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Animated Film Review

THE BOY AND THE HERON

(Hayao Miyazaki, JP 2023)

Hayao Miyazaki, co-founder of Studio Ghibli and one of animation's most respected figures, has captivated audiences for decades with his meticulously crafted worlds and profound narratives. After announcing his retirement following *KAZE TACHINU* (*THE WIND RISES*, Hayao Miyazaki, JP 2013), Miyazaki's return to filmmaking with *KIMITACHI WA DŌ IKIRU KA* (*THE BOY AND THE HERON*, Hayao Miyazaki, JP 2023) was met with global anticipation. Released in Japan on 14 July 2023, after nearly seven years in production, the film eschewed common marketing strategies: no trailers or extensive promotions – just a poster featuring a hand-drawn heron. This unconventional strategy only heightened interest, contributing to Studio Ghibli's most successful box office opening in Japan to date.

Internationally titled *THE BOY AND THE HERON*, the original Japanese title, which translates to “How Do You Live?”, arguably captures the film's introspective themes and literary roots more accurately. Loosely inspired by Genzaburō Yoshino's novel *How Do You Live?* (1939), Miyazaki's work interweaves this question with elements from John Connolly's novel *The Book of Lost Things* (2006), ultimately creating a unique, complex narrative that extends beyond a straightforward adaptation. At its international premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2023, *THE BOY AND THE HERON* was introduced by Guillermo Del Toro, who extolled Miyazaki's profound legacy, likening him to even Mozart and Van Gogh.¹ This admiration was echoed in the film's accolades, as it won both the Oscar for Best Animated Feature and a Golden Globe. Notably, *THE BOY AND THE HERON* faced tough competition from *SPIDER-MAN: ACROSS THE SPIDER-VERSE* (Joaquim Dos Santos / Kemp Powers / Justin K. Thompson, US 2023), a highly acclaimed work in its own

1 Yasmin 2024.

right. Yet producer Chris Miller commented on their Oscar loss: “Well, if you’re gonna lose, might as well lose to the GOAT”.²

THE BOY AND THE HERON tells the story of 12-year-old Mahito, who, after losing his mother in a tragic hospital bombing during the Pacific War, moves with his father to the countryside to live on the estate of his father’s new wife – his mother’s younger sister. His father, who manages a military aviation factory, is engrossed in work, and Mahito, feeling isolated, struggles to adjust to his new family and surroundings. At school, he clashes with classmates and, in a moment of deep despair, turns to self-mutilation, retreating further from those around him. Amidst this turmoil, Mahito encounters a peculiar grey heron that can speak and claims his mother is still alive, trying to lure him into a strange tower on the estate. When his stepmother suddenly vanishes, Mahito ventures into the tower to find her. What started as a search for the lost soon becomes a deeper journey of self-discovery, leading Mahito into a surreal world filled with fantastical creatures like ominous man-eating parakeets and small fluffy beings called Warawara, representing unborn human souls.

Miyazaki’s signature style animates this world, blending the familiar with the surreal in a way that feels distinctly Ghibli. Long-time fans of Miyazaki will even recognize nostalgic image references to earlier Ghibli films. Emphasis on the beauty of imagery, particularly in scenes that stand as works of art beyond plot advancement, is central to Studio Ghibli’s animation aesthetics, influenced profoundly by Miyazaki’s vision. The film’s visuals, from the serene Japanese landscapes to the vibrant otherworldly realms, resemble paintings, reflecting Ghibli’s dedication to detailed, contemplative art. This visual language invites viewers to slow down and immerse themselves in its richness, with each frame seemingly layered with meaning that encourages deeper engagement. Studio Ghibli’s commitment to hand-drawn animation continues in *THE BOY AND THE HERON*, retaining its distinct aesthetic in an industry increasingly driven by efficiency. Although some scenes incorporate computer-generated elements, the hand-drawn artistry remains dominant, setting the film apart from both contemporary animations and Ghibli’s previous release *ĀYA TO MAJO (EARWIG AND THE WITCH)*, Gorō Miyazaki, JP 2020), a 3D production directed by Miyazaki’s son Gorō. In an era where animated films increasingly rely on digital perfection, this commitment to traditional hand-drawn animation stands as a quiet act of resistance. Complementing this allegiance to tradition, composer and longtime Miyazaki collaborator Joe Hisaishi once

2 Sharf 2024. “GOAT” is an acronym for “Greatest of All Time”.

again provides the score, enhancing the film's visual storytelling. Hisaishi's music guides the audience through Mahito's emotional landscape, creating an experience as evocative through sound as it is through imagery.

At its core, *THE BOY AND THE HERON* is a profound meditation on grief and the search for meaning amid loss. Rather than following a conventional narrative of healing, Mahito's journey offers an imaginative and introspective engagement with the unknown. Ghibli's tradition of inviting personal interpretation is evident here, though *THE BOY AND THE HERON* stands out for its complexity. The film's rich symbolism raises many unanswered questions, and while visually arresting, it lacks the cohesion and momentum that defined Miyazaki's past classics. Mahito's stoic demeanour further challenges the audience's emotional connection. Instead, viewers are encouraged to project their own interpretations onto his experiences. This approach might alienate some, including regular Ghibli fans, who may feel distanced by the film's introspective nature: The titular question of the film – "How do you live?" – is subtly woven into the story, prompting personal reflection without prescribing answers. At the same time, Miyazaki's use of complex symbolism adds layers of meaning that resist simplistic interpretation while occasionally drifting into ambiguity. This complexity may leave viewers oscillating between emotional engagement with the characters and analytical consideration of the film's broader implications. As a result, some viewers could find themselves unable to provide a definitive answer to the central question based solely on their cinematic experience.

The film revisits themes that define Miyazaki's oeuvre – nature, childhood, the impact of war, the search for meaning in a chaotic world – but in *THE BOY AND THE HERON*, he explicitly engages with mortality. There is a sense that Miyazaki, now in his eighties, is reflecting not only on the impermanence of life but also on his own legacy as a filmmaker and storyteller. Mahito shares autobiographical similarities with Miyazaki, including a relocation to the countryside during wartime and a father connected to military aviation. The question of the legacy of Studio Ghibli – founded by Miyazaki alongside Isao Takahata and Toshio Suzuki in 1985 – is subtly explored through the film. According to producer Toshio Suzuki, Miyazaki intended *THE BOY AND THE HERON* as a message to his grandson: "It's his way of saying, 'Grandpa is moving on to the next world, but he's leaving behind this film.'"³ In this context, it's also relevant to note that Miyazaki's son

3 Sharf 2017.

Gorō has directed Ghibli films as well, though they are often seen as lacking the depth and charm of his father's works. With *THE BOY AND THE HERON*, Miyazaki seems to grapple with the question of succession, within both his family and his studio – a theme that adds a bittersweet layer to Mahito's journey. This personal connection is enriched by the metaphysical nature of Mahito's adventure, which explores and then blurs the boundaries between life and death. The fantastical realm Mahito enters thus symbolizes the cyclical nature of life and the seamless bond between past and present.

Ultimately, Miyazaki's refusal to offer easy answers or clear resolutions makes *THE BOY AND THE HERON* one of his most intellectually and emotionally challenging films to date. Yet, for those willing to engage, the film offers a rare cinematic experience. Miyazaki's choice to leave certain threads untied reflects his understanding of art as a conversation rather than a conclusive statement. He challenges the audience to engage with the film on an emotional and intellectual level while offering a work of art not to be understood but to be experienced. Through this journey, Miyazaki presents animation not merely as a medium for escapism, but as a lens through which to explore existence's most profound questions. In a cinematic landscape increasingly defined by clear-cut narratives, *THE BOY AND THE HERON* invites viewers to sit with uncertainty, to question rather than resolve, and to find beauty in the fleeting, the ambiguous, and the unknowable.

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