had the chance to see it. Ghibli appeared to now exist to watch over its beloved brand, looking more towards its past than any future.

The Return?

Then came 2017, and the first signs of a reviving Ghibli crept out into the world. On May 19th, the studio put forth a call for new animators, indicating a restructuring of their production department. Then, in February, it became official: Miyazaki Hayao was returning to full-length film production once again. Retirement, it seemed, could not hold him back.

Inspiration had apparently struck him while working on *Boro*. He and Suzuki selected a group of young animators to work on the short, hoping to provide some real experience. Working with these energetic, fresh talents, Miyazaki "couldn't repress his desire to return to return to full-length filmmaking."

Online commentary had long held that Miyazaki could never actually keep to retirement; how right this was. Although many speculated Miyazaki real goal was beating the incredible global success of 2016's *Your Name.*, the official reasoning went as such:

「一方、この間、昔からの大切な仲間を何人も亡くし、自分自身の終焉に関してより深く考える日々が続きました... 『引退撤回』を決断し、長編アニメーション映画の制作を決めました。作るに値する題材を見出したからにはほかなりません。年齢的には、今度こそ、本当に最後の監督作品になるでしょう。」

“On the one hand, he’d recently lost a number of his old, treasured comrades, and the days during which he’d contemplate his own demise continued onwards... Miyazaki decided to carry out a ‘retirement repeal,’ determined to create a full-length animated film. The only reason for this is that he’d found something worth creating. Considering his age, this will likely be his true final directoral production — for real, this time.”

From the [official Studio Ghibli job posting for new animators](#). (Translation by author.)

Miyazaki's New Film



Director Miyazaki Hayao attends the 'Ponyo on the cliff by the Sea' photocall at the Piazzale del Casino during the 65th Venice Film Festival on August 31, 2008. (Picture: [Denis Makarenko](#) / Shutterstock)

What might Miyazaki's new film be about? To put it succinctly... we don't really know.

We do, however, have a tentative English title: *How Do You Live?* In Japanese, that's *Kimitachi wa Dou Ikiru Ka*, or 「君たちはどう生きるか」. The film takes its title from the book of the same name, a 1937 classic by Yoshino Genzaburo, itself an educational novel aimed at conveying ethical thinking. Yet, Miyazaki's new film is said not to be a straight adaptation — or even an adaptation at all. Rather, the studio has stated that this will be a grand fantasy epic — only tangentially connected to the book by the film's protagonist, for whom Yoshino's story holds great meaning.

Beyond this, we don't really know anything about *How Do You Live*. There have been no character designs or images released, nor any further plot details leaked. The movie remains a mystery. Even so, the excitement around the film's production is quite prodigious. Thousands of convenience and book store immediately began stocking the original book, featuring it in prominent displays. Moreover, a manga adaptation of the original novel

became Japan's best selling book in 2018 — almost certainly on the back of anticipation for Miyazaki's newest creation.

The film's release date also remains a mystery. Miyazaki had originally hoped to have it ready for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, but that has long since ceased being a possibility. Additionally, Suzuki recently announced that since Miyazaki first put pencil to paper in 2017, the film's animation has reached the state of being 10% complete. With the director now 79, his production has according taken on a bit of leisureliness; thankfully, early days in animation are often the slowest. We may yet see this film in the years soon to come.

The Future of Studio Ghibli

Suzuki further dropped some intriguing hints as January 2020 rolled around. The company's annual New Years Greeting (featuring a celebratory illustration by Miyazaki) gave the usual overview of projects coming down the pipeline; amongst this, one line stood out. 2020 is the Year of the Rat. Since that zodiac symbol represents prosperous offspring, Suzuki stated that it's suiting that Ghibli is "engaged in the production of two new film works." (二本の新作映画の制作に取り組んでいます。) The wording is somewhat vague, but to many — myself included — this reads as the first admission that a second film is currently in pre-production at Studio

Ghibli.

If so, Ghibli may really be returning to us after all. A second film by a separate director would indicate that Ghibli is once again investing in new talent and planning for the future. Takahata, Ghibli's other master and Miyazaki's one-time mentor (with whom he shared a difficult friendship), tragically passed away in 2018. With him, one-third of the true nucleus of Ghibli has left us. But with new blood being brought in and given a chance — who knows what may happen.

Further in Ghibli's future lies a [full-blown theme park](#), set to open in 2022. To be located at the former site of the 2005 World Expo in Aichi Prefecture, the park will be themed more closely to specific films than the more aesthetically-inspired Ghibli Museum. When we add all this to the near-worldwide Netflix pick-up, the HBO Max deal in North America, and Ghibli-sanctioned events like [kabuki plays](#), art expos, and the aforementioned Ghibli film festivals happening around the world, it looks like we may be hitting a bit of a Ghibli renaissance.

Exactly what the future will hold for Studio Ghibli, especially in the long run, remains unclear. But focusing back on some recurrent themes from the Studio — those of impermanence, accepting change, and moving onwards — I can't help but feel optimistic for the future of one of Japan, and the world's, greatest filmic institutions.

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