



## INTRODUCTION

IF YOU LOOK UP THE HEAD OFFICE OF JAPANESE ANIMATION LEGENDS STUDIO GHIBLI ON GOOGLE MAPS, THE LEAD IMAGE YOU SEE IS OF AN A4 PRINTOUT SIGN POSTED IN A WINDOW: "THIS IS NOT GHIBLI MUSEUM. IT'S STUDIO GHIBLI OFFICE. NOT OPEN TO PUBLIC." NOT THAT WE CARED, WE KNEW PRECISELY WHERE WE WERE, AND WHY WE WERE THERE.



But who are we, anyway? We're Michael Leader and Jake Cunningham. Back in 2018, we started working in the same office together. Both obsessed with film, podcasts and film podcasts, our eventual collaboration seemed inevitable: all that was needed was the perfect meet-cute moment. Then, a conversation across the desk revealed a heinous, monumental gap in Jake's cultural knowledge: he'd barely seen any Studio Ghibli films. Well, this simply would not do – at least not on Michael's watch.

An avowed Ghibli fanatic, Michael planned out a rigorous and robust syllabus for Jake, a guided tour through the Studio's entire catalogue, along the way taking in their historic successes (*Spirited Away*, *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke*), fan favourites (*Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Grave of the Fireflies*, *Pom Poko*) and deepest cuts (*Ocean Waves*, *My Neighbours the Yamadas*, *The Red Turtle*).

And why not capture it all on microphone? The resulting podcast would strike a balance between Michael's anorak-level research into the production history, the industry context, and the people and personalities behind the films, and Jake's fresh, unfettered take, experiencing these classics of world cinema as a first-time viewer, one film at a time. All that was needed was an ever so slightly laboured but undeniably catchy (and surprisingly tricky to spell) pun title, playing on the French word for library – *bibliothèque* – suggesting a warm, welcoming setting for this regular film club.

**Opposite:** The exterior of the Ghibli Museum in Mitaka, Tokyo.  
**Above, Left to Right:** Chihiro looking ahead to her adventure in *Spirited Away*; Jake and Michael in the midst of their adventure at Ghibli Museum; Hayao Miyazaki, hard at work, in the documentary *Never Ending Man: Hayao Miyazaki*.





## LAPUTA: CASTLE IN THE SKY (TENKŪ NO SHIRO RAPHYUTA, 1986)

STUDIO GHIBLI TAKES FLIGHT

DIRECTED BY: HAYAO MIYAZAKI  
WRITTEN BY: HAYAO MIYAZAKI  
LENGTH: 2HR 5MIN  
RELEASE DATE (JAPAN): 2 AUGUST 1986

ON JUNE 15, 1985, STUDIO GHIBLI WAS BORN. HOWEVER, THE COMPANY WAS FORMED JUST AS MUCH OUT OF NECESSITY AS AMBITION. FOLLOWING THE BLOCKBUSTER SUCCESS OF *NAUSICÄÄ OF THE VALLEY OF THE WIND*, HAYAO MIYAZAKI AND ISAO TAKAHATA HAD TROUBLE SECURING FINANCING AND FINDING A PRODUCTION PARTNER TO CREATE YET MORE HIGHLY POLISHED, FEATURE-LENGTH ANIMATED FILMS. AND SO, THEY STRUCK OUT ON THEIR OWN.

The name came from Miyazaki, a lifelong aeroplane enthusiast, nodding to an Italian reconnaissance aircraft in World War II which, in turn, was named after the warm Saharan winds that sweep across the Mediterranean. Studio Ghibli, too, would be a fresh, creative force blowing through the Japanese animation industry.

Tokuma Shoten, publishers of *Animage* and backers of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, gave the fledgling company start-up support, while *Animage* editor Toshio Suzuki would moonlight in an unofficial capacity at the newly founded Ghibli – even printing his own business cards.

Rather than the safe bet of a sequel to *Nausicaä*, Studio Ghibli's first feature project would be a return to the younger-skewing fantasy adventure genre that Miyazaki excelled at with the 1978 series *Future Boy Conan*. Drawing influence from *Gulliver's Travels* and the writing of Jules Verne, Miyazaki's original December 1984 proposal for what would eventually become *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* included provisional titles that hinted at this direction: "Young Pazu and the Mystery of the Levitation Crystal", "Flying Treasure Island"

and "The Flying Empire". The film, Miyazaki writes, would be an "intensely thrilling classic action film" that would "bring animation back to its roots".

As the film would be a retro-futuristic throwback to nineteenth-century science fiction with a steampunk style aesthetic, producer Isao Takahata suggested that Miyazaki make a research trip to the UK, to visit one of the birthplaces of the Industrial Revolution. There, Miyazaki took a trip to Wales to see both the rolling landscape of the valleys and its coal mining industry first-hand, but it was the sense of community that would influence him the most. His visit coincided with the conflict between miners' unions and Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, when long-term strike action had been defeated by Westminster, resulting in widespread unemployment and poverty across the region. Miyazaki would

**Opposite:** Castle in the Sky's young protagonists, Sheeta and Pazu, soar above the flying island of Laputa.

**Below:** Sheeta and Pazu lie down in the grass, a restful setting for many Ghibli moments.







later recall, in a 1999 interview with Helen McCarthy for *Manga Max* magazine:

"I really admired the way the miners' unions fought to the very end for their jobs and communities, and I wanted to reflect the strength of those communities in my film. I saw so many places with abandoned machinery, abandoned mines – the fabric of the industry was there, but no people. It made a strong impression on me. A whole industry with no people."

Released in August 1986, *Castle in the Sky* didn't fare as well at the box office as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, selling only two-thirds as many tickets as its predecessor on initial theatrical release. However, its reputation would grow with time, and its cultural impact would be felt across animation and video games, not least in the long-running Japanese role-playing video game series *Final Fantasy*. *Castle in the Sky*'s soundtrack albums, composed by Ghibli stalwart Joe Hisaishi, became bestsellers, and the film amassed a cult following over the years thanks to home video releases and regular screenings on television.

*Castle in the Sky*'s life on the small screen gives Ghibli its most curious tradition and landmark. When the film screens on Japanese television, it has become customary for viewers to take to Twitter and post the word "balse" when that magic phrase is uttered towards the end of the film. Such is the popularity of the film that, in August 2013, fans managed to break the record for the most tweets posted in a single second. During that screening, there was a spike of over 140,000 tweets when the fateful line was spoken, compared to the usual average, at the time, of 5,700 posts a second.

Studio Ghibli's first film might not have been an instant success, but the winds of change blowing through the industry were gaining strength.

Above: The fabled island of Laputa.

Opposite: The Japanese-language poster for *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*.







## MY NEIGHBOUR TOTORO (TONARI NO TOTORO, 1988)

THE BIRTH OF AN ICON

DIRECTED BY: HAYAO MIYAZAKI  
WRITTEN BY: HAYAO MIYAZAKI  
LENGTH: 2HR 5MIN  
RELEASE DATE (JAPAN): 2 AUGUST 1986

IF YOU SUBSCRIBE TO THE SOMEWHAT REDUCTIVE NOTION THAT HAYAO MIYAZAKI IS JAPAN'S ANSWER TO WALT DISNEY OR STEVEN SPIELBERG, THE FURRY FOREST TROLL TOTORO IS UNDENIABLY HIS MICKEY MOUSE, HIS E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL. TOTORO IS AN ICON FOR GENERATIONS OF JAPANESE CHILDREN AND – CRUCIALLY – AN EASILY MERCHANDISABLE MONEY-SPINNER, WHOSE ROTUND, WELCOMING FORM CAN BE EFFORTLESSLY REMOULDED INTO CUDDLY TOYS, COSY NIGHTLIGHTS AND OVERSIZED, EXCEEDINGLY COMFORTABLE SLIPPERS.



Totoro graces Studio Ghibli's own logo, and would become their brand ambassador abroad, popping up in cameo form in Western media ranging from *Toy Story 3* and *The Simpsons* to the comic book pages of *X-Men* and *The Sandman*. However, in the late 1980s, Totoro was merely an acorn from which the Studio Ghibli empire would grow.

After two epic anime features that traded on fantasy settings and spectacular scenes of often violent derring-do, Hayao Miyazaki envisaged his next project as something more low-key and child-friendly. "*My Neighbor Totoro* aims to be a happy and heart-warming film," wrote Miyazaki in his

editorial statement, "a film that lets the audience go home with pleasant, good feelings."

Crucially, after two films based in fictional worlds created from a patchwork of mostly Western storytelling influences, *My Neighbor Totoro* would see Miyazaki turning his attention to a uniquely Japanese setting and story. He lamented that

**Above:** Mei meets her new neighbour.  
**Opposite:** A tale of two families: sisters Mei and Satsuki spend time with the Totoro clan.





## KIKI'S DELIVERY SERVICE (MAJO NO TAKKYŪBIN, 1989)

THE LITTLE WITCH WHO SAVED  
STUDIO GHIBLI

DIRECTED BY: HAYAO MIYAZAKI  
WRITTEN BY: HAYAO MIYAZAKI  
LENGTH: 1HR 43MIN  
RELEASE DATE (JAPAN): 29 JULY 1989

THREE FILMS INTO ITS LIFE, STUDIO GHIBLI WAS IN A SLUMP. *LAPUTA: CASTLE IN THE SKY*, *MY NEIGHBOUR TOTORO* AND *GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES* HAD FAILED TO DELIVER ON THE PROMISE OF *NAUSICAA OF THE VALLEY OF THE WIND*, THE BLOCKBUSTER THAT INSPIRED THE FORMATION OF A STUDIO FOCUSED ON THEATRICAL, FEATURE-LENGTH FILMS.

The day after completing work on *My Neighbour Totoro*, Miyazaki started planning for his next project, an adaptation of Eiko Kadono's popular children's novel *Kiki's Delivery Service*, which follows a young witch's first footsteps into adulthood, as she leaves home, settles into a new town and finds her calling. In his directorial statement, dated April 1988, Miyazaki ruminated on the modern-day comforts that can often keep young adults in a state of arrested development:

"It is no longer appropriate to refer to leaving one's parents as a rite of passage, because all it takes today to live on one's own in society is the ability to shop at the local convenience store. The true 'independence' girls must now confront involves the far more difficult task of discovering their own talents."

Initially, Miyazaki was to take a break from directing and act solely as producer on *Kiki's Delivery Service*, with former *Sherlock Hound* writer Sunao Katabuchi set to make his debut as director, and writer Nobuyuki Isshiki on script duties. However, Miyazaki wasn't happy with the first draft of the screenplay, so he rewrote it himself, and eventually

took the reins of the project away from Katabuchi altogether, demoting him to assistant director.

Katabuchi would find success under his own steam years later, writing and directing *Princess Arete*, *Mai Mai Miracle* and the much garlanded *In This Corner of the World*. He now has a diplomatic view of his ousting from *Kiki's Delivery Service*: he'd been brought in on loan from Mushi Production to give Miyazaki a break from directing after *My Neighbour Totoro*. "However, for some reason he changed his mind and thought he could handle it," Katabuchi says. "Maybe he regained strength."

That strength would come in handy as *Kiki's Delivery Service* was by many accounts a punishing and stressful production, especially when it came to the discussions with author Eiko Kadono about Miyazaki's adaptation, which included

**Opposite:** Kiki soars above the seaside town of Koriko.

**Below:** Relaxing on a grassy hill – a recurring pastime for Ghibli's protagonists.







additional elements – both emotional and airborne – that weren't present in the more episodic, conflict-light original book.

Originally intended to be a 60-minute special, the film ballooned to its eventual 104-minute runtime as Miyazaki's script and storyboards took shape. The film would be in Japanese cinemas in July 1989, just over a year after Miyazaki had taken charge of the project. Gossip spread that Miyazaki was washed up and *Kiki's Delivery Service* would be his final feature as director. Working flat out for decades had taken its toll and, at 48, he was seriously considering closing up shop and retiring – starting a noble Ghibli tradition that each new Miyazaki film would, almost without exception, be touted by the filmmaker as his last.

Stepping in to smooth things over, as always, was Toshio Suzuki, who in 1989 was transferred over to Studio Ghibli from Tokuma Shoten, allowing him to dedicate himself full-time to the release of *Kiki's Delivery Service*, receiving his first individual credit on a Ghibli feature as associate producer. Frankly, he was underbilled, as this was where Suzuki's flair for marketing and advertising came to the fore. Noting the similarity between the film's title and the courier company Yamato Delivery Service, which has a prominent black cat on their logo, Suzuki brokered a deal for sponsorship and commercial tie-ins, which later helped secure a distribution deal from Toei.

In fact, Suzuki recalls that it was Toei's head of distribution predicting that Kiki would spell "the end" of both Ghibli and Miyazaki's career that spurred him on to ensure the film would be a hit. To that end, his primary focus was on delivering the film to its target demographic, namely young working women who would relate to Kiki's story of flying the nest and fending for herself in the face of life, work and loneliness. A stroke of inspiration came with the combination of a tagline that struck right to the heart of this complex emotional appeal – "I was feeling blue, but I'm better now" – with poster art that shows Kiki slumped at Osono's bakery counter, the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Suzuki's magic worked, and Kiki took flight. A runaway success, the film was the highest-grossing Japanese movie at the national box office in 1989. In fact, even with Hollywood films included, it was third, behind only *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and *Rain Man*. Bigger hits were to come in the ensuing decade and beyond, but for now Ghibli was back on track, and Miyazaki finally had another hit to his name.

**Above:** Sketches and cels from *Kiki's Delivery Service*, as seen at the Ghibli Museum.

**Opposite:** The Japanese-language poster for *Kiki's Delivery Service*, downbeat but depicting perfectly the film's focus on the personal challenges our young, independent protagonist must face.







## SPIRITED AWAY (SEN TO CHIHIRO NO KAMIKAKUSHI, 2001)

A ROAD TO SOMEWHERE

DIRECTED BY HAYAO MIYAZAKI  
WRITTEN BY HAYAO MIYAZAKI  
LENGTH: 2HR 4MIN  
RELEASE DATE (JAPAN): 20 JULY 2001

EVERY FAN REMEMBERS THEIR INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF STUDIO GHIBLI, AND IF YOU'RE READING THIS BOOK, IT'S VERY LIKELY THAT THE FILM THAT FIRST ENRAPPED AND ENCHANTED YOU WAS *SPIRITED AWAY*. A RECORD-BREAKING SENSATION IN JAPAN – ECLIPSING EVEN THAT OF ITS PREDECESSOR, *PRINCESS MONONOKE* – *SPIRITED AWAY* WAS ALSO THE FIRST GHIBLI FILM TO TRULY BENEFIT FROM A FULL INTERNATIONAL RELEASE, GARNERING THE RESPECT, ACCLAIM AND ACCOLADES THAT, FRANKLY, THE WORK OF HAYAO MIYAZAKI SHOULD HAVE BEEN GETTING ALL ALONG.



Unsurprisingly, after the intense experience of producing *Princess Mononoke*, Hayao Miyazaki announced his retirement from making feature films in January 1998, but he was far from idle. In 1998 alone, he filmed a travelogue recreating a flight across the Sahara taken by French author and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry; he created his own office space retreat, often referred to as his “atelier”, a short walk from the main Studio Ghibli headquarters; he taught a workshop course for aspiring young animation directors age 18–26, called the Higashi Koganei Sonjuku II (following in the footsteps of Isao Takahata, who led a similar course three years prior), and he even started dreaming up plans of a Ghibli Museum dedicated to the craft of animation.

He also, before long, returned to feature filmmaking. Miyazaki was inspired by a holiday with family friends and their young daughters – and the thoroughly unimpressive manga they were reading – to make a film with the modern,

**Above:** Packed with delightful detail and extraordinary characters, Studio Ghibli's films are always a feast for the eyes.  
**Opposite:** Two tickets please. One child, one otherworldly spirit.

ten-year-old girl in mind. A decade on from *Kiki's Delivery Service*, Miyazaki would return to similar encouraging themes, writing in his November 1999 project proposal:

“This is supposed to be the story of a young girl who is thrown into another world, where good and bad people are co-existing. In this world, she undergoes rigorous training, learns about friendship and self-sacrifice, and using her own basic smarts, somehow not only survives but manages to return to our world...”

However, the world had changed since 1989, and Miyazaki's social conscience and conflicted worldview would be reflected in the work. “Our world appears ever more fuzzy and confusing,” he wrote.





## EARWIG AND THE WITCH (ĀYA TO MAJO, 2020)

GHIBLI ENTERS THE THIRD DIMENSION

DIRECTED BY GORŌ MIYAZAKI  
WRITTEN BY KEIKO NIWA & EMI GUNJI  
LENGTH: 1HR 22MIN  
RELEASE DATE (JAPAN): 30 DECEMBER 2020 (TV)

STUDIO GHIBLI – FOR MANY THE LAST BASTION OF TRADITIONAL, HAND-DRAWN ANIMATION – HAD LONG BEEN CAUTIOUS ADOPTERS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY. AS WE HAVE SEEN, KEY COMPUTER-ASSISTED TECHNIQUES HAD CREPT INTO THE GHIBLI ANIMATION PROCESS FROM THE 1990S ONWARDS, BUT THE STUDIO ALWAYS MAINTAINED THAT THEY WERE FIRST AND FOREMOST 2D ANIMATORS, NOT, LIKE THEIR PEERS AT PIXAR, INTERESTED IN PURSUING THE ART OF 3DCG ANIMATION.

It's well documented that Hayao Miyazaki himself was a fierce skeptic, as seen in the 2016 documentary *Never-Ending Man: Hayao Miyazaki*, which not only finds the old master struggling to incorporate CG animation into the production of his 2018 short film *Boro The Caterpillar*, but also features a now-notorious scene in which representatives from a tech company demonstrate a new system that should, in theory, generate lifelike animation without the need for an artist's hand. Miyazaki's withering reaction has since become an omnipresent meme: "I strongly feel that this is an insult to life itself."

Meanwhile, Ghibli's other Miyazaki was well on his way to embracing 3DCG. 2014 saw the premiere of *Ranja, the Robber's Daughter*, a 3D-animated TV series co-produced by Ghibli and directed and storyboarded by Goro Miyazaki. The experience was clearly a positive one, as Goro's next feature would, against all expectations, be Ghibli's first 3DCG feature.

The announcement of *Earwig and the Witch* in 2020 came as nothing short of a surprise. Interest in Ghibli was at a peak after their library had been released globally on the streaming services Netflix and HBO Max, while tantalizing news of both Hayao Miyazaki's feature *How Do You Live?* and the long-mooted Ghibli theme park kept fans daydreaming of a near-distant future. Little did they know that a new feature was already fully finished, and ready to launch.

Developed and produced behind closed doors, *Earwig and the Witch* was suggested for adaptation by Hayao Miyazaki, who came across the source novel, a short posthumous work by *Howl's Moving Castle* author Diana Wynne Jones, when browsing in a bookshop. Producer Toshio Suzuki tapped Goro for the project, and suggested, following *Ranja*, that this could be an ideal project for 3D animation. The board was set. *Earwig and the Witch* featured input from a few key Ghibli veterans (Katsuya Kondō contributed character designs, while Keiko Niwa co-wrote the screenplay and Satoshi Takebe composed the score), but it was predominantly animated by a young and international staff working with the studio for the first time.

Goro Miyazaki has never had much luck when it comes to outside forces disrupting his films. His debut *Tales From Earthsea* was overshadowed by his father's legacy, while *From Up On Poppy Hill* had to be produced through the rolling

blackouts following the Fukushima disaster in 2011. Then, in the COVID-19-impacted landscape of 2020, with cinemas shuttered around the world, it looked like there might be no venues open to even show *Earwig and the Witch*.

However, when the project was unveiled by Toshio Suzuki in June 2020, it was announced that *Earwig* would screen not in cinemas but on television, with a date set for a festive premiere in late December. Later that month, it was also revealed that the film would have received a world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, had the festival not been postponed due to the pandemic. He may have missed out on a glitzy red-carpet premiere on the French Riviera, but Goro had achieved the distinction of making Ghibli's first Japanese film to appear in Cannes' prestigious Official Selection.

But the question still stood: what would the world make of *Earwig and the Witch*, and Ghibli's new direction? After 35 years of distinctive hand-drawn animation, the film looked like a break from the established, beloved norm.

*Earwig* appeared on screens in the English-speaking world in 2021, first as a limited theatrical release in the USA in February from GKIDS, followed by a streaming premiere on HBO Max, and a cinema release in the UK from the new outfit Elysian Film Group, making it the first Ghibli film in decades not to be released by StudioCanal. It was also the first Ghibli film to receive a public, big-screen rollout in the West before it hit cinemas back home – which it finally did that April.

Reviews were among the most scathing ever written about a Ghibli film. Kristy Puchko of *Pajiba* described the film as feeling "like a cheap knock-off of Studio Ghibli", while Simon Abrams, writing for the website maintained in honour of Ghibli's great champion, Roger Ebert, called *Earwig* "a lumpy cover version of Hayao's greatest hits".

*Earwig and the Witch* is an undeniably daring experiment under the Ghibli name, but Goro Miyazaki found himself, once again, unfairly judged against the precedence of his father and his world-conquering films.

**Opposite:** A young, dark-haired girl, broom handle in hand, black cat by her side and curious about magic may seem like familiar Ghibli territory. But beware: the bratty *Earwig* is no Kiki.



## REVIEW: EARWIG AND THE WITCH



*Earwig and the Witch* might just be Studio Ghibli's most experimental film. Read the script and you might ask why, because the story of a young witch and her cat, set against a rural European backdrop, sounds like another page from the classic Ghibli recipe book. But take one look at it and it's instantly clear: this isn't just a new film for Ghibli, it's a whole new dimension.

The studio's foray into 3D computer-generated animation makes for strange, almost uncanny, viewing. Backgrounds of blue skies, green hills and ocean horizons provide a foundation of relievably recognizable imagery, but the characters that reside in this new world are far from comforting. Instead of the expressive, almost artistically tangible, work that one has come to expect, here the people seem to have been squeezed out of a plastics factory line. Their skin is too smooth, their expressions are robotic, and their hair has the solidity of a Lego figure's. In the moments when emotion must be translated, a mainstream 'anime' style is applied to Earwig and her fellow 3D residents, where eyes widen or tighten to extreme proportions and mouths envelop a whole face to scream. These cartoonish contortions might not sound too outlandish, but elsewhere in the film things are animated to such hyper-detail (including an admittedly incredible looking plate of fish and chips), that together they make for a clash of realities and an unnerving stylistic dissonance.

Under the surface level, which in this case is probably the best place to look, there are some interesting ideas bubbling away in the film's creative cauldron. The bulk of the story revolves around the bratty young orphan Earwig being

adopted by a nefarious magical duo named Bella Yaga and The Mandrake. They promise her that they'll teach her how to brew magic spells, but in reality she's left scrubbing the pots. Here spells and potions come with a cookbook; we've seen before how magical a Ghibli kitchen can be, but here it really is. Earwig can follow instructions to create enchantments and in doing so learn her craft, democratizing magic and making it something attainable to all, providing they can put in the work. Although the story might initially seem like a companion to the magical adventure of *Kiki's Delivery Service*, philosophically this suggests more alignment to the lessons on hard work and creative practice found in the real world of *Whisper of the Heart*.

Earwig does finally get her magic, but then disappointingly she wields it like the brat she always was, the abrupt ending of the film slamming in before any lessons are actually learned. One can only hope that at Studio Ghibli that isn't the case and the lessons of this excursion into 3DCG have very much been absorbed. Although some may wish for this venture to have a similarly abrupt ending, the prospect of Studio Ghibli experimenting is and should always be exciting. Let's see them stir the magic cauldron, who knows what might come next, it could be delicious.

**Opposite:** The English-language release poster for *Earwig and the Witch*.

**Below:** Full marks as a wizard, zero marks as a foster father. Wizard, wannabe author and one-time rock band keyboardist The Mandrake, the second of Earwig's sinister foster parents.

