ONLY YESTERDAY AND THE TRANSNATIONAL POWER OF ANIME

by

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Abstract

Though the medium of animation has existed since at least the 1900s, scholarship in the field of animation has been largely neglected in favour of the academic study of live-action films. This trend in film academia has gravely overlooked the cultural importance of animation, in particular mainstream animated television shows and feature-length films, as a medium that has historically been consumed voraciously by child and family audiences. Anime, or Japanese animation, has drastically increased in popularity in North America, spurring a wave of English-language subtitled and voice-over versions of anime television shows and films, with list of titles that are available to English viewers growing rapidly since the 1990s. Where the works of Walt Disney Studios have traditionally been the most popular and well-known in North America, Studio Ghibli takes that role in Japan as a critically acclaimed animation studio. A fundamental difference between the work of these two studios is the role of gender in the heroines that are depicted. Anime as a Japanese cultural export has become a transnational media form, in which international and particularly North American viewers have found value. This dissertation argues that Disney’s distribution of Studio Ghibli titles in North America has played a major role in anime gaining a place in the Western media landscape, therefore increasing the popularity and demand for anime being available to English-speaking audiences. It goes on to argue that there is a shift in the attitude from North American audiences towards and expectations for female characters in cinema, that can be linked to the popularity and cultural recognition of anime, and Studio Ghibli films in particular which are famous for their strong female characters. These points are evidenced by the retroactive English localization of Studio Ghibli’s 1991 film *Only Yesterday* (Isao Takahata dir. 1991), which only received its first English release in 2016. By exploring the ways in which anime is localized for Western audiences, this dissertation illuminates the transnational nature and potential of anime as it is interpreted by international audiences, as it contributes to the evolving role of female characters in both animated and live-action film.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

We find ourselves in a time where there is a mass of computer-animated children’s cartoons that now include revamps of classics like Franklin and Thomas the Tank Engine. Computer generated animation, which began as a novelty in the medium, has become more cost effective to produce than traditional hand-drawn and stop-motion animation, as CGI animated features tend to do better at the worldwide box office than traditional animation.¹ It is also an attempt to appeal to a generation of children that are being brought up on the computer animated films from Disney and Pixar, as well as a golden age of 3D graphics in video games.² Yet there is still a subset of animated movies and television shows that retain the technique of traditional hand-drawn cell animation, and they have a small but growing and vocal fanbase. This is just one of the reasons why the distinctive style of Japanese animation, known simply as anime, has captivated a growing audience in the West—an audience that is quickly emerging from its former niche status and becoming a part of the mainstream pop culture of North America. What was once more of a small subculture of Western animation and cartoon fans in the 1980s and 1990s has become a thriving fan base, with fan conventions in North America like Anime Expo and Anime North each bringing in tens of thousands of attendees every year. Unlike the vast majority of Western animation that is mainly produced for young audiences, anime covers a wide range of content, with many series being specifically aimed at mature viewers. This surge in anime’s

popularity in the West has been accompanied by a gradually increasing appreciation for the medium of animation by both critics and the film and television industry, having a positive impact on both the North American and Japanese animation industries. What is it specifically about anime that has piqued the interest and admiration of so many in North America? What are the cultural differences, or perhaps points of relation, that has caused anime to be a crucial cultural export for Japan?

The types of stories and representations that are often depicted in anime are unique amongst a Western media culture of cartoons, which are not only generally family-oriented, but also still retain the institutional problems of representation that plague the American film industry (both live-action and animation). In this dissertation, I will explore the relationship and difference between North American and Japanese animation, with emphasis on the cultural and gender representations that each convey. I will also analyze the advent of anime’s popularity in North America—how it started and how it is still growing—, as well as the effects it has had and will potentially have on Western animation. To do so, I will first provide a brief history of the study of animation and the cultural context in which animated works are created and viewed in North America. I will then discuss how anime first appeared in the North American media landscape and gained a fan following. Finally, I will zero in specifically on the works of Studio Ghibli—possibly the most highly regarded animation studio based outside of North America—and how it has paved the way for a multitude of anime feature films and television series on a global stage, and ultimately, for animated storytelling as a whole. Many of the films and other works discussed in this dissertation have Japanese creators, and were originally released in Japan prior to their North American release. For clarity, I will write Japanese names with the given name first followed by the surname. I will also use the official English-language titles of the works discussed, unless otherwise stated. Likewise, a major limitation of my pool of research was that it
was limited to sources that are available in the English language, regarding both the literature and the films researched.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Despite the fact that the study of film and film history is almost as old as the medium itself, animation is a category of film that remains relatively obscure in the realm of film academia. Some scholars have occasionally discussed animated feature films, although historically this has only been in relation to live-action cinema, or for the reason that the film might be considered exceptional amongst other animated films. It is not just the casual moviegoer but also film academia who, consciously or unconsciously, dismiss much of the popular animated features that are released as no more than children’s entertainment, and therefore not relevant as forms of cultural, critical media. This raises some questions on the purpose of film theory, namely: do films that are marketed towards children and families have less value, academically or otherwise, than live-action films? When moviegoers in North America think of animation, they often think of Disney films and Saturday morning cartoons. Particularly within the last three decades, animated shows and films have permeated much of children’s film and television programs. Animation is a substantial part of the media that children consume, so it is hard to argue that animation would not have an effect on viewers as children or later as adults, whether that effect be ideologically, psychologically, or otherwise. Unfortunately, to date there is not a lot of research available about animation’s effect on both the film industry and its audience. However, with some of the literature of the work that has been done on animation, we can begin to compile what may be called a theory of animation.

A major obstacle into the study of the history of animation is that Disney, the largest and most famous animation production company in the world, had for years been severely restricting access to its own archives at Walt Disney Studios in Burbank, California. Such had been the case for Amy M. Davis when she was researching and writing on the topic of female characters in
Walt Disney productions in her book *Good Girls & Wicked Witches: Women in Disney’s Feature Animation*. According to the chief archivist and founder of the Disney archives, Dave Smith, a main purpose for the creation of the archives was for the reference of past materials by current and future employees in the making of Disney features and projects. According to Davis herself, her request to view materials in the Disney archives in 1997 had been denied, and she was further told in 1999 by Dave Smith that the archives would be closed to outside researchers “indefinitely” (Davis 2006, 4). Additionally, the company also does not allow third-party publications to feature the name “Disney” in the title, as it “implies endorsement or sponsorship by the Disney Organization”.

This includes written materials by scholars on the topic of Disney, which forced Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells to rename their book of essays on the animation studio from the original working title of *Doing Disney: Critical Dialogues in Film, Gender, and Culture* to *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, so that it excluded the name Disney. In the present day, while the company includes the archives on guided tours of their studio, the archives are still not open for use by outside researchers, and are only made available to employees of the Walt Disney Company. Since the 1990s, scholars writing on the subject of Disney have had to rely on sources that had previously made it out of the Disney archives, as was the case for Davis. This protectiveness is something for which the Walt Disney Company has become known. Disney is dedicated to promoting endlessly happy and kind imagery and stories about its founder, Walt Disney, as well as:

an endless regime of representations and commodities that conjure up a nostalgic view of America as the “magic kingdom”, the Disney Company has become synonymous with a
notion of innocence that aggressively rewrites the historical and critical identity of the American past.\(^6\)

The Walt Disney Company’s squeaky-clean image of both its history and its productions and commodities, according to Harry A. Giroux, are intentionally made to be too “innocent” to be worthy of critical analysis. It is thanks to this “innocence” that the Disney logo and its characters have “become almost synonymous with the very notion of American pop culture”\(^7\), and allowing the Walt Disney Company to securely take up a powerful role in the culture of America, without much criticism from the public, with the exception of scholars up to the task of critically analyzing the effects of Disney and animation. Along with Giroux’s essay on, *From Mouse to Mermaid* features a number of essays on the politics of Disney, including ones on the politics of identity and representation, such as the contribution by Patrick D. Murphy: “‘The Whole Wide World Was Scrubbed Clean’: The Androcentric Animation of Denatured Disney”. In this essay, Murphy argues that the Disney’s feature length films (up to that point in the 1990s at least) convey an escapist and androcentric worldview. It does by denying “wild nature”, or in other words keeping its settings static and timeless, as well as anthropomorphizing elements of nature. Murphy relates this denial of the wildness of nature to Disney’s simultaneous sexism, arguing that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are intrinsically linked to the history of patriarchal civilizations.\(^8\) According to Murphy, Disney’s depictions of wildness in nature as evil (such as the spooky forest scene in *Snow White*) can be linked to depictions of the “wild” evil woman who is unpredictable, vain, and selfish, such as Cruella Deville in *101 Dalmatians*. This sets a worldview where it is up to male heroes to re-establish goodness over evil, and women

\(^7\) Giroux. 45
deemed “good” are relegated to domesticity. This is potentially the case for works from the studio’s earlier decades. In the more than twenty years since this notion was brought up, a number of their feature length films have flown in the face of this, particularly *Moana* (2016), where nature is anthropomorphized as both “good” and female. Nature acts as an ally to the titular Moana, who saves her village and takes up a position of power.

In a broader sense of the scope of animation, scholar Paul Wells in his 1998 book *Understanding Animation* attempted to put forth a possible foundation for an academic theory of animation. He begins the book by offering a brief history of animation, while through a number of case studies establishing different categories of realistic versus abstract animation. For instance, he uses the term *orthodox animation* to describe animation that is “hyper-realistic” in text and form. A lot of mainstream and commercial animated, such as the Disney films would fall into this category. Another is *experimental animation*, which are films that fall outside of traditional practices, which often involve non-continuity and interpretation. A final category he describes is *developmental animation*, which is films that fall somewhere in between the former two categories, where continuity and reality may exist, but which use subversion through different approaches to themes and issues. Wells goes on to clarify that the tentative theory that comprises these terms cannot be conclusive to an objective theory of animation because “for every animated film produced there is possibly a different mode of address and another way of understanding its creation and purpose”.⁹ Just as it would be impossible to sort all traditional live-action films neatly into such categories, the intersection of animation and genre is not so easily defined. A lot of the animated features that are likely to be seen in film festivals and to be taken seriously by Western critics and academics—or otherwise not dismissed as children’s entertainment—may fall into Wells’ latter two categories. However, it is dire that film scholarship not dismiss the cultural importance of mainstream animation.

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The secure presence of Disney in North American culture allows us to identify that the works of Walt Disney Studios are reflective of the culture in which they were created. Film behave as a cultural mirror, according to Davis, and as the division of labor in the American household shifted in the twentieth century from the well-defined financially supporting male and the care-giving female, so did the ways in which gender was constructed in the media. Likewise, the role of the female character in films began to shift as well, although not necessarily in the same fashion as in live-action Hollywood films of the same time period. In Davis’ book, she notes that so many of the feature animations of Walt Disney Studios have historically been focused on female characters. However, she also brings up several common misconceptions of the role of female characters in some of Disney’s films, specifically those featuring princesses. One common one being that most or all of Disney’s human female protagonists are princesses, and furthermore that all of Disney’s

Fig. 1 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, scene still. Dir. David Hand et al. Walt Disney Productions, 1937
female characters are passive figures who sit around waiting to be saved by a man. This misconception likely stems from the image of two of the most famous Disney princesses, Snow White and Cinderella (and some would also include Aurora from Sleeping Beauty), are considered “passive princesses” in several more modern films. Yet as Davis notes, human female protagonists in Disney films from more recent decades, such as The Little Mermaid, Pocahontas, and Aladdin are anything but passive. In fact, in each of those examples, it is the heroine that at some point saves the main male character at least once. More importantly, Davis notes a striking way in which female characters in Disney’s films differ from those of live-action films. Films from earlier decades of Walt Disney Studios depict women in conflict with each other, pitting female protagonists against other women who are often the antagonists (or in some cases, like in Peter Pan, they are pitted against other protagonists, like Wendy and Tinkerbell). In later decades of Disney, specifically the 1980s and 1990s as Davis points out, this changes to having female characters exist in isolation:

They are surrounded by men, their friends and enemies are men, and they seem to function solely as women alone in a man’s world… Disney women of the 1990s functioned in a vacuum, surrounded by, identifying with, and functioning in relation to men. Some examples of this phenomenon can be seen in Hercules (Megara being the only main female character, and one of only three female characters with speaking roles in the film), Tarzan (there are three prominent female characters, but they hardly ever interact with each other), and The Lion King (Simba’s mother Sarabi and Nala never interact, and Shenzi is one of the sidekicks of the main villain). It was only with the release of Atlantis: The Lost Empire in 2001 that, according

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to Davis, women in Disney films began to not just feature more female comrades, but also give female characters positions of power in the world, with the princess Kida taking over the ruling of Atlantis.

However, even amongst these film scholars and critics, animated films, whether they be arthouse or mainstream works, are rarely discussed amidst the plethora of live-action films, as it is commonly dismissed as child-friendly entertainment. This is despite the fact that adult-oriented animation has seen a rise in recent decades with the help of hit television series such as *Family Guy* (1999-present), *Futurama* (1999-2013), and *South Park* (1997-present), although animated television series such as these are often considered by general audiences as outliers in the kiddie cartoon dominated realm of animation. Yet these shows were not the first animations to try to push the envelope of what is acceptable in animation. One of the first Western animated films to be considered “adult animation” was *Fritz the Cat* (1972), based on the comic strip of the same name by Robert Crumb. Through the course of Fritz’s adventures in a New York City of anthropomorphized animal characters the film featured graphic depictions of sex, parodies of racial stereotypes and slurs, and explicit illegal drug use. It shocked many viewers, but the novelty spurred its notoriety. After an early screening in Los Angeles in 1972, director Ralph Bakshi reaction to the audience’s powerful response, commented that, “they forget it’s animation. They treat it like a film. This means we can make *War and Peace* in animation. This is the real
thing, to get people to take animation seriously”. The intense realism of the situations depicted in the film compared to the relative unreality of popular animation (such as Disney’s penchant for producing animated fairytales) remains one of the most if not the most important shock factor for Fritz the Cat. Bakshi deliberately rejected the commonly used trope in Western animation of characters doing unrealistic things. “I want people to believe that my characters are real, and it’s hard to believe they’re real if they start walking down the street singing”. Even though a small host of adult animated feature films followed in the wake of Fritz (including its own sequel The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat (1974) which lacked the involvement of Bakshi and was widely negatively reviewed), the cultural idea of animation as being aimed at children has still remained. However, there is evidence that on some level this may be changing. Following in the footsteps of shows like Futurama and South Park, recently animated comedy television shows featuring social and political commentary, mature jokes, and meta-humour are becoming a normal feature the Western television landscape.

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Cartoon Network’s “Adult Swim” programming block specifically slots animated shows and movies not intended for children, such as Rick and Morty (2013-present), Robot Chicken (2005-present), and Bob’s Burgers (2013-present). Though adult animated television shows are seen as outliers in the grand scheme of cartoons and animation, the increase the amount of these series being produced points towards a gradual change in Western audiences’ ideas of the kind of content that animation can cover. Netflix has shown to be invested in animation, both child-friendly and adult-oriented, having produced a number of series including BoJack Horseman (2014-present) and F is for Family (2015-present). The incredible majority of animated feature films released in North America are marketed as family films if not aimed directly at children. Last year’s R-rated animated film Sausage Party (2016) made the news specifically for its rude and adult humour, and because of an incident where a red-band trailer for the film was accidentally shown before a screening of Disney and Pixar’s Finding Dory.15

Unlike in North America and Europe, animation is not relegated to the status of only being children’s media in Japan. The history of animation in Japan reaches almost as far back as it does in Western film history, yet in modern times, unlike in the West, animation permeates nearly all levels of media and entertainment in Japan. Comic books and graphic novels (known as manga) and animated television series and movies are a huge industry in Japan. Since the 1990s, the market for anime and manga has expanded exponentially, both domestically and globally, becoming a multi-billion dollar industry. In 2014, the sales of anime, which includes animated feature films, television series, and DVDs and Blu-Rays, reached 655.2 billion yen (almost 6 billion U.S. dollars).16 Animated television series make up a relatively huge percentage of the programming on Japanese television networks, as well as roughly half of movies released in

Japanese cinemas.\textsuperscript{17} Animation and anime-style art is also commonly used in advertising in Japan, in televised commercials, outdoor advertising, and more. Anime not only consists of after school cartoons with toy merchandise tie-ins, but there are also a huge number of anime movies and series that are intended for older audiences. Anime’s surge in popularity in the West has brought a number of Western scholars to begin to open the field of anime studies. One of the first North American scholars to write on the topic of anime in relation to its Western fan subculture was Antonia Levi. In her 1996 book \textit{Samurai from Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation}, Levi looks at anime from the perspective of both local Japanese audiences and American “otaku” (a term referring to obsessive fans of \textit{anime}). Levi compares the stories found in anime with Japanese culture and mythology, asserting that anime has become popular in North America because it offers an insight into Japanese and Asian culture that Western audiences would normally not easily be able to access, stating that Western audiences “enter the world of the Japanese hero, a world filled with strange customs and assumptions”.\textsuperscript{18} Levi’s idea that what makes anime enticing to North Americans is the world that the anime hero understands and tries to save is something that is foreign and new, is one that has been echoed by other scholars at the time, but over the years, this oversimplified notion has proven to be inadequate at capturing the much more complicated reality of both Japanese and Western audience’s relationship with anime.

A decade after publishing \textit{Samurai from Outer Space}, Levi updated her views on anime’s relationship with the West in her essay published in editor Steven T. Brown’s \textit{Cinema Anime}, in which she states that what she “saw as a failure to appreciate the uniquely Japanese aspects of anime and manga can just as easily be seen as an example of the type of negotiated

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{17} Napier, Susan J. \textit{From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West}. New York, Palgrave, 2007. 7
\textsuperscript{18} Levi, Antonia. \textit{Samurai from Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation}. Peru, IL, Carus Publishing Company, 1997. 84\end{flushleft}
understandings that result from encoding and decoding”. Anime and manga, despite their international success, are still primarily targeted towards a Japanese audience, who Levi argues can inherently understand the meanings and values “drawn from their social and economical realities”, that anime and manga creators encode into their works. Anime and manga is now being wide distributed across Europe, North America, and South Asia. These transnational audiences are left with decoding those meanings, allowing for more personal connections to the productions.

In *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Koichi Iwabuchi argues that Japanese audiovisual exports are neither culturally neutral nor culturally foreign to transnational audiences. He coins the term “cultural odor” to describe “the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated positively with a particular product in the consumption process”. According to Iwabuchi, Japanese animations have a “culturally odorless” presence on the global stage thanks to their unembedded expression of race, ethnicity, and culture. Prominent anime scholars have taken up Iwabuchi’s concept of anime being culturally odorless since.

Susan J. Napier, a professor of Japanese literature, moves away from essentialist perceptions of Japanese animation in her own extensive writing on the topic of anime, including her books *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke* (first published in 2001, an updated edition of the book was published in 2005, titled *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle*), and *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West*. In the former book, Napier explores contemporary anime as a cultural phenomenon amongst Western fans and audiences by examining the position of anime both in its local Japanese context and its global

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context. According to Napier, a number of Japanese commentators on anime have referred to anime as being “mukokuseki”, meaning “stateless”, or lacking a sense of national identity. She goes on to equate this idea of statelessness to Iwabuchi’s idea of cultural odorlessness, which speaks to anime’s dependence on transnational, cultural neutrality for its versatility, stating:

Unlike the inherently more representational space of conventional live-action film, which generally has to convey already-existing objects within a preexisting context, animated space has the potential to be context free, drawn wholly out of the animator’s or artist’s own mind.

It is thus a particularly apt candidate for participation in a transnational, stateless culture.\(^{21}\)

She uses case studies to analyze cultural issues such as gender and violence in her selected works of anime. In the introductory chapter, she asserts that Japanese animation does more than simply reflect contemporary Japanese society and ideas, but that “films such as \textit{Princess Mononoke} actually work to resist and even confront certain public stereotypes”.\(^{22}\) In later chapters of this book, she references the opinions and thoughts of self-identified anime fans in the West—a concept that she carries over to her later book \textit{From Impressionism to Anime}. Throughout the chapters and case studies in this second book, Napier goes on to use a combination of historical analysis and human research in order to identify aspects of anime that draw in Western fans. She addresses the issues of orientalism, “soft power” (or cultural power), and transnationalism as they relate to the growth of anime fan culture in the West, and ultimately argues that fans are drawn to Japanese animation because the medium offers viewers perspectives that are simultaneously “‘Japanese’ and ‘nationless’”.\(^{23}\) The “otherness” of anime to the West is what incites interest, but there are still transnational issues being related to and subverted within them.

\(^{21}\) Napier, Susan J. \textit{Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle}. New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005
\(^{22}\) Napier. \textit{Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle}. 33
\(^{23}\) Napier. \textit{From Impressionism to Anime}. 210
In recent decades, the Japanese government has used anime as “soft” cultural power and has pushed to make anime into one of Japan’s key cultural exports. As Mark W. MacWilliams asserts, “it has to do with Japan’s quest for a ‘cultural uniqueness’ in contrast to foreign nations”. MacWilliams borrows from Iwabuchi in arguing that many examples of globally exported anime end up being “culturally odorless”, in that the stories, themes, and characters are disconnected from notions of Japanese culture (MacWilliams 17). By doing so, such animes “offer their own Orientalist iconography” in addition and in contrast to the exoticisation of Japanese culture (MacWilliams 18). Japan’s commodification of anime as a cultural export is unique amongst the media exports from other countries in that modern Japan’s society consists of an amalgamation of Japanese culture with a heavy American influence, thanks in part to the United States’ presence in Japan after the conclusion of the Second World War. Japanese society, although still possessing a unique culture that is foreign to the West, has elements that are on some level recognizable and relatable to Western consumers of Japanese media.

Similar to the film histories of the United States and Europe, Japan has a long history of animation. Anime first came to America with Astro Boy, when American producer Fred Ladd adapted the series and produced an

Fig. 3 Astro Boy, scene still. Dir. Osamu Tezuka. Fuji TV, 1963-1966

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English dubbing (of an eventual 124 episodes released in America, out of the original 193), which was first broadcasted in America on NBC in 1963. Osamu Tezuka, sometimes referred to as “the god of manga”, is perhaps known best for creating the manga and television series *Tetsuwan Atomu* (1963-1966), known in English as *Astro Boy*. Tezuko founded Mushi Productions in the 1960s, which produced not only a number of family-friendly anime television series and movies, but also produced some adult animation feature films, including the *Animerama* series—one of which, *Cleopatra* (1970) (not to be confused with the American film *The Notorious Cleopatra* released in the same year), was touted as “the first X-rated pornographic animated movie” upon its 1972 North American release (despite it never having been submitted to the Motion Pictures Association of America for a

![Cleopatra, promotional image, Dir. Osamu Tezuka and Eiichi Yamamoto, Nippon Herald Movies, 1970](image-url)
The film probably would not have received an R rating if it had actually been submitted to the MPAA. It is likely the film’s American distributors attempted to borrow from the X-rated buzz surrounding Fritz the Cat, which was released just a few days after Cleopatra. In the following years the American broadcasting of Astro Boy, a number of other English-language versions of Japanese animated media found success in North America, though it was not until the mid 1980s that anime and its Western fan base gained a better degree of recognition. It was also around this time that one of Japan’s most celebrated creators of manga and anime, Hayao Miyazaki, directed his first feature length animated film, The Castle of Cagliostro (1979). In the decades to come, Miyazaki’s animated features as part of Studio Ghibli achieved considerable international success, with the help of English-language releases of his works. Most of these English-language versions, particularly from the 1990s and onwards, were produced and distributed by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures. This was the case until 2011, when the distribution company GKIDS won theatrical and non-theatrical distribution rights for the works of Studio Ghibli in North America.²⁶

²⁵ Barrier. par 41
Chapter 3

The Subtitle Wars: Dubbing vs Subbing vs “Fansubbing”

The ideas of Japanese culture that global audiences gain from anime are not all equal; the globalization of Japanese cinema and anime in particular necessitates translation of the media into different language, through subtitles of audio dubbing (voiceovers). The technology that makes globalization of anime a reality has also been a topic for scholars. Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano includes a chapter on “The Rise of ‘Personal’ Animation” in her book *Japanese Cinema in the Digital Age*, in which she frames anime within the history of evolving media forms in Japan. She argues that anime’s quick adoption of technological developments in the production and distribution of media has allowed both large-scale and small-scale (“personal”) animation projects—such as the works of Makoto Shinkai, creator of *5 Centimetres Per Second* (2007) and Koji Yamamura, creator of *Kafuka: Inaka isha* (2007), —to thrive. Wada-Marciano emphasizes that anime “needs to be examined in light of its affinities with media convergence”, 27 including developments such as DVD/Blu-Ray and internet technologies. It is because of these technologies that we have seen the rise of anime fans amidst a global market. Several scholars have addressed issues that have risen from this globalization. In her essay “The Global Markets for Anime: Hayao Miyazaki’s *Spirited Away*”, Rayna Denison explores the difference between the original Japanese audio track of *Spirited Away* (2001), the English dubbed audio track, and the French dubbed audio track. She argues that the subtle differences in the dubbing, including certain unexplained or over-explained culturally Japanese elements, create an “uneven cultural awareness” 28, leading

to different interpretations of the film and different ideas of these culturally Japanese elements. The way anime is translated for global audiences has been a matter of debate amongst international anime fans and an important topic for academics in the field of anime studies as well. On a note similar to Dension’s, Laurie Cubbison examines the relationship between anime and DVD distribution in “Anime Fans, DVDs, and the Authentic Text.” According to Cubbison, when Japanese animation is reproduced in different languages and reformatted for the medium of DVD viewing, the experience for the audience is altered as well. Ian Condry goes further to explore the grey area of copyright and “fansubbing”, the phenomenon of anime fans who create unofficial translations and subtitles for anime. The effect of fansubbing is what he terms “dark energy”; in other words, the effect of these fansub creators can be clearly seen but “poorly explained by theories of economic motivation”.29

The advent of anime streaming websites both legal (such as Crunchyroll, Anime Planet, and Funimation) and not legal has continued to strengthen an ever-growing demand for anime series in a niche yet large global audience. This demand has affected not only anime television series, but Japanese animated feature films as well. Up until several years ago, many North American anime fans were only able to access the series and films that had been dubbed into English and broadcasted on local television stations, or to buy (often rather expensive) DVD and home video boxsets from international distributors. Another option eventually arose thanks to the internet, where several communities of multilingual anime fans began translating and subtitling anime series and feature films, against the knowledge or wishes of the anime creators themselves, and shared them with international fans online. Fansubbing, as it was termed, became a major way for international fans to consume anime, which lead to a unique dilemma for anime


producers. Although the original anime creators and producers had no way to make money from people viewing fansubtitled anime, it was thanks to fansubs that many shows gained any attention at all from Western fans. Because the translators and subtitlers that create fansubs normally do not make money off of fansubs, selling their products either at cost or uploading them to the internet for free, it is difficult for the copyright holders of anime properties to pursue legal action against them.

There was a case in 2004 where anime distributor Bandai Entertainment filed a lawsuit against parties who were turning a profit from the sales of fansubbed and bootlegged anime. Although information remains unclear about how the suit was settled, the ordeal generated a lot of discussion in online anime fan communities at the time. As one fan under the online moniker “Jemstone” argued that the lawsuit “[is] just so unbelievably stupid. I'm not gonna go to a store or online and buy a series I have never seen and have no idea what's it about.”

Western anime consumers who find new series through fansubs often end up supporting the anime creators in alternative ways if they discover they like the series, such as buying official merchandise, or even indirectly by simply increasing the demand for more anime series to get official English language distribution. For anime fans, their only opportunity to get a taste of what a particular anime is like is to watch a fansub. The case with Bandai Entertainment took many anime fans by surprise, as anime creators would usually turn a blind eye to fansubbers, as they likely figured that the benefits of their anime increasing in popularity outside of Japan outweighed what they would gain from pursuing legal action, which, although they may gain money through the lawsuit, could involve losing face in the eyes of the international anime fan community. In the current internet landscape, arguably the most well-known legal anime streaming service is Crunchyroll.

Crunchyroll is partnered with a number of anime distributors such as Aniplex and Funimation (which also streams many of its series on its own website) to legally stream anime series both old and new. The service operates in a similar way to Netflix, with a main website as well as apps available on mobile devices and game consoles, and offers a catalogue of anime, the vast majority of which is only available with English subtitles (though some dubbed versions are available as well). They also offer simulcasts of currently airing series in Japan, where a new episode will be available to view on their website (to paying “premium” members) an hour after an episode airs in Japan, complete with English subtitles. Non-paying users of the service can still access certain series, with interruptions for advertisements. The service is proving to be popular, having over 20 million registered users, with over a million of those being paid subscribers, up from 750,000 at the beginning of 2016. As Polygon contributor Allegra Frank reports, Crunchyroll is now in the top 10 list of over-the-top video services in the United States, proving that “for something understood to be a niche for nerds, anime continues to prove that it’s much bigger than many take the time to realize.” Even with Crunchyroll’s success and convenience, there is still a sizeable amount of anime fans who prefer the quality of fansubs over the subtitles that come with Crunchyroll’s anime streams. Reddit user fan_rotom_is_scary complained about the liberties taken with the service’s subtitles, saying:

Loads of easy lines are so poorly translated under Crunchy[roll]. For example, this line in _World Trigger_… pretty obviously translates to "That's not my way of doing things." But Crunchy[roll] translate [sic] it to "It wouldn't be right." Why? It doesn't make sense to take a liberty there within the context; the character is literally being asked why he chose not to use his weapon against some bullies and his answer indicates that he doesn't

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33 Frank.
personally like to do that. There's no implication of a judgement call on anyone else's part if they did choose to use their weapon.34

Fans that watch fansubtitled anime have an expectation that fansubtitles remain as faithful to the original Japanese dialogue as possible. Translators of fansubs often go as far as to leave a word untranslated that is culturally ingrained in a Japanese context, and put a side note from the translator in the subtitles further explaining the context in which the word is used.

Because anime studies is a field that is only several decades old, considerable gaps exist in the literature. Much of the non-Japanese literature and commentary on anime is published by and for academics, and are in most cases not read by the creators of anime themselves. Studio Ghibli films are a popular topic amongst anime studies scholars, yet according to Jaqueline Berndt, non-Japanese film and animation scholars “tend to assume that [Hayao Miyazaki’s] movies are typical of anime as a whole because of their mere presence in Japan”.35 Non-Japanese scholars and critics often treat the films of Studio Ghibli as typical reflections of Japanese art and culture, and fail to include or are ignorant of the cultural and transnational history of anime in which they exist. Although animation has been a popular medium in Japan since at least the 1960s, even within Japan many of the works of Studio Ghibli are considered exceptional in terms of their art direction and storytelling. They are a window into the world of Japanese animation as well as Japanese culture, but not a window that is able to view the whole picture. Anime encompasses so much of the media landscape in Japan that to claim that anime in general is “culturally odorless”, even in a broad sense, seems to oversimplify an incredibly diverse amount

of animation and manga that exists. The creators of anime rarely create stories and art with the end product’s potential appeal to a transnational audience in mind.

There are many animes and mangas that are based on having some knowledge of Japanese history, literature, and folklore. These stories rarely meet the same level of transnational distribution as something more “culturally odorless” as Pokémon, and for understandable reasons. As an example, Natsume’s Book of Friends (2008-present) features a young man, Takashi Natsume, who has inherited his grandmother’s curse of being able to see spirits. Upon her death, Takashi’s grandmother bequeaths him her Book of Friends—a book of the names of spirits she has bullied into servitude. Those spirits now haunt Takashi until he performs a ritual for each one to be released from the book’s hold. These spirits are based on Japanese folklore and the ancient Japanese belief in animism. Many of the spirits in the show are, like many traditional Japanese spirits, tied to certain geographical places, or to objects, or are the embodiment of certain emotions. Natsume’s Book of Friends is distinctively Japanese. A transnational audience cannot project themselves comfortably onto the main character, as his circumstances and the cultural context that must accompany it are not easily translatable to other cultural experiences. That is

Fig. 5 Ep. “The Dew God’s Small Shrine”, Natsume’s Book of Friends, scene still, Dir. Takahiro Omori. TV Tokyo, 2008, subtitles by CrunchyRoll.
not to say that a non-Japanese audience cannot enjoy the series or understand what is happening. It is incredibly easy to feel sympathetic towards and to admire Takashi with how he calmly and remorsefully tries to free the spirits trapped in his grandmother’s book (the titular Book of Friends). Takashi’s begrudging sidekick in the series, Madara, or as Takashi affectionately calls him, “Nyanko-sensei” (which translates to “teacher kitty”), is a powerful spirit that has been relegated to the appearance of a “maneki neko” (lucky cat), and stays with the main character in the hopes that he will inherit the Book of Friends if Natsume is killed. Madara is an incredibly popular piece of anime merchandise that can be found in anime and comic book stores everywhere, even in North America, in the form of plush toys, knick-knacks, and the like. Similar to the globally popular Totoro merchandise being a symbol of and even surpassing the popularity of his source anime, Madara’s popularity as a symbol of anime fan culture is a testament to the show’s transnational appeal not despite the show’s heavy grounding in Japanese culture and folklore, but in part because of it. Despite being acclaimed by critics, being currently in its sixth season with no sign of stopping, and having an iconic cute character that is popular in and outside Japan, no English distributors have shown interest in attempting to create an English dub of Natsume. The main avenues for international fans to watch Natsume are by streaming episodes online, either legally or illegally, with simply the support of subtitles, whether those are official subtitles (the show is available to be watched on Crunchyroll) or fansubbed. Another interesting circumstance of a popular and acclaimed anime scaring away attempts to create English dubs is Polar Bear Cafe (2012-2013), a slice-of-life sitcom featuring a polar bear who runs a café with a cast of anthropomorphic characters from the zoo next door to the café, as well as your usual human characters. The fact that animals can talk let alone drink coffee is never explained; it is simply the way the otherwise mundane world of Polar Bear Cafe works. It has also never been picked up for an English dubbing despite its popularity and good reviews primarily because of the language used in the show. At least once an episode, there is a moment where the conversation
stops and at least one of the characters make a series of puns about what has just been said complete with visuals of each rhyming word that is brought up.

Fig. 6 Ep. "Polar Bear's Café", *Polar Bear Cafe*. Dir. Mitsuyuki Masuhara, TV Tokyo, 2012, subtitles by CrunchyRoll.

In the English subtitles, they translate each word, but in parentheses show each word that is being used to make the pun; for instance, when the character Penguin asks for a second coffee ("okawari"), Polar Bear holds up sunflowers ("himawari"), the daily special meal ("higawari"),
an axe and logs to chop wood ("makiwari"), and a watermelon to split ("suika wari"). There is simply no way to make these sequences make any sort of sense in an English dub since the Japanese puns do not carry over to English. Another difficult aspect to dub into English is that some episodes also show Penguin trying to perform "rakugo", a traditional form of Japanese comedic storytelling (although he usually ends up boring his friends to sleep). For these short "rakugo" sequences, when viewing with English subtitles, it still feels like there is something missing contextually. The stories do not entirely make sense, but it is not clear if it is just a case of being lost in translation, or of the character being bad at telling the stories. These cultural contexts would have to be either removed completely or be extremely awkwardly translated if the series were to be dubbed into English, and appropriately, English distributors have left it alone.

One of the few places now for an international fan to watch it (legally) is on Crunchyroll with subtitles. With more legal ways for fans to consume anime, there is more incentive and demand for North American distributors to take up the task of releasing anime on home video, as Disney and eventually GKIDS has done with the works of Studio Ghibli.

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Chapter 4

Studio Ghibli and *Only Yesterday*

*The Castle of Cagliostro* was Hayao Miyazaki’s feature-length directorial debut, and the film’s domestic box office success spurred the director towards creating one of the most world-renown animation studios outside of North America. After *Cagliostro*, Miyazaki began the project of turning his manga serial *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, which ran from 1982 to 1984 in the magazine *Animage*, into a feature animated film. The film version of *Nausicaä*, titled the same, was released in 1984 in Japan and found enormous success. Though *Nausicaä* was released before the creation of Studio Ghibli, it is often included in the studio’s list of works, as many of the top collaborators on the project also went on to become a part of the studio shortly after its release. It was ultimately thanks to *Nausicaä*’s success that Miyazaki, along with anime and manga distribution company Tokuma Shoten founded Studio Ghibli in order to produce Miyazaki’s next feature animation, *Castle in the Sky* (1986), which was also based off of one of Miyazaki’s manga series.37 Soon after the studio’s conception, Isao Takahata, who was the producer of 1984’s *Nausicaä*, joined as a permanent figure in both producing and directorial positions throughout Studio Ghibli’s history, often acting as producer and story collaborator on films that Hayao Miyazaki directed, and vice versa. The films that followed in the years after *Castle in the Sky*, such as *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) and *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) were not large financial successes for the studio, despite being acclaimed by critics at the time of release. However, the merchandise sales of the iconic character Totoro may be given credit for keeping the studio afloat until the release of *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (1989).

While *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* enjoyed considerable success in Japan at its release, its first appearance on the North American film scene was short-lived and not well received. Independent distribution company New World Pictures produced a 95-minute edited and English dubbed version titled *Warriors of the Wind*, released on VHS to the North American market in 1985. In an attempt to market the film as an action/science fiction kids’ movie, they made major changes, resulting in the original 117-minute film being cut to 95 minutes. Through drastic edits, the distributors made major changes to the plot, character names, and character personalities, resulting in a change in the overall theme of the story. One of the big plot changers was that the giant bug creatures, *ohmu*, became villainous, rather than being side effects, victims even, of a changing global climate as they were in the original. Miyazaki hated this edited version, and since then has not allowed any edits to be made to Studio Ghibli works, whether they be distributed in Japan or internationally.\(^3^8\) For the next decade, the feature films that Studio Ghibli released found critical success in Japan, but remained relatively obscure on the world stage. Streamline Pictures, the American media company which was known for its English dub of *Akira* (1988), produced English-language versions of *Castle in the Sky* (which was given a limited theatrical release in the U.S.), as well as *The Castle of Cagliostro* and *Kiki’s Delivery Service*, both of which also had extremely limited releases. Despite Studio Ghibli’s satisfaction with these English translations, Studio Ghibli remained relatively obscure in North America.

It was not until 1996 where Tokuma Publishing made a distribution deal with the Disney Corporation, known as the “Disney/Tokuma Deal”, that Studio Ghibli’s works received recognition in North America.\(^3^9\) This deal gave Disney not only the distribution rights to Studio Ghibli’s feature films in North America, but also in Japan and across the world (but excluding the

rest of the Asian market). One of the main conditions that the deal specified was that “Disney cannot cut even one second from the films.” Toshio Suzuki, a producer with Studio Ghibli, stated that “other companies such as Fox and Time-Warner contacted Tokuma, but Disney was the only company willing to agree to this condition, and that was the main reason why Tokuma chose Disney as a partner”. The deal between The Walt Disney Company and Studio Ghibli has played a huge part in the latter’s international success in the last fifteen years. The wide-reaching hand of Disney in the worldwide movie market—and particularly in the North America—meant that the English-

Fig. 7 My Neighbor Totoro, DVD cover, Dir. Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli, 1988, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2006

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40 Cavallaro. 43
language dubs produced for Studio Ghibli films featured voices provided by well-known
Hollywood actors and dialogue that remained faithful to the original Japanese script. Most of
Disney’s DVD and Blu-Ray releases feature the names of the notable actors who lent their voices
to the project, presumably with the aim of catching the American moviegoer’s eye in the video
store. Trailers for the Disney-produced English dubs were featured on VHS releases of Disney
feature films, ensuring that the audiences for Disney films at the time were made aware of these
releases. The first Ghibli film to be adapted into English through this deal with Disney was Kiki’s
Delivery Service, featuring the voices of well-known stars such as Kirsten Dunst, Debbie
Reynolds, and Phil Hartman. The English language version was shown at the 1998 Seattle
International Film Festival, and released later that year on home video in North America. This
was followed by the English dub of Princess Mononoke (1997) in 1999, two years after the
Japanese release broke box office records domestically. As previously mentioned, Studio Ghibli
entered into an agreement with American film distributor GKIDS in 2011, which gave GKIDS
the theatrical and non-theatrical distribution rights to Studio Ghibli’s feature film library, though
Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment continues to hold the home video distribution rights to
the films they had originally distributed. Additionally, GKIDS took over not only the distribution
rights from Disney but also the production English-language versions for Studio Ghibli’s feature
films released in the following years: From Up on Poppy Hill (2011), The Tale of the Princess
Kaguya (2013), and When Marnie Was There (2014), which each had limited theatrical releases
in North America.\textsuperscript{41} To date, Studio Ghibli has officially produced twenty feature films, twenty-
one if The Red Turtle which was co-produced with the studio Wild Bunch is included, along with
an array of short animated films. There is an increasing demand for localized English and other
foreign language versions of Japanese animated films and television shows compared to the
1980s and 1990s when Ghibli’s older films were first released in Japan. One of the more recent

\textsuperscript{41} Marechal.
examples of this is the 2016 English language release of *Only Yesterday* (1991) from director Isao Takahata, one of Studio Ghibli’s main storytellers.

The vast majority of academic English-language literature on Studio Ghibli films has focused on the works of Hayao Miyazaki. Miyazaki’s films have received the most attention from the media and from anime fans. It also seems as though films directed by Hayao Miyazaki were Disney’s main interest amongst the Studio Ghibli film library. Miyazaki’s last film before his reported retirement, *The Wind Rises* (2013), was the last Studio Ghibli film for which the Walt Disney Company kept the licensing to produce the English version (under their Touchstone brand this time). *From Up on Poppy Hill*, which was directed by his son, Goro Miyazaki, was originally released in Japan in 2011, but received North American release once GKIDS gained the distribution rights for it and produced an English dub in 2013. Though Disney retroactively went back to create English dubs for Hayao Miyazaki’s films that were made prior to the Disney/Tokuma deal, they never produced an English dub for *Grave of the Fireflies*, *Only Yesterday*, or *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (1999), all of which Isao Takahata directed. GKIDS also dubbed *Ocean Waves* (1993), a television movie produced by Studio Ghibli, and gave it a limited theatrical release in 2016. It was included in “The Studio Ghibli Collection”, a compilation edition of thirteen of the Studio Ghibli films that were not individually released on DVD or Blu-ray by GKIDS.

Disney took a pick-and-choose style approach to which Studio Ghibli films they would release in English. With the exception of *Whisper of the Heart* (1995), the films with which Disney exercised their English distribution license were fairly fast-paced and usually included some element of fantasy or magic. Miyazaki’s films are ones that, despite their marked differences from North American style animation and storytelling, still hold similarities to the works of Disney. Studio Ghibli producer Toshi Suzuki visited Disney’s recording studio during the production of the English dub of *Kiki’s Delivery Service*, and remarked: “The thing that really
surprised me the most is that it’s become such an American film, and it’s really become like a
Disney film.”  

It is not hard to see how the similarities between Disney films and Miyazaki’s films are
drawn, particularly with Disney’s distribution of the films. With the first English language release
of Kiki’s Delivery Service by Disney on VHS in 1997, Disney removed the film’s original Japanese
opening and ending songs “Ryuujyo no Dengon” and “Yasashisa ni Tsutsumareta nara”,
performed by Yumi Matsutoya. Disney replaced them with two original English-language
songs (“Soaring” and “I’m Gonna Fly”, performed by Sydney Forest). For the later re-release on

Fig. 8 Kiki’s Delivery Service, promotional image, Dir. Hayao Miyazki, Studio Ghibli, 1989

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DVD and Blu-Ray, the original Japanese songs by Yumi Matsutoya remained in the English audio track instead of these English songs. As years went by, Disney stopped replacing the lyrical theme songs, choosing to keep the original Japanese ones, such as with the original Japanese ending song in *The Wind Rises*. Even though most anime fans agree on keeping original elements like opening and ending songs in their original Japanese, the songs produced for the first English release of *Kiki’s Delivery Service* are still remembered fondly by those who were introduced to the film with the initial Disney release, especially in their childhood, as evidenced by comments left on the songs uploaded to YouTube. “How dare they remove such a brilliant song from the dvd and blu-ray release!” grieves a top comment on an upload of “I’m Gonna Fly”.43

Similarly, Studio Ghibli’s *Only Yesterday* had not been considered for an English dub until GKIDS took up the task for a 2016 North American theatrical and home video release. Originally released in Japan in 1991, international fans of Studio Ghibli often did not know of its existence, since it had never been widely available to audiences in the West. There was a little-advertised region 2 DVD with limited distribution, which featured only the original Japanese audio with English subtitles. Otherwise, it was possible to find it on the Internet with fansubtitles, but on a grand scale the film has simply not been on the radar of the usual anime fan or even Studio Ghibli fan. Although Studio Ghibli’s name carries weight in the West, Hayao Miyazaki is much better known and associated with the studio than Isao Takahata is in North America. There are a few reasons for this, one of the major ones being that North American audiences best remember Miyazaki as the director of *Spirited Away*, which was highly critically acclaimed by international movie critics, going on to win Best Animated Feature at the 2003 Academy Awards, beating Disney’s *Lilo & Stitch* (2002) and *Treasure Planet* (2002) as well as Dreamworks’ *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (2002). In North America, Ghibli is most often associated with

Miyazaki’s films including *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004), *My Neighbor Totoro*, and *Kiki’s Delivery Service*. In fact, he has been referred to as the “Walt Disney of Japan”. The films directed by Isao Takahata under the name of Studio Ghibli receive less recognition in North America, for a number of possible reasons. Most of the films directed by Hayao Miyazaki have a markedly slower pace than mainstream North American animated films (usually pushing closer to the two-hour mark or more as opposed to the North American convention of an hour and a half). Takahata’s films are typically even more slow paced than Miyazaki’s, and therefore less in line with what North American distributors assume young audiences would find appealing. They feature fewer elements of

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magical creatures and whimsical adventures, and often have more subdued but serious themes. One of his most well known features amongst North American moviegoers is "Grave of the Fireflies." Set during the Second World War, it follows a boy and his young sister as they try to survive after the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima has killed their family. The film has been critically acclaimed for its realism and storytelling, and it did not pull any punches in its depiction of the carnage created by atomic bomb, although it did not go as far as the famous atomic bomb scenes in the 1983 animation "Barefoot Gen." Anecdotally, I have spotted "Grave of the Fireflies" in video rental stores with a sticker on it exclaiming that it is “not for kids”. It received an initial English dub in 1993 from Central Park Media, and then more recently a second English dubbing by GKIDS in 2012 for a Blu-Ray release. "Only Yesterday" was Takahata’s next film, based on a manga series of the same name (1987-1991) by Hotaru Okamoto and Yuuko Tone, and it featured very different subject matter from "Fireflies.

"Only Yesterday" is based on the manga of the same name by Hotaru Okamoto and Yuuko Tone. Set in the 1980s, it follows a 27 year-old woman named Taeko (voiced by Daisy Ridley in the English dub) who takes a leave from her job in Tokyo to work on her grandmother’s farm in the countryside to help with the safflower harvest and to experience life outside of the city. Her older sister, Nanako (Laura Bailey) is worried about the fact that she is still single, and on the phone with Taeko the night before she leaves, she half-jokingly tell Taeko to find a boyfriend or husband while she is there. Taeko makes it clear that it

Fig. 10 Taeko on the phone with her sister, "Only Yesterday" (1991)
is not a priority for her, but the conversation sparks a flood of memories of her time in fifth grade.

This scene intercuts between the present adult Taeko on the phone, and a memory of her younger 10 year-old-self talking with her sisters, introducing us to the numerous flashbacks to come throughout the course of the film. She brings up one of these past memories to Nanako on the phone, to which Nanako laughs and responds: “Are you still dwelling on that? Taeko, you sure hang on to things, don’t you?” The theme of nostalgia and memory is established early on in these first few minutes of the film. On her overnight train trip to the farm, Taeko experiences extended flashbacks to her 10-year-old self (voiced by Alison Fernandez) navigating classic pre-teen dramas such as puberty, first crushes, and fights with her older sisters. From young Taeko’s eyes, we see how much these things meant to her at the time and how dire they felt. Coming back to the present, we see adult Taeko reflect on these experiences and even laugh at what was once tragic to her childhood self. She arrives at the train station in the countryside and is met by her brother-in-law’s cousin, Toshio (Dev Patel), whom she only barely remembers having met years ago. These flashbacks to her school days continue after she arrives at the farm, as certain moments, such as one of Taeko’s teenage relatives trying to convince her mom to let her buy an expensive pair of shoes, continue to elicit memories of her own, both bad and good. As we go along with her between the past and the present, Taeko wonders if the person she is now corresponds to the person that, as a kid, she thought she would become if she had followed her own childhood dreams. As time goes on, with the help of her family in the countryside, especially Toshio, and her own past self, she begins to

Fig. 11 Young Taeko and her sisters
realize what her true self is, and what her present dreams are. As Taeko’s mind wanders on the thoughts and memories flooding back to her, she wonders: “Perhaps my fifth grade self is trying to tell myself to find a new way to fly.”

Fig. 12 Adult Taeko turns around to see a memory of her childhood
In the end, with the help of the spirit or memory of her younger self, she chooses to stay on the farm instead of returning to Tokyo, and the last scene heavily implies that her and Toshio begin a relationship.

Fig. 13 Taeko and Toshio in the final scene, surrounded by the memory of Taeko's childhood classmates

According to Geoffrey Wexler, producer and chief of the international division at Studio Ghibli, when he and his colleagues were updating subtitles for an upcoming Blu-Ray release of *Only Yesterday*, he asked why the film had not been dubbed in English. He was told the film was “undubbable.” “For me, ‘undubbable’ meant a litany of excuses that didn’t make any sense,” he told an audience at a panel ahead of the North American theatrical release of the film. “A different studio than GKIDS had the right to distribute it and they never distributed it. When I joined Ghibli and I talked to them I said, ‘Are you ever going to release this?’ , and they said, ‘We can’t release it’.”

Wexler speculates that there are several reasons why the previous distributor

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believed that the film was ‘undubbable’, but it is not for the same reasons why anime distributors find shows like Natsume’s Book of Friends and Polar Bear Cafe unable to be effectively dubbed into English. Only Yesterday holds some references to 1960s Japanese pop culture, such as the young version of the main character, Taeko, watching a kids’ program on television, Hyokkori Hyoutanjima (1964-1969) (sometimes translated in English to Pop-up Gourd Island or Unexpected Gourd Island)\(^4\), which is a real program that aired at that time, as well as singing along to the show’s theme song. In this scene in the 2016 English dub, the English voice actor for young Taeko sings along in Japanese to the television show’s theme song, with subtitles translating what is being said. In this instance, it is clear that GKIDS’s English dub was not trying to gloss over the fact that the story being told is Japanese. A lot of anime fans who dislike English dubs in general complain about changes that get made during the translation process.

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Unlike when anime is only subtitled, the dubbing process requires an extra step of script revision so that lines that are spoken in English can match the length of the characters’ original spoken Japanese lines. The English voice actors have to do their best to match their lines with the mouth movements of the character on screen, but because of the restrictions in the timing of the lines, some of the original meaning of lines and conversations can get lost in the process. Additionally, many anime series that are broadcasted alongside North American cartoons, especially ones that are kid-oriented, tend to omit elements of Japanese culture that North American children would not recognize. For example, there are a number of episodes of *Pokémon* where characters are eating onigiri, Japanese rice balls. In the English dubbed versions, at one point the characters refer to them as “jelly-filled donuts”, and in other episodes the rice balls are replaced completely with superimposed images of sandwiches. Although this case of cultural context being lost in translation is comically extreme (although not unusual for anime that is broadcast alongside American cartoons), it highlights the issue that dubbing can create for distributors who want to release anime internationally, especially films that they want to market as family films. The care
taken in the dubbing of *Only Yesterday* to maintain these elements of Japanese pop culture shows a shift in the way distribution companies treat the cultural context of these films. If the distributors had wanted to (and hypothetically if Studio Ghibli would allow them to do so), they could have made an English version of the TV show’s theme song to which the young Taeko could sing along.

This trend of more deliberately faithful English dubs can also be seen in one of Takahata’s more recent films, *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, which is based off of the Japanese folktale “The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter”. *Kaguya*’s visual style and writing strongly takes after traditional Japanese art. The film’s art direction is somewhat more abstract compared to most of Studio Ghibli’s other works, being made to look like a moving Japanese painting. The lines spoken in the English dub (also produced and distributed by GKIDS), when comparing the subtitles for the Japanese audio track with the dialogue in the English audio track, seem to be as faithful to the original as they could reasonably get. Some liberties still have to be taken when producing an English dub of a Japanese film, as the differences in the languages are quite extreme; emotions in English are not expressed the same way in as they would be in Japanese, which is why many anime fans and cinema fans in general will prefer to watch foreign cinema with English subtitles rather than English voiceover dubbing if they are able to do so. For *Kaguya*, with the exception of English voices, the film’s English version still feels quintessentially Japanese in its characters, setting, and storytelling.

Another element of *Only Yesterday* that previous potential distributors were uncomfortable bringing to an English audience was a fairly involved sequence where young Taeko and her classmates learn about menstruation, and the pre-teen awkwardness that follows. After the girls in her fifth-grade class learn about periods in gym class, Taeko’s group of friends all agree to get “special underwear” from the nurse’s office in preparation. One of these girls mentions this to a boy in the class, and the news spreads through the boys in the class like
wildfire. Out of ignorance, the boys begin to tease the girls mercilessly. The voice of adult Taeko remarks in an amused tone over these flashback scenes that “sure enough, looking up skirts became all the rage, and periods became an obsession.”

Fig. 16 A male classmate looking up skirts after learning about periods

One of Taeko’s friends confides in her that she has already started having her periods, and sometimes misses gym class because of them at the request of her mother. Soon after, Taeko gets a cold and her mother tells her to sit out of gym class because of it, which sets of a fear in Taeko of the boys in the class mistakenly believing that she is on her period. Wexler thought that this open, and rather lengthy, subject matter involving menstruation—despite the fact that about half of the world’s population experiences menstruation—was a problem for the previous holder of the distribution rights (i.e. Disney), admitting that “[a] lot of people squirm about it in North America, but in other countries they don’t.”\(^{47}\) The producers of the 2016 English dub did not back away from the conversation around periods; considering the length of the scene and some of the

\(^{47}\) Aguilar, “Studio Ghibli’s Geoffrey Wexler Talks Dubbing Takahata’s Undubbable ‘Only Yesterday’.
visuals (including a diagram of reproductive anatomy during the health class), it would be difficult if not impossible to alter the dialogue to try to shift the conversation to a more palatable subject matter for North American audiences. It is difficult to ignore what this aversion to subject matter concerning menstruation in North America tells us about the climate of what is socially acceptable to talk about—in Western society in general as well as particularly on the subject matter of Western cinema. Almost every single one of the twenty-one feature films (if *Nausicaä* is included) done by Studio Ghibli star female protagonists, with the main exceptions being *Porco Rosso* (1992), although it has several prominent supporting female characters, the titular character arguably takes the role of the true protagonist, and *The Wind Rises* (a fictionalized biopic of airplane designer Jiro Horikoshi). A few other films had ensemble casts where male and female characters shared roughly equal screen-time and importance to the plot, but the vast majority are female-led films.

Although female-led feature films are very gradually becoming more common in North American cinema, both live-action and animation, it is still uncommon here compared to films in Japan. Disney is well known for its female protagonists, but the works of other animation studios such as Dreamworks and Pixar remain heavily male-centric. Japan and North America both still have disproportionate gender ratios of filmmakers, particularly in leading creative roles such as directors and writers. Yet the female characters in Studio Ghibli’s films are independent and powerful, whether that be in a conventionally physical way, or in a societal context, or both. Miyazaki’s heroines are often touted for possessing a pronounced sense of independence, one that is not learned over the course of the film but instead is inherent in these characters from the beginning. Napier uses *Princess Mononoke* (1997) to study the type of female characters that star in the narratives of director Hayao Miyazaki. In doing so, she examines how the female protagonists in his films often hold an ambiguous if not gender-neutral characterization rather than complying with traditional gender stereotypes. In *Princess Mononoke*, most of the numerous
female characters, including the main protagonist and main antagonist, as Napier argues, possess

Fig. 17 Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, scene still, Dir. Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli, 1984

a “gender neutral, or at least deeply ambiguous, characterization compared to traditional female
stereotypes, and they remain completely outside the misogynistic patriarchal collectivity that
rapidly became the foundation of premodern Japan.” Though Princess Mononoke is perhaps the
most overt example of Miyazaki’s heroines breaking gender roles, most of the other female
protagonists in Miyazaki’s films do so as well on some level. Nausicaä, for instance, leads her
community with a position traditionally held by a male; near the beginning of her story, she
discovers a prophecy that predicts a saviour “clothed in blue, descending onto a golden field, to
join bonds with the great Earth and guide the people to the pure lands at last.” The characters, in
the English-language version at least, refer to this saviour as “he” and “him”, and—despite early
clues such as her nearly always wearing blue—it is only once Nausicaä fulfills this prophecy that
the other characters realize that it was referring to her. When asked why Nausicaä is female
instead of male, Miyazaki answered:

48Napier, Susan J. Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle. 238
I don’t logically plan it that way. When we compare a man in action and a girl in action, I feel girls are more gallant. If a boy is walking with a long stride, I don’t think anything particular, but if a girl is walking gallantly, I feel “that’s cool”. Maybe that’s because I’m a man, and women may think it’s cool when they see a young man striding. At first, I thought “this is no longer the era of men…” But after ten years, I grew tired of saying that. I just say “because I like women.” That has more reality.49

Miyazaki’s appreciation and fondness for the role of women is seen by the fact that although his heroines are distinct from many of the heroines we are used to seeing in North American animation, most of them still retain elements of traditional femininity and female gender roles, such as the Disney princesses. The female characters from Miyazaki’s films are young women or girls who have an element of cuteness and even naïveté. As Napier asserts, most of Miyazaki’s heroines can be considered part of a trope called shoujo, which translated literally means “little girl,” and often refers to a genre of anime and manga that are meant to appeal to pre-teen and teen girls. However, over the last several decades, the term has come to be used as a “shorthand for a certain kind of liminal identity between child and adult,”50 that is rooted in nostalgia as well as a consumer culture based on the accumulation of kawaii (“cute”) material goods. Shoujo characters and stories take up a huge amount of the stories being told in anime and manga, which is part of why female characters (whether or not they may be considered strong or good female representations) are so present in Japan. When female characters are shoujo, they are young girls, typically around the ages of 12 or 13 (although they sometimes can be a bit younger or can be older teenagers), in a state of being “between adulthood and childhood, power and powerlessness, awareness and innocence, as well as masculinity and femininity.”51 The liminal states being

50 Napier, Susan J. *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle.* 148
negotiated by shoujo are personified notably by Taeko in Takahata’s Only Yesterday, as we experience her flashbacks to her 10 year-old self, in an age where she is negotiating what it means to be not just a young woman as she hits puberty but also simply an independent human being, growing into someone uniquely herself. We also see her as her present 27 year-old self, as she leaves her current life in an attempt to grow psychologically and emotionally, like her 10 year-old self did. As she remarks about her flashbacks and the nostalgia she has been experiencing:

“Perhaps my fifth grade self is trying to tell me a new way to fly.” Only Yesterday is not a typical shoujo genre anime compared to what many North American anime fans often see, but it is an intriguing exploration of what it feels like to be in that state between being a wayward child and being a responsible adult. The film takes this traditionally Japanese trope and makes it a mature and patient story in itself. The nostalgia and wistfulness with which Taeko looks back on her past memories are incredibly relatable to people of any culture. To quote Geoffrey Wexley:

I started watching it in the early 90s, and it’s changed for me as I watch it. So if you watch it again in 10 years…you’ll see a different film because you’ll change. That’s really something the film is very much about; about how Taeko’s changed. What it means to me is that it reminds me that most people are presenting themselves quite honestly.52

52 Aguilar, Carlos. “Studio Ghibli’s Geoffrey Wexler Talks Dubbing Takahata’s Undubbable ‘Only Yesterday’.”
Chapter 5

Conclusion: Towards A Change in Hollywood Animation

Takahata’s films may not have been as desirable to North American audiences in the 1990s when Disney first took hold of the distribution rights for Studio Ghibli’s films, but Miyazaki’s films’ status in the West helped to pave the way for better representation for female characters in Western cinema. As can be seen with the recently produced and released English dub of *Only Yesterday*, there is an increasing recognition of Studio Ghibli and the medium of anime in general amongst North American audiences, thus creating demand for more official distribution of Japanese animation in the West. Over the past several decades, the productions of English dubs for home video and theatrical releases of Japanese animation in North America have trended towards keeping some of the original essence of Japanese culture embedded in these productions, to a reasonable degree. This is not so much the case for anime that is directed towards kids, such as *Pokémon*, and that air on children’s television networks in North America, where they are still made in their English localizations to play out like North American cartoons, including giving characters English names to make the shows more recognizable for children. However, anime distributors such as GKIDS, Funimation, and Aniplex, maintain Japanese names of characters and places in the productions they distribute, and are less motivated to Westernize characters and stories for the sake of audience. They also almost always providing the option to watch anime with the original Japanese audio track and English translation subtitles—a popular option among anime fans, as subtitles tend to follow the original Japanese scripts much more closely, and less of the cultural aspects of the language and story are lost. In this way, anime has become an intensely transnational media form, bridging audiences from Japan and North
America, and allowing North American audiences to find connections and meanings within a Japanese cultural context.

With *Spirited Away*’s success at the 75th Academy Awards, American moviegoers took notice of Miyazaki’s works, and thanks to Disney’s influence, he has become something of a household name not just amongst anime fans but of Disney fans and parents with children who love movies. John Lasseter, the chief creative officer at Pixar Studios and a great admirer of Hayao Miyazaki, spearheaded much of the publicity behind the Disney dubs of Studio Ghibli films. Lasseter provided introductions to several of Disney’s DVD releases of

*Fig. 18 Spirited Away*, promotional image, Dir. Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli, 2001
Studio Ghibli films, as well as being interviewed for Turner Classic Movies’ television airings of the Disney English dubbed versions. As managing editor of Movie Mezzanine, John Spiegel, writes: “if you see most of Hayao Miyazaki’s movies in the United States, and do so legally, you are likely doing so because John Lasseter convinced Disney’s higher-ups to get the distribution rights.” Although this is not entirely correct, as we know from the Disney/Tokuma Deal, it does say something of Lasseter’s idolization of Miyazaki. It is in part a result of Lasseter’s campaigning that helped both moviegoers and North American filmmakers come to take notice of Miyazaki’s work. Considering Lasseter’s creative position in the Pixar company, Miyazaki’s masterful storytelling likely had an effect on the stories told in many of Pixar’s original films. Pixar’s films historically have been mostly centred on male protagonists and mostly male ensembles of characters, though there is evidence of this potentially shifting, with the more recent releases of Inside Out in 2015 and Finding Dory in 2016 which centre on female protagonists.

It is Disney Studios that has a history of female characters, and where we can see the most significant comparable elements between North American animation and Studio Ghibli films. The most famous Disney franchise is arguably the Disney Princess line-up, with films dating back to Disney’s first feature length film, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937). Comparing the original three Disney princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty, to the last several Disney heroines, Rapunzel from Tangled (2010), sisters Elsa and Anna from Frozen (2013), and most recently Moana from Moana (2016), the progression in both the storytelling and the types of female characters we see is apparent. Rapunzel actively rescues herself from the tower, simply needing the male character, Flynn Rider, as a guide to her destination. Between the two main characters, Rapunzel is the decision maker and action taker, with Flynn hesitantly along for the ride. In Frozen, the bond of sisterhood is explored, as Elsa’s

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uncontrollable and dangerous magical powers turn her into an unwilling villain. And in Moana, contrary to practically all other Disney films with female main characters, there is no romantic subplot at all—no mention of romance, not even jokingly. It is a film entirely about Moana and her journey to save her home island. It is thanks in part to the changing cultural value of the role of women, but also, potentially, thanks to examples of women in film like those in the films of Studio Ghibli. As the amount of female-lead films in foreign films increase, so, it seems, has the demand for female stories in North American cinema. That change is starting in the field of animation, with the help of anime.

This is not to say that anime as a whole is a bastion of what viewers or critical commentators might consider “good” or “strong” female representation. Issues remain in the representation of girls and women in anime, particularly with stereotyped portrayals and sexualisation of young girls as is the case in many Japanese anime television series. This issue seems to be more common in anime television series rather than feature films. Another increasingly popular Japanese animation director is Mamoru Hosoda, director of films such as The Girl Who Leapt Through Time (2006), Wolf Children (2012), and Summer Wars (2009), which all feature female protagonists that are not overly sexualized. Though the problem of sexualisation of female characters is substantive in areas of anime it cannot be said that anime suffers from the same kind of quantitative gender inequalities as North American cinema, which still heavily favours male characters. Western animation’s direction towards children seems to have made animation more open to tell stories with female characters, and with the increase in the popularity of animation as a genre not just for children but for adults too, we will hopefully see the proportion of female protagonists in North American cinema increase. We are seeing this already in North American animation, such as in the Emmy Award-winning series Avatar: The Last Airbender (2005-2008), which takes clear thematic and artistic influences from the works of Studio Ghibli. Set in a universe based on East Asian mythology and spirituality, Avatar features a
diverse cast of characters, powerful female lead and supporting characters, as well as some more blatant Ghibli-esque influences such as a many-legged flying bison which greatly resembles the iconic many-legged Catbus from *My Neighbor Totoro*. Another clear example of the influence of anime and strong female characters is the popular anime-style web series *RWBY* (2013-present), which features four young women as the main characters, presenting generally positive female roles and representations. Not so coincidentally, *RWBY* has found great success.
not only in North America but in Japan as well, with a reversal of the usual process of anime distribution—this time going from an original English script and being localized with an official Japanese dub. And there are promising signs that this is making changes in the world of live-action cinema as well, with such critically acclaimed examples as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2014), the latest two *Star Wars* releases, *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015) and *Rogue One* (2016), and *Wonder Woman* (2017), the latter of which became the highest grossing superhero origins film in history.\(^{54}\) Cinema and the representations therein reflect the society around which they are built; this is true not only for live-action cinema, but animation as well. It is for this reason that animation deserves not only further dedicated study, but also a second look through the eyes of the adult viewer. Because of the increasing amount of anime being produced and

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distributed to a North American market, it is important that scholarship in the field of animation continue to develop. It is my hope that more academic work is done in the realm of animation studies, not only by dedicated scholars contributing to the field, but also by general film scholars and critics who recognize the cultural importance of animation.
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