

# Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



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## Private Vocabulary, Public Resonance: On Miyazaki's *The Boy and the Heron*

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**Abstract:** The latest film by Hayao Miyazaki, *The Boy and the Heron*, unfolds in unexpected and occasionally baffling ways. The film's second half, especially, takes place in a world that appears to abide by a distinct narrative logic than that which viewers are familiar with. I discuss this as an instance of Miyazaki creating and working within a private, authentic vocabulary, as has been described in Existentialist and Pragmatist traditions. Specifically, I analyze its filmic language as an alloy of the memories, imagined possibilities, and losses of two of its characters, and why this depiction is so affecting.

## I. INTRODUCTION

While discussing Hiyaoy Miyazaki's *The Boy and the Heron*, the critic Andy Greenwald noted that American audiences 'think of [Studio Ghibli] movies as made in a foreign language. But in the case of Miyazaki, it's a language that he has slowly taught us all to understand and speak'.<sup>1</sup> This is likely to ring true for both supporters and dissenters of the film maker's latest effort, perhaps his last. In the positive register, it is something that only Miyazaki could have made, and that we can only appreciate because we've been tutored throughout the decades to understand what he's saying. We're all the richer for having had another peek into such a mind. In the negative register, we have not been tutored so much as talked at in an increasingly obscure tongue. *The Boy and the Heron* is an example of an artist forgetting that even monologues are two-sided — listeners must have some purchase on what's being said.

There are multiple interrelated ways in which the filmic vocabulary of *The Boy and the Heron* is distinctly Miyazaki. It features some classic Miyazaki tropes: a stoic, troubled child as the protagonist; talking animals, usually too mischievous or dangerous to be cute without qualification; detours into the visually grotesque; and an environment that functions as a living organism, which humans try to ignore. At times, these move beyond tropes towards something closer to flashbacks. Greenwald references specific elements in the film that recall previous Miyazaki efforts: *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Ponyo*, and *The Wind Rises*. And even beyond that, we recognise certain key elements as drawing on the life of Miyazaki himself, such as his mother's early death and his father's job making air craft during World War II. We can thus see that *The Boy and the Heron* is in large part a self-reflection, an old man at the end of his career using his creative powers to investigate what his life has meant and the role those very creative powers have played in it.

The film is split into two parts. First, we are introduced to young Mahito. That is, only insofar as witnessing someone experience their defining trauma is an introduction. This is key to the logic of the film. The death of Mahito's mother Hisako in a hospital fire in 1943 is not so much *part* of the story — something that occurs in an established space of characters and settings — but is the very ground on which the story is built. Soon after, Mahito's father Shoichi, who manufactures planes for the Japanese military, marries Hisako's sister, and all three resettle from Tokyo to the countryside along with seven elderly maids.

Mahito is ostracised at school, haunted by the screams of his mother, and unable to connect to either his macho father or his pregnant, sickly aunt-*cum*-step-mother. In a shocking scene, the young boy picks up a rock and savagely bashes himself in the head, blood gushing from the wound beyond plausibility. Liquids in the film do not always behave in normal ways, suggesting that they may belong to a different realm. He is lonely and grief-stricken and has no

idea how to express it. Worst of all, he's constantly mocked by a gray heron with a disturbingly full set of teeth. This creature squawks that 'his presence is needed' at a location where he can see his mother again. Eventually, Mahito and one of the maids, Kiriko, follow the heron into an abandoned castle built by his great-granduncle, and then into an undersea world. There, things really get weird.

## II. ENTERING THE ILLOGICAL UNDERSEA WORLD

The rest of the film is the main focus of this review, but I will not summarise it. It is not the sort of narrative that lends itself to summary. Summarising relies on the flexibility of a vocabulary such that certain descriptions can be transformed into other, briefer descriptions, without losing too much that's vital in the process. But, as I've said, this film, and especially this part, is told in Miyazaki's idiosyncratic vocabulary. Any summary that might do justice to it would have to be written in Miyazaki's own language, or else not be a transformation but a translation. I do not have the fluency for either of those options. Instead, I'll take a step back and discuss the language itself.

The movie has been described as being about 'grief' or 'growing up', but such views are not quite right. Those all describe general experiences. If those were the film's subjects, Miyazaki would be talking about my grief or your grief just as much as his own grief. He would be like those 'bourgeois writers' whom Jean-Paul Sartre criticised for thinking 'they have done enough once they have described their own nature or that of their friends: since all men are made the same, they will have rendered a service to all by teaching each man about himself'.<sup>2</sup> Sartre calls on such writers to reject a naïve universalism and acknowledge the situatedness of individuals. If Miyazaki's film concerns grief, it is not about 'grief' in general, but a historically and culturally situated grief.

Perhaps, then, we can interpret the film through its historical moment. World War II can seem like mere stage-setting in the film, explaining Schoichi's job and why the maids cannot get cigarettes due to rationing. Note, however, the crowd of malevolent 'soldier parakeets', who are struggling with Great-Granduncle for control of the undersea world. In their gathering, bearing flags and cheering on their king, they bear a striking resemblance to that era's fascist rallies. This is not mere stage-setting: it suggests that the forces threatening our protagonist during his personal, spiritual journey are inextricable from the forces contemporaneously threatening Japan as a whole. In all, there is something fruitful in recognising in the spiritual struggle over the undersea world a reflection of the spiritual struggle over 1940s Japan.

But this still doesn't do it justice. The syntax and diction of the undersea world is too particular, too bizarre. It seems to be less the collective unconscious of a people and more the entangled unconscious of two versions of a person. Miyazaki the traumatised boy and Miyazaki the retiring elder; as

characterised by Mahito and Great-Granduncle.

Consider Richard Rorty's commendation of Marcel Proust, who generated his distinct literary world with full awareness that it was only a transmutation of what 'he happened to bump into'.<sup>3</sup> [Rorty, 100] *Remembrance of Lost Time* is all the better for being a self-consciously personal project; for seeing its images and words as not just historically and culturally situated, but also personally situated. In contrast to Proust, Rorty remarked how 'theorists' like Sartre or Martin Heidegger thought '[they] could, by virtue of [their] acquaintance with certain books, pick out certain words which stood to all contemporary Europeans as Marcel's litany of recollections stood to him,'<sup>4</sup> and as a result they got lost in a liminal space between private insight and public utility, confusing '[their] own idiosyncratic spiritual situation for the essence of what it [is] to be a [contemporary European] human being.'<sup>5</sup>

We might similarly say that *The Boy and the Heron* is successfully enigmatic. By having the film play out in a world of self-reference and personal history, Miyazaki stays true to the fact that he can best engage with his existential questions if the very language those questions are posed in, the very form of their on-screen manifestations, is built out of the raw material of his own personal experience. There is no pretence that the logic of the undersea world could, much less should, be totally apparent to the viewer, even if they happen to come from the same historical moment. Much like Proust's logic, it is founded on his private redescriptions of the things that impacted him, deftly filtered through his two on-screen redescriptions of himself.

Consider the striking ways that such highly personalised manifestations of future and past, and potential and death, intermingle in the undersea world. There is a sense that one resides in this world *before* entering the 'real' world. Cute, spherical beings called 'warawara' fly into the sky where they enter our world to become humans, like the human growing in Mahito's step-mother's womb. Both Kiriko, the maid that followed Mahito, and his mother Hisako are present in the undersea world as younger versions of themselves, stuck in a time before Mahito was ever born. In the way that one mythologises a younger version of some decrepit or dead loved one, both are generous, heroic guides. Hisako can even control fire, the very thing that killed her on Earth. Yet, this suggests that events in the 'real world' can have influence over how one appears in the undersea world. That is to say, Hisako is a version of herself that both precedes and follows the version that Mahito knew on Earth.

And this is just one way that the undersea world also appears to be where one resides *after* their time in the 'real' world. One of the first things the younger Kiriko says is, 'Here, the dead outnumber the living.' One of the soldier parakeets is overwhelmed when he comes across his ancestors. The whole undersea world's existence, we come to learn, is predicated on the balancing of blocks that Mahito observes are made from the same material that is used to make gravestones. This world both precedes and follows the 'real world,' because it is built out of an alloy of Mahito's and Great-

Granduncle's memories, imagined possibilities, and losses — recollections and hopes filtered through grief.

We can also look at the original Japanese title of the movie, which translates as 'How Do You Live?', which is also the title of a 1937 novel by Genzaburo Yoshino, one of Miyazaki's favourites. Despite certain thematic similarities, the film is by no means a direct re-creation of the novel's events. The only direct reference is when Mahito finds that his mother has left a copy of this novel for him to read when he's older. We might say that this is not an *adaptation* of the novel, but rather a *translation* of it into Miyazaki-ese. He does not take the book's plot and layer his style on top. Instead, he transmutes the spirit of the original text into his idiosyncratic vocabulary, intermingling with all else in his private world.

### III. FROM PRIVATE LANGUAGE TO PUBLIC RESONANCE

I have perhaps not done well to counter the complainer who accuses *The Boy and the Heron* of being indulgent nonsense. Rorty, after all, seemed to submit to those complaints when he tied the success of figures like Proust and Jacques Derrida to their lack of broad intelligibility. Derrida's work is profound precisely because it is so private, because it gives up on appealing to those who haven't had the key experiences he had. 'If we have not been impressed by Plato or Heidegger, the chances are [Derrida's work] will be [of] no use at all; if we have, it might be decisive.'<sup>6</sup> Rorty suggested that even though most of us view an artwork as indulgent nonsense, this is no strike against it, so long as those who share key influences with the author recognise the artwork's power.

This is unlikely to convince our complainer, who might respond to Rorty as Wayne Booth responded to critics who argued that authors are at their best when they hold our hand the least, simply presenting objects and images they consider significant. However significant those objects and images are to the author, Booth argues:

More often than not we may not even recognize, if left unassisted, what it is that we have been shown. It might be said that we *ought* to. But *why* ought we? Could I reasonably expect Faulkner, say, or Joyce, to recognise *my* natural objects for what they *really* are, if I simply presented a fictional world to them with no clues as to how I viewed that world?<sup>7</sup>

It is said that Great-Granduncle lost his mind after reading too many books. The undersea world, then, may only be the deranged creation of a man lost amongst symbols, useless to those of us who are not lost in that same place. Rorty might have been okay with such a result, but I suspect that most of us are not. Yet Booth's retort seems inappropriate here. It cannot account for why, despite the confusion, the film was so affecting. I have not had

many of the key experiences that either Miyazaki or Mahito had. And the transcendent feeling that I had watching the film did not reflect some abstract appreciation for Miyazaki's display of self-creation. So, what was it?

Shortly after his comment about language, Greenwald describes why he loved taking his daughters to the movie:

It brings them into contact with something sort of ineffably beautiful, maybe something that they can't articulate yet. But it familiarises them with an idea of art, and what you can get from it, that isn't as easily translatable into 'Let's play these songs on Spotify.' 'Let's buy this backpack.' 'Let's wait for the sequel.'<sup>8</sup>

This helps us see how Miyazaki's private language achieves public resonance. It works because his movies are children's movies, not just in the way they're aimed at children, but because of the *particular* way in which they keep the viewer on the outside, straddling the boundary of the vocabulary in use. It is the type of outsidership that a child might feel in the presence of a trusted adult, before they become convinced that such alienation is altogether a bad thing; when the inchoate, evocative perceptions that one experiences in the presence of beauty, kindness, and fear leak through, even if we have not yet mastered the underlying concepts and schemas that we can package them into.

Many viewers have taken up a particular variation on this theme. Essential to appreciating this dive into another's private language, they suggest, is appreciating its insufficiency. The critic Brian Tallerico argues that the movie's final act, in which the undersea world comes apart at the seams and Mahito returns to the real world, expresses the necessary limitations of life lived within one's own world. 'That's the lesson of adulthood, the awareness that we can't live in lands of made-up characters and fantasy versions of those we've lost,' Tallerico writes. 'After gifting us with so many visions, Hayao Miyazaki isn't telling us to live in those animated worlds: he's telling us to live in our own.'<sup>9</sup>

I cannot bring myself to fully assent to this interpretation either. While that awareness surely is an integral part of maturation, one that Miyazaki has always been willing to look at head-on, I'm not so sure that the film's conclusion works as a full-throated *endorsement* of it. Yes, Mahito rebuffs Great-Granduncle's offer to take over the undersea world. But his reasoning for that — the confidence in himself and his future that he's gained from the relationships he's formed during his time in the undersea realm — seem to me as much an affirmation of private worlds as it is a rejection of *this particular* private world, one beholden to the baggage of his elder. And after all, it is not Mahito or Great-Granduncle, but rather the Tojo-esque King Parakeet who causes the undersea world's undoing in an act of reckless violence. It is a maturation, a transition between worlds, that is recognised as necessary and even beautiful, but it is nevertheless the tragic imposition of a cruel universe,

not an autonomous choice. It is, I argue, too easy to see the ‘real’ world, the one that we can most easily relate to and understand, as ultimately the truer one. We would do well not to ignore the gray heron when he claims that the safe logic of our world of clear delineations between past and present, present and future, and life and death, while at times a reality that we must accept, can at other times be no more than ‘a typical human trick.’

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### ENDNOTES

1. Fennessey et al. 2023.
2. Sartre 1948, 248.
3. Rorty 1989, 100.
4. 119.
5. 110.
6. 133.
7. Booth 1961, 111.
8. Fennessey et al. 2023.
9. Tallerico 2023.

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