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AN EXPLORATION OF ESCAPISM WITH A UNIQUE BLEND OF CINEMATIC  
EXPERIENCE IN FILMS OF HAYAO MIYAZAKI

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**Abstract:**

*Miyazaki films have always been the center of attention in the world of Japanese anime. His films have received critical acclaim for the portrayal of social and political issues, and also been renowned for the mesmerizing beauty of storytelling and cinematography. The present paper aims to shed light on the art of narration in selected films of legendary Japanese animator/director Hayao Miyazaki in popular films like Kiki's Delivery Service, Howl's Moving Castle, Princess Mononoke and My Neighbor Totoro. Miyazaki focuses on blending fiction or fantastical elements along with realism which becomes the central appeal in his works. The film also discusses relevant topics which are welcoming for people of all ages. The paper will essentially focus on escapism as a compelling form of comfort narrative in the films of Hayao Miyazaki. The paper also sheds light on the simplistic elements of everyday life present in his films. The movies are simple; made for simple people, in order to get away from their mundane lifestyle, it offers an immersive experience, rendering a sense of warmth and overwhelming emotions.*

**Keywords:** *Escapism, Anime, Media Fiction, Psychology, Hayao Miyazaki, etc.*

**Introduction:**

Anime is an abbreviation of the word Animation, typically used by Western audiences for anime made in Japan. The advent of creating anime began in the early 19th century and has continued to remain in popular business presently. Japanese anime industry has undoubtedly produced one of the finest film directors of all time i.e. Hayao Miyazaki, who has rendered a new definition and set high standards for anime across the globe. Miyazaki began his career as an animator and later moved towards directing and producing various films throughout his career. The director is renowned for bringing social concerns into the mainstream. He often focuses on portraying love and family in his works. Few of his works are considered as 'comfort films' throughout the world. Miyazaki focuses on several themes which reflect his personal ideologies as well, such as anti-war, pacifism, political domination, environmentalism etc. Many of his films are profoundly appreciated for showcasing societal concerns in a more comprehensive way. His recent film, *The Boy and the Heron* (2024) swept Oscars award in the best animation category.



Miyazaki uses unique narrative style techniques to engage with his audience and to keep his viewers glued to the screen. The film *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) directed by Miyazaki had several animistic characters who were also called 'wood spirits' of the forest which eventually went on to become the official merchandise of Studio Ghibli, founded by Hayao Miyazaki, Toshio Suzuki and Isao Takahata. Even though the film was not a commercial success initially, the sale of merchandise alone benefited the studio and later on became a cult classic among young audiences. In his film *Princess Mononoke* (1997) the titular character San lives with wolves that raise her as their own. The 'boar' represents evil and demonic nature. Here, we can see the importance of retaining nature as it is, but the encroachment of the forest and human greed allow nature and forest spirits to find fierce ways to combat human beings. His most popular film *Spirited Away* (2001) also portrays animistic characters such as 'no-face', Haku as dragon and river spirit etc. The film was appreciated for its unique portrayal of myths on-screen. These techniques built a strong narrative through which Miyazaki is able to convey his thoughts, emotions and his understanding of the world.

Miyazaki films are often called 'gateway to escapism' and many of his films are child-centric yet they have mature themes which make the young learners understand the significance of life, people and society. The director employs 'heart-to-heart' connection with his audience in order to captivate their interest and to make them feel at ease with his films. Even though the director Miyazaki has a different outlook towards life, some consider him as a pessimist and others are often awestruck by his philosophical way of thinking. Miyazaki is passionate towards his art, he is known for keeping authenticity alive in his works.

"I would like to make a film to tell children 'It's good to be alive.' "

The above-mentioned quote by Miyazaki suggests how committed he is about filmmaking and his love for life, even though he is largely portrayed in the media as someone who leans towards a pessimistic outlook and a miserable artist. Miyazaki has always preferred drawing anime from hands using 2D effects rather than relying on technology rampantly. He has openly discussed his dislike towards depending upon modern technological art forms such as AI, CGI etc., to finish animation in films.

The research paper focuses on the psychological concept of 'escapism' as a medium for many viewers to cope with their daily lives. Escapism essentially focuses on distraction, in order to avoid reality by focusing on some other tasks such as playing games, watching films/anime, sleeping, usage of social media apps etc. Daydreaming is often associated with escapism, as per research, daydreaming is good as long as it does not hinder the physical, mental or social health of an individual. Miyazaki films have the same kind of effect on its ardent viewers, since it's a work of fiction and many tend to get lost in the world of fantasy, choosing 'immediate pleasure' over dealing with present issues. Often called the 'Happy Hormone', the chemical messenger Dopamine plays a vital role in escapism, and in the short run, it is considered good, however, it may lead to negative consequences if utilized frequently.

This paper suggests that people prefer Miyazaki films not only because they're cinematic or they transport you to the fantasy 'Ghibli world', it is also because many find solace in his films, his direction and the art of storytelling which is completely different from any other directors in the contemporary period. Miyazaki films have been often cited as powerful representations of emotions and feelings paired with nature and its connections with human beings. His films have



portrayed certain strong characters that bring out the altruistic side which is rarely visible in other anime films. Most of his films center around the theme of 'nature', 'freedom', 'humanism' and 'compassion' which inadvertently binds his audience with captivating storytelling.

**Objective:**

This paper aims to study the role of escapism in modern life through depiction of animistic characters and unique narrative representation in Miyazaki films. It also makes us understand why his films and direction are considered compelling and are often viewed in different light with respect to storytelling, appealing illustrations, gripping musical background score and animistic characterisation.

**Methodology:**

The film is analyzed by using ideological and narrative analysis, studying various themes and representation of animism in Miyazaki films. His films are often worthy of critical appreciation of various human experiences. The paper will also examine the auteur theory and cultural aspect of the films and its influence in his works.

**Stimulating Sceneries and Landscapes:**

Miyazaki is known for his love for preservation of the environment and it is quite evident from his portrayal of countryside landscapes which are utilized for storytelling and making the audience as a nature enthusiast. The scenic beauty of nature urges viewers to think about their relationship with the environment and to rebuild what we have lost over the past years. His films largely focus on preserving and bonding and becoming one with nature as portrayed in *Princess Mononoke*. Many of his films depict the human impact on the environment, raising awareness about the environment and finding reassurance and relief from nature. Nature plays a critical role in his films since he is a devoted advocate for environmentalism and it is deliberately presented onscreen.

**Family, Love and Human Emotions:**

Miyazaki paints an extraordinary picture of a world which may not be perfect or ideal, in spite of that it seems surreal, dreamlike and magical which transcends language and cultural boundaries. His films unveil what it feels like to be a human and to explore the forgotten experiences of our world. The film essentially addresses the aspects of freedom, nature, empathy and weaves a poignant storyline compelling the audience to understand the complex themes. The stories emphasize the connection we share with our loved ones, providing unconditional support and empathy. The basic bonding between family and friends are expressed in a genuine and endearing manner, and the characters portray the everyday struggles of a common man's life. The characters are sensitive towards the feelings of other characters, something that aids in forming lasting connections. The relationship between characters is delightful and heartwarming which often reminds the viewers of their own relations with their dear ones. The films often celebrate the theme of love and acceptance. Miyazaki films are endearing to watch simply because they convey beguiling human emotions which are shown in an appealing and captivating manner, despite Japan being quite a conservative society. Here, the filmmaker strives to make his films relatable to the rest of the world. The characters undergo continuous personal growth, hardships and struggle which frequently inspire the viewers, it also inspires them to have something even remotely similar in their own life. He has a way of expressing human feelings in a straightforward and it's



elementary form, perhaps which is why film enthusiasts tend to worship his style of art in his films.

### **Realism with Magical Fantasy:**

Magical fantasy is a recurrent theme in Ghibli films. The films are captivating not only for younger audiences but for adults as well, it carries an essence of magical fictional world where people can adrift and make use of their imagination to comprehend the struggles and dilemmas of the protagonist. Magical fantasy establishes the connection between the character and the audience through various means such as strong and vivid imagination, certain magic or mythical creatures impacting the role of the character etc. Fantasy plays a vital role in shaping the character, making them aware of the traditional concept of good vs evil and in order to make the character more captivating, Ghibli often portrays them in large scale conflicts and provide enough source for the growth of the character. It is very rare to witness a blend of fantasy and realism in anime films, however Miyazaki has done an impeccable job to portray the same. His films frequently use folklore and mythology to bring out various aspects of supernatural elements which correlate with the development of characters in the film. *Princess Mononoke* is one such film where mythical creatures play a significant role in making the audience understand the wrath and agony of nature and the consequences of human interference with nature. Another famous film *My Neighbor Totoro* depicts the adventure of two children who deal with magical creatures of the forest and form a unique bond with them. The film deals with family, childhood, compassion etc., it allows young viewers to understand nature, to maintain family bonding and to enjoy the importance of a rural life. *Totoro* is also the official mascot of Ghibli after it became famous among children. *Kiki's Delivery Service* is another anime film directed by Miyazaki which portrays the unusual adventures of Kiki, a young witch who relies on her magic and navigates through the city helping people and understanding her purpose of life.

### **The Tale of Journey and Adventure:**

Miyazaki films often have intriguing ideas of adventure and life-changing journey which helps the characters in shaping their perspectives towards life and embarking on a steadfast journey of self-growth. His films often tend to portray characters who step out of their comfort zone and perform things which are extraordinarily challenging hence they grip the audience in viewing their character development. Journey and adventure play a significant role in Studio Ghibli films, they render determination towards improving the main character by making the protagonist face struggles and challenges. The main character usually undergoes several hardships in order to learn the way of the world and to confront their circumstances in order to come out stronger than before, it is usually a canon event in the development arc of the protagonist. In the film *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), the young character of Sophie depicts the struggle of war, rage and revenge but in the end, it can be seen evidently the film ends at a positive note, reinforcing the idea of pacifism. Miyazaki's latest film *The Boy and the Heron* created waves in the international media by sweeping best animated film at the Oscars. The movie conveyed the idea of a young boy having his adventurous spirit and discovering his sense of emotional connection with people around him. Certainly, Ghibli has several characters that have been the source of inspiration such as Princess Mononoke for taking a stand for environmental cause, Totoro for being adventurous and friendship, Jiro Hirokoshi for acceptance and letting go. Ghibli has proved time and again, that



human emotions and experiences shape the perspective of the characters which allows viewers to perceive them in different light and to be inspired from those characters.

### **Miyazaki Films in current Age:**

Hayao Miyazaki remains popular in this current age, despite being quite old, the reason being his ideas conveyed through his films are refreshing and relatable, the audience enjoys the pure connection they are able to make through his films. Miyazaki is a revered figure in modern age, his films have become a cult classic throughout the world. His films have also been instrumental in shaping the image of Japan and anime industry. The present age knows Miyazaki as the master of animation. His distinctive art style has been monumental in shaping the anime growth in Japan. Several themes pertinent to nature, war, pacifism can be seen in his works. Miyazaki has received international acclaim for his works Spirited Away, The Boy and the Heron, Kiki's Delivery Service etc. Undoubtedly, Miyazaki has played an important role in bringing anime to the forefront with his groundbreaking anime style and narration. His films are not only aesthetic in scenery and landscape but they feel alive when one views his films from different perspectives. The films are highly representative of our everyday life which may seem mundane to us but not to the acclaimed director. The films allow us to peek into the inner rich world of anime, their depiction of culture, romanticized version of life and many other breathtaking visuals make us comprehend that life perhaps is better in Ghibli world than in reality. An anonymous internet user wrote "Miyazaki films feel like a warm hug on a chilly winter night", this quote probably describes why people find comfort and escapism in his films. The films have their way of focusing on human conditions, which is both vivid and lively. Even in this present age, the director has remained a popular figure among youngsters. He created the immersive world for everyone with genuine characterisation of normal people and their problems, perhaps this is why audiences are able to find peace in his films. The research paper has strived to cover the impact and influence of Miyazaki and his films throughout the world, by understanding his films through various lenses and creating a better comprehension for the upcoming researchers.

### **Conclusion:**

Over the period of many years, Miyazaki films have become a cult classic and almost like a sensation which cannot be ignored. His films have given inspiration to many young artists and directors, which is commendable given the fact that Miyazaki's legacy is still being carried on by upcoming artists. Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli are almost synonymous with each other, their works have created a lasting impression on young people who admire the unique blend of cinematic experience and storytelling. Miyazaki and his films have always emphasized on the narration of the story, animation which speaks volume about the human experience. There is a reason why Studio Ghibli is called the 'Disney of Japan', it targets all kinds of audiences, using immersive realism, nostalgia, art, mythology and folklore. Miyazaki still prefers hand drawn animation; he heavily criticizes new-age technology which takes away the sheer joy of creating something for others. His films are evident results of his determination towards keeping traditional art of animation alive. He has also been an active advocate for pacifism and environmentalism throughout his life and it can be seen in many of his films. The director has become famous not only for his films but his opinions are also appreciated in the industry.



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