

David Höwelkröger

Kiel

“One shot tells me whether a film is great or not.”

Hayao Miyazaki’s Auteurist Identity as ‘Media Figure’ in Studio Ghibli’s Making-Of Documentaries

Abstract: *Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron* is the newest attempt to discursively frame director Hayao Miyazaki as an ‘animation auteur’ in a making-of documentary. Using *auteur* theory as a category of reception as well as research on Ghibli’s brand image and the commercial impetus behind this brand strategy, this article focuses on making-of documentaries as paratextual media artefacts to construct the director as the sole creative voice behind Studio Ghibli’s films. I want to argue that the documentaries offer interpretations of the movies by primarily suggesting autobiographical readings of his works. Moreover, they minimize the labor of animators through a depiction of Miyazaki as an artistic ‘genius.’ On the filmic side, the article examines how the documentaries’ editing enforces this connection between Miyazaki’s movies and his life, e.g., by establishing a connection between characters and staff.

David Höwelkröger (M.A.) is a research associate and PhD candidate at the Institute for Newer German Literature and Media at the Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel. He studied Media Studies and English Literature and Culture at the University of Paderborn. Research interests: videographic criticism, platform studies, and transmedial forms of animation.

1. Introduction: The making of 'animation auteurs'

"I don't want to make crap. I want to go somewhere new. For me, it's not about the story. One shot tells me whether a film's great or not. That's the essence of film."¹

That is just one of the phrases famed director Hayao Miyazaki utters in one of the making-of documentaries about his works, which frame him as an "animation auteur."² The discursive branding of *auteurs* by way of paratextual material is well-established by now: Whether it occurs in interviews, trailers, or audio commentaries, it contributes to "the auteur [being constructed, D.H.] as a commercial strategy for organizing audience reception, as a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims."³ Comparatively less attention regarding this strategy has been paid to how paratexts construct *auteur* directors of animated works.⁴ Animation scholar Paul Wells claims that "[a]rguably, animation may be viewed as the most auteurist of film practices [...], and its very process, even when at its most collaborative, insists upon the cohesive intervention of an authorial presence."⁵ The process, here, refers to the practice of, at the most basic level, drawing images, which can only be done by one person.

This article is going to focus on Studio Ghibli and Hayao Miyazaki specifically, given their successes, both in Japan and abroad.⁶ Yet, except for the work of Rayna Denison, Laz Carter, and Manuel Hernández-Pérez, the paratextual construction of authorship of Ghibli movies has seldom been examined. Denison has mainly researched Ghibli from a discursive production-studies standpoint, focusing on marketing materials and its meaning for image construction of the studio, as has Carter.⁷ Hernández-Pérez compares and contrasts Hayao Miyazaki's image as an

¹ Hayao Miyazaki in: *Never-Ending Man. Hayao Miyazaki* (00:48:38–00:49:05, taken from the English subtitles) (J 2016, Kaku Arakawa).

² Wells 2002: 72.

³ Corrigan 1990: 46. For the creation of the *auteur* figure in audio commentaries on DVDs, see Grant 2008; see also Hadas 2020: 1–26. For newer reception of Asian auteurs specifically, though not *anime auteurs*, see Promkhuntong 2023.

⁴ But see Hernández-Pérez 2016 for a comparison between Hayao Miyazaki and Walt Disney and Gan 2013 for the role of *auteurs* in television anime. As with film studies, it is not surprising that the field of animation studies seeks to focus on and build canons of mostly male directors behind successful and well-known works, as is evident in overviews of animation history (see, e.g., Pellitteri/Manuzzato 2016: 214–222, 228–247 and Kohara/Nimii 2013.) As Jerome Christensen (2012) has also outlined, the *auteur* label can be applied to entire studios as well, which was done by Robert Alan and Robert Westerfelhaus (2005) to Pixar. One might also conceptualize Ghibli as a studio with its own *auteurist* branding (see Carter 2018a: 53 and 2018b: 50.)

⁵ Wells 2002: 73.

⁶ For an overview of Ghibli's cultural cachet, see Denison 2023: 1–2 and Rendell/Denison 2018: 6 as well as Hernández-Pérez 2016: 298.

⁷ See Denison 2023, 2018, and 2015: 117–132 and Carter 2018b.

auteur to Walt Disney's.⁸ Apart from a few mentions, none have given an in-depth focus to the four feature-length making-of documentaries though.⁹ Taken together, these documentaries cover over a decade of Miyazaki's work between 2006 and 2024: The series *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki* (J 2019, Kaku Arakawa) (abbreviated as *10 Years*) and the movies *The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness (KoDaM)* (J 2013, Mami Sunada), *Never-Ending Man: Hayao Miyazaki (NEM)* and *Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron (HMatH)* (J 2024, Kaku Arakawa).¹⁰

Using theories of a discursive construction of auteurism that posit auteurs as celebrities to market the film with, which will be elaborated on in the next part, this article is going to identify the main discursive lines and filmic strategies typical of the making-of documentary that construct and re-affirm Miyazaki's label as *auteur*.¹¹ Miyazaki has repeatedly been labeled as so-called "animation auteur"¹² or "auteur star", though this was mostly done in relation to his works, not with regards to how he is paratextually framed.¹³ Making-of documentaries typically portray the production of a film in a truncated manner and have the potential to define the discourse about its production and reception for audiences.¹⁴ Thus, the documentaries this article focuses on consolidate Miyazaki's biography and work behavior into a coherent image, tying it together with the production of his movies and ultimately connecting it to what Rayna Denison calls "Studio Ghibli's brand identity."¹⁵ It connects aesthetic styles, themes like the importance of environmental

⁸ Hernández-Pérez 2016. Regarding Walt Disney, Wells refers to him "as a 'supra-auteur' by virtue of his overall position and affecting relation to his own studio", which is also applicable to Miyazaki (2002: 101).

⁹ But see Hernández-Pérez 2016: 309; Law 2021: 204; Mes/Agnoli 2021: 208; Denison 2023: 53, 150.

¹⁰ This article is only going to focus on the documentaries mentioned here. Other documentaries that have not been localized in Germany thus far include *Mononoke Hime wa Kōshite Umareta* (Toshiro Uratani, J 1998), the television special *Miyazaki Hayao Saishin-saku Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi Kōkai Chokuzen Supesharu!* (J 2001, Maiko Yawata.) Moreover, at least four more by director Kaku Arakawa, who produced television documentaries on *Ponyo: On the Cliff by the Sea* (J 2008, Hayao Miyazaki), *From Up on Puppy Hill* (J 2011, Gorō Miyazaki), and *The Wind Rises* (Hayao Miyazaki, J 2013) that were originally broadcast on the public-broadcast channel NHK. At least two of these are included in the documentary series *Purofessionaru – shigoto no ryūgi* (roughly translatable to *Professional Work Style*). These documentaries were also released as longer versions on DVD. Later, they were edited into four episodes for an international release on NHK's International Video-on-Demand site, under the title *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki*. For a comprehensive overview of the documentaries on Ghibli in general, see n.A. (29.03.2025): "Documentaires." Generally, the *Professional Work Style* series has also spotlighted other (usually male) anime directors, such as Mamoru Hosoda, Hideaki Anno, or the Ghibli producer Toshio Suzuki.

¹¹ See Distelmeyer 2005: 41. For perspectives on Ghibli's other prominent late director, Isao Takahata, see Gräjdian 2010 and Coleman/Denison/Desser 2025.

¹² See Wells 2011: 248–250; Denison 2018: 37; Denison 2023: 69, Papastavros 2023: 1158; Wells 2002: 17, 72–76, 130 and Moist/Bartholomew 2007.

¹³ See Carter 2018b: 49–50 and Corrigan 1990: 48–49.

¹⁴ See Hasebrink 2024: 14, 21, 112, 129.

¹⁵ Denison 2015: 117–132.

concerns and strong female characters, iconography like flying vehicles, and a particular approach to animated works.¹⁶

The article's main focus will be the most recent documentary *Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron* from 2024 by Kaku Arakawa, which details the creation of Miyazaki's latest movie *The Boy and the Heron* from 2023.¹⁷ What I would like to argue in this article is how these documentaries can be viewed as engaging in auteurism as a 'method of reception.'¹⁸ Thus, Hayao Miyazaki is not examined as a person, but rather his outward representation in the documentaries.¹⁹ This happens through an established reading of the movies' (alleged) meanings through an autobiographical lens and an editing-style that simulates the director's own subjectivity as well as linking scenes from his works to his statements and characteristics, thus naturalizing the romanticized notion of works that are 'essentially' "Miyazaki-fied."²⁰ This leads to a concealment of "the complex and diverse relationship structure of [...] [animators, D.H.], operations and instances of meaning in the film's discourse as a point of convergence [...] [that is replaced, D.H.] with the unity of a person" inherent in *auteur* theory, as the *auteur* "organizes, [...] unifies, condenses, abbreviates and omits [meanings and processes, thus creating, D.H.] [...] linearity and clarity."²¹

2. The *auteur* (re)animated in paratexts

Despite his repeatedly pronounced death, the (still, too often, male) *auteur* refuses to die, at least in matters of film reception.²² More recent approaches see the *auteur* as discursive label or 'role' then, especially in mediated paratextual film discourse: Timothy Corrigan coined "the commerce of auteurism" in the 90s, which refers to the label of 'auteur' being used for commercial purposes.²³ With this, Corrigan brings the commercial and paratextual sphere into view for the study of *auteurs*. He also introduced "the commercial auteur and the auteur of commerce" as categories to group directors in.²⁴ The first one refers to directors who either construct their own image through the movies they are directing or whose images are created extratextually.²⁵ The second category refers to directors who are aware of this and try to actively "rework the institutional manipulations of the auteurist position

¹⁶ Ibid.; Denison 2023: 74–75, 141–142; Hernández-Pérez 2016: 305; Amzad Hossain/Fu 2014: 108–109.

¹⁷ A shortened version with partially alternate scenes not included in the streaming version was broadcast in December 2023 under the title *Professional Shigoto no Ryūgi – Sutajio jiburi to Miyazaki Hayao no 2399-nichi* [2399 Days with Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli] on NHK in the *Professional Shigoto no Ryūgi* ['Professional work style'] series.

¹⁸ See Frisch 2007: 158, 162; 2020: 263.

¹⁹ Peter Wollen (1972: 145, 168) already distinguishes between the person and the director in his theory about the director as *auteur*.

²⁰ Hernández-Pérez 2016: 307, 309.

²¹ Frisch 2020: 268, translated from German by D.H.

²² Diestelmeyer 2003: 86; see also Rugg 2014: 70–71, 187, fn. 2.

²³ Corrigan 1990: 43.

²⁴ Corrigan 1990: 50.

²⁵ Ibid., see also Hills 2003: 185.

within the commerce of the contemporary movie industry."²⁶ Miyazaki can be classified into the first category. Although Corrigan exclusively refers to directors of live-action movies, this model can also be applied to *auteurs* in animation, since marketing for industrialized studios like Ghibli is similar.²⁷ One of the main contentions of auteurism lies in the belief that meaning in a film can only be imposed by some auteur-subject.²⁸ Nevertheless, auteurism is still valuable as a tool when focusing on the *auteur* as a category of reception where it is up to the audience to decipher how the *auteur* is present and how he imposes meaning in filmic works.²⁹

Drawing on the *auteur* as a construct that emerges during reception, one can conceptualize Miyazaki as a discursive 'label' that is used in the context of marketing.³⁰ Jan Distelmeyer brings up the related term of the so-called "media figure" who is created through certain means of presentation.³¹ The media figure is concurrent with Richard Dyer's concept of the "star image."³² As such, as P. David Marshall argues that celebrities have a form of "industrialized agency" which works both extra-textually, i.e., through promotional efforts, or in becoming synonymous with the studio they work at, and intertextually, i.e., "their meaning and significance inhabit other cultural spaces and venues as their personalities are called upon or interpellated into how our culture interprets situations."³³ This is the case for Miyazaki when he, for example, publicly opposes attempts of the then-conservative Japanese government that wants to change the Japanese constitution for Japan to be able to command their own armed forces again in a newspaper (*KoDaM* 01:44:42–01:45:30). Another example would be his negative comments on art created with the support of A.I.³⁴

Regarding the analysis of a director through paratexts, Jan Distelmeyer states:

²⁶ Corrigan 1990: 51.

²⁷ Denison 2023: 2. Corrigan also does not take into account that the industries in different countries have different conditions. However, since contemporary industries are always already globalized – the mere fact that these documentaries receive international distribution via Netflix and NHK World, subtitled in 13 languages in the case of the latter, is proof enough of that – this also seems to suggest that the conventionalized narratives about *auteurs* work on a transnational level.

²⁸ See Frisch 2020: 268.

²⁹ See Distelmeyer 2005: 401; Caughie 2008: 410; Hernández-Pérez 2016: 310.

³⁰ Corrigan 1990: 44; Distelmeyer 2003: 93, 95. It is notable to mention that, while *The Boy and the Heron* was not advertised beyond a single poster before its rerelease in Japan, for the international release, the autobiographical reading, i.e. which characters Miyazaki created to allegedly resemble persons from his own life and what they mean, was used for marketing purposes by publisher *GKIDS*, as well as emphasized in interviews by Toshio Suzuki (see @gkids (06.12.2023) and Fleming (28.11.2023)).

³¹ Distelmeyer 2003: 93, 95.

³² Dyer 1998: 33–85.

³³ Marshall 2021: 168.

³⁴ See Denison 2023: 98 and *NEM* 00:56:41–01:00:09. This does not yet include a mention of the recent viral trend on social media in which A.I.-generated works were created to distinctively emulate the supposed 'style' of the studio in images and partially also videos (see Varleite 2025).

“Because the star director [...] can be experienced in the context of (re)presentations – e.g. in the form of interviews, film appearances [such as in making-of documentaries, D.H.], published statements, lectures and Internet pages – an analysis of this media figure must examine the processes through which the image or images of the star are produced.”³⁵

This is the aim of the next chapter.

3. *Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron's Documentary Mode*

Most of the released documentaries about Miyazaki were directed by Kaku Arakawa and have previously all been broadcast, usually in a shortened version, on the Japanese public broadcasting channel NHK, or the “Japan Broadcasting Corporation.”³⁶ A majority of the making-of documentary scholarship focuses on it as a type of paratext that has been released in spatial proximity to the movie, such as on DVDs and BluRays.³⁷ This is not the case for the documentaries focused on here, though they have all been released in years when new movies came out as well.³⁸ Felix Hasebrink conceptualizes the making-of documentary and its relation to the film whose production it is covering on three levels that are relevant for these examples: Making-ofs as ‘exterior’ the production, as ‘backside’ of the production and as performance.³⁹ One of the few evaluations of the Ghibli Making-of documentaries assesses that:

“[r]ecent fly-on-the-wall documentaries made with the studio’s cooperation [...] have spotlighted Miyazaki as representative of Ghibli’s artistic as well as its corporate culture. Such nonfiction works reveal how much of the studio’s performance of its own identity hinges on Miyazaki’s public persona, presenting it as informing even the internal workings at the production house, such as in ways staff members are expected to operate and what standards they are asked to live up to.”⁴⁰

While this quote already hints at how the documentaries portray Miyazaki as a central figure, it is debatable whether they are filmed in a “fly-on-the-wall”-style, since most of them do sometimes interact with Miyazaki as the subject to be

³⁵ Distelmeyer 2005: 41, translated from German by D.H.

³⁶ Yoneyama 2019: 190, fn. 30. In 2023, Ghibli announced that the commercial television channel Nippon TV had acquired the largest share of the company. Thus, the studio is now a subsidiary of the company (see Frater 21.11.2023). Nippon TV also contributed to Ghibli’s movies through production committees (see Denison 2023: 157 and *KoDaM* 01:38:10–01:40:43 for Suzuki’s description of the working relationship with the channel’s staff).

³⁷ See Hight 2005; Grant 2008; Hasebrink 2024: 75–81; Andrade Zamarripa 2024: 143–151. Critically, see Hasebrink 2024: 24.

³⁸ *HMatH* was released as part of a special edition of *The Boy and the Heron* in Japan on DVD and Blu-Ray, as well as during the Cannes Film Festival 2024. *KoDaM* was released theatrically in Japan and the U.S., and others were shown on TV in Japan and later released abroad as separate home video releases.

³⁹ Hasebrink 2024: 22, 25, 28, 75 et. passim.

⁴⁰ Mes/Agnoli 2021: 208.

observed, next to also observing the work at the studio.⁴¹ Apart from *KoDaM* and *10 Years*, none of the documentaries have a narrative voice-over.⁴² For *HMatH*, I suggest that it uses a mix of Bill Nichols' three suggested documentary modes of "observing mode" and "participatory mode" to ultimately create a "performative mode" of editing.⁴³ What mode the documentary employs differs from scene to scene. In the studio itself, Arakawa mostly observes with his camera (00:08:59–00:09:22, 00:31:02–00:31:38) while, when alone with Miyazaki, they chat.⁴⁴ Sometimes, the latter even tells Arakawa not to film when he does not appear to be in the mood for it (00:07:03–00:07:06, 00:32:21). Significantly, Arakawa (who is also the camera operator) follows Miyazaki almost like a shadow, especially in moments of creative doubt, which occur frequently during production (e.g. 01:30:09–01:31:51). Moreover, the editing uses archive footage or old photos, especially when Miyazaki talks about his deceased friends (e.g. 00:11:50–00:12:38, 00:22:24–00:22:45, 00:27:38–28:08). In the participatory mode "[f]ilming takes place by means of interviews [...]. This mode is often coupled with archival footage [...]."⁴⁵ Lastly, a performative mode "rejects notions of objectivity in favor of evocation and affect" since here, the filmmaker's own involvement is emphasized, which creates a "subjective or expressive aspect" in the documentary.⁴⁶

This is especially the case for *Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron* where, through editing, the documentary tries to emulate Miyazaki's thought processes: At one point, Miyazaki muses: "It's like I'm sticking my hand in my brains. I pick up scenes from my movies and string them together. Somehow, it seems to work" (00:01:12–00:01:45). Arakawa appears to have taken this as the quintessential leitmotif for editing the documentary in a 'performative mode' that combines footage from Miyazaki's movies, past documentaries and other details and edits them together in a style of montage that wants to emulate Miyazaki's mind, or what the documentary takes it to be with very rapidly interspersed footage (e.g. 00:35:36–00:36:28). Thereby, the documentary appears to construct a link between Miyazaki's statements and actions and all of his previous films.⁴⁷ These sequences often follow a very loose and associative style of editing, that has been short-handedly compared by some viewers on social media as similar to the Kuleshov-effect.⁴⁸ Therefore, it appears as both the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² The TV versions do use voice-over, though.

⁴³ Nichols 2017: 22.

⁴⁴ This goes against Nichols' suggestion that a documentary does not interact with its subject in this mode (see *ibid.*)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See Hasebrink 2024: 112, 129.

⁴⁸ @Into_the_Oh (19.12.2023): "クレショフ効果みたいに「それ一つでは意味をなさないが、並べられることで編集者の恣意的な意味合いを持つ」ってことかな" [Like the Kuleshov effect, 'It doesn't mean anything on its own, but when put together, it takes on the arbitrary meaning of the editor,' right?]" and @anime_gaku (18.12.2023): "Imagine this, but it's 80 minutes long and feels like the director just found out about the Kuleshov effect That's what the NHK doc feels like." The Kuleshov effect describes the cutting together of two separate

'backside' of the movie and as the 'exterior' of production. This is the case when audiences get a more everyday-impression of the director and, for instance, follow Miyazaki as he wanders through the countryside near a cottage while he talks about how he is still haunted by the death of Isao Takahata (00:23:50–00:30:23).⁴⁹ One of Hasebrink's central points of analysis is how the making-of documentary connects the images of a finished movie to its production.⁵⁰ While the images of production primarily consist of drawing and flipping images and looking at images on-screen, this documentary chooses the established route of an autobiographical reading and therefore positions Miyazaki and his experiences as essential to understand *The Boy and the Heron*.⁵¹ For media studies and approaches to analysis of an *auteur*, this is ultimately considered to be an outdated mode, yet it is still used to construct a "media figure" for general audiences.⁵²

As has been established, in *HMatH* and the other documentaries, the audience follows Arakawa following Miyazaki. As Linda Haverty Rugg describes, generally,

[t]he 'making of' films about auteurs most often include a dialogic structure, in which the director of the 'making of' film, usually a younger or less prominent director [here Kaku Arakawa, D.H.], interviews and views the auteur at work. The ensuing dialogue carries more than a hint of discipleship; the younger director [...] wants to get at the heart of what makes this cinematic genius tick (in the 'making of' films, the auteur is implicitly designated a cinematic genius either by the documentarian or himself or both)."⁵³

This notion of Miyazaki as an artistic 'genius' is not just underscored by his claims that he cannot help himself but create (see e.g. 00:01:56–00:02:23), but also through the role of producer Toshio Suzuki who appears in the role of a 'translator' of Miyazaki's actions in the documentaries (c.f. e.g. 00:05:27–00:05:31, 00:09:30, 19:41–20:35, 23:35–23:54).⁵⁴

As for the third categorization of Hasebrink – making-of documentary as performance – outside of drawing storyboards, the documentaries only offer little

shots that generate meaning when they appear in sequence (see Russell 2005). Hasebrink (2024: 98–105, 284) also discusses conventions for how film and behind-the-scenes footage are set into relation with each other through editing, but does not describe them in terms of the Kuleshov effect.

⁴⁹ See Hasebrink 2024: 22, 27–28, 75.

⁵⁰ Hasebrink 2024: 104, 124, 284.

⁵¹ See e.g. Corrigan 1990: 51; Hickethier 2010: 149; Distelmeyer 2005: 36.

⁵² Distelmeyer 2003: 93, 95, and 2005: 41

⁵³ Rugg 2014: 70.

⁵⁴ On Suzuki's role in shaping Ghibli's brand identity, see Denison 2015: 127–131 and Hernández-Pérez 2016: 309–310. In *HMatH*, Miyazaki says that Suzuki should "use his alchemy" (00:04:21–00:04:30) when looking for ways to fund the movie, which usually happens through different production partners who form a production committee, consisting of, e.g., publishers, record labels, and other companies who take part in the marketing of a movie. However, in *The Boy and the Heron*, Ghibli apparently financed the production on their own without a committee (00:06:22–00:06:28). Thus, Suzuki's role in the production of the movie is to oversee the production process generally and to take care that the established production pipeline is kept in place. He also reads the script or parts of it (00:06:45–00:06:55)

focus on how the process of how animation works as such.⁵⁵ According to Hasebrink due to their difference in production, animated films have less overall production to show.⁵⁶ “The work of the animators is still captured in medium shots over their shoulders, permitting the viewers to catch a glimpse of the drawings on their desk.”⁵⁷ Rarely, if ever, the work of other staff members *animating* is being focused (but see for very brief and decontextualized scenes *KoDaM*, 01:29:16–1:29:45, 01:31:46–01:31:51 as well as *NEM* 01:01:02–01:01:55 for staff operating animation devices.)⁵⁸ When the work of others is being taken into consideration, the dialogue frames the work as Miyazaki ‘taking the energy’ from other, younger people, ‘absorbing’ it to reinvigorate his creative spirit, as stated both by Toshio Suzuki and fellow anime director Hideaki Anno: These and similar statements are often shown in a reverse shot with the character of *Kaonashi* from *Spirited Away* who, in the movie, absorbs other characters and takes on their traits (J, 2001, Hayao Miyazaki) (*KoDaM*, 01:09:35–01:10:21, *NEM* 00:25:53–00:26:20 and *HMatH* 00:10:16–00:10:37). This vampiric quality ties into stereotypes of the artist as “workaholic”⁵⁹, framing labor as mere contribution to one great mind.

Another editing method that produces Miyazaki’s image as genius is to compare him to characters of his prior movies: Two noticeable examples in *HMatH*, (and a montage in the television version (00:03:20–00:03:37)), stand out: Miyazaki’s appearance in the beginning of the documentary is intercut with the appearance of a nightly forest deity, the *Deidarabotchi*, from *Princess Mononoke* (J 1997, Hayao Miyazaki) (00:05:32–00:05:53). The comparison with a deity appears cheeky at first, giving the viewers the impression that his reputation is god-like. However, when Miyazaki reflects on his creativity and the metaphor of “opening the lid of one’s brain”, this is paralleled with the wizard Howl from *Howl’s Moving Castle* (J 2004, Hayao Miyazaki). In one pivotal scene shown, he absorbs a star that gives him his magical powers (01:20:04–01:20:42). During the scene, the score from the movie plays, once again showing how intertwined NHK and Studio Ghibli are in this promotional effort, when Ghibli also grants the channel the rights to freely use footage and music from their movies. In addition, the inclusion of movie footage appeals to the studio’s fans who recognize and remember these scenes fondly and are thus more eager to uncritically accept the way they are presented here: The comparisons between Miyazaki and these characters appear to suggest that there is something otherworldly, magical, and mysterious in Miyazaki’s ability to create. *HMaH*, then, creates a romanticized notion of the author, ultimately contributing to

⁵⁵ While some artists and staff members are identified by name and position in the TV version with inserts, the process of animation is given more in-depth focus in other documentaries, see, for example, the first episode of *10 Years* (07:04–12:25). No documentary, however, offers a succinct step-by-step explanation how a movie is created from start to finish.

⁵⁶ See Hasebrink 2022: 113. At one point, in *KoDaM*, we see a drawn image from *The Wind Rises* of plane engineers sitting at their desks, which, in the next scene, is fully colored and animated when Hidaki Anno does voice work. The documentary then cuts to a wide shot of animators at Studio Ghibli thus seemingly drawing parallels between the engineers in the movie, portrayed as equally creative, and the animators (01:27:13–01:27:24).

⁵⁷ Ibid: 118.

⁵⁸ See Hasebrink 2022: 116 and Hasebrink 2024: 195.

⁵⁹ Hernández-Pérez 2016: 304.

the idea that Miyazaki's movies are inherently personal affairs that can only be created by him. It is necessary to stress once again that the image of Miyazaki in this documentary is artificially constructed. The same point needs to be stressed when examining how this documentary wants viewers to understand and interpret his films. It 'loosens up' the meaning of the animated film and then pins it down again, thereby limiting other perspectives, readings, and engagements with Miyazaki's films, but also unifying their reception.⁶⁰

4. Conclusion

Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron establishes a romanticized narrative of auteurism through the autobiographical reading of his films, enforced by interview statements and editing that (re)assure Miyazaki's status as a genius. Thus, the documentary serves as both the 'backside' of production, offering additional details on how the production was shaped. However, the documentary also goes beyond the sphere of production by offering a (highly composed) account of Miyazaki's mind as an 'exterior' space of the production, accompanying him in his everyday life. Here, the editing constructs an artificial connection between his works, his fictional characters, and his personal life. As such these documentaries aim to define the discourse about the production, i.e. how an audience is 'meant' to receive the film when applying Corrigan's concept of "the commerce of auteurism" to the film's promotion.⁶¹ Since Miyazaki has not made any public appearances during the (non-Japanese) promotion of *The Boy and the Heron*, *Miyazaki and the Heron* remains one of the only possibilities to gain insight into the production processes and thoughts behind the film, especially for international fans who do not necessarily have access to other making-of-materials, to audiovisually engage with Miyazaki's conception of the movie.⁶² This solidifies the making-of documentary's status as suggesting a supposedly 'authentic' view of the film's production, as perceived by the audience through the different documentary modes.⁶³ The artifice in the editing, however, potentially points viewers to auteurism as category of reception that according to Frisch is meant to systematize and order perspectives.⁶⁴ While such representations of authorship might be considered outdated from a media-studies perspective, these

⁶⁰ Hasebrink 2024: 284; see also Frisch 2020: 268. This can also be seen in other documentaries from the *Professional Work Style Series*, such as in the making-of documentary *Hideaki Anno: The Final Challenge of Evangelion* (J 2021, Aki Kubota) about the making of *Evangelion: 3.0+1.0 Thrice Upon a Time* (J, 2022, Hideaki Anno) which similarly deals with a supposed 'fly-on-the-wall' mode, while portraying Anno as eccentric and somewhat unpredictable genius. There are also many examples on the audience's side, as well as among critics, that uncritically adopt such a reading (see, e.g., the video essays from Densetsu Media (09.12.2023) and *The Local Mangaka* (06.12.2023)).

⁶¹ Wells 2002: 72; Corrigan 1990: 43.

⁶² On the publishing side of things, the coffee-table artbook *The Art of The Boy and the Heron* was published in 2025. There are other publications, such as storyboards and so-called movie pamphlets, that have been released in Japan but not outside it.

⁶³ See Hasebrink 2024: 112, 129.

⁶⁴ Frisch 2020: 268.

documentaries ultimately demonstrate how they still serve both commercial endeavors well as well as a framework for reception.

Bibliography

- Amzad Hossain, Mohammed/Fu, Wei-Hsin (2014): "Young Girls and Flying Images: A Semiotic Analysis of Hayao Miyazaki's Animations." In: *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 33.2, pp. 97–119.
- @anime_gaku (18.12.2023): "Imagine this, but it's 80 minutes long and feels like the director just found out about the Kuleshov effect That's what the NHK doc feels like." *X.com*. https://x.com/anime_gaku/status/1736796881596932429 (30th of January 2026).
- Andrade Zamarripa Armando (2024): "The Making-of Documentary: An Approximation to some Discourse Intentions and Contemporary Uses." In: *Cinéma & Cie* 24(43), pp. 141–154.
- Brookey, Robert Alan/Westerfelhaus, Robert (2005): "The Digital Auteur: Branding Identity on the Monsters, Inc. DVD." In: *Western Journal of Communication* 69.2, pp. 109–128.
- Carter, Lawrence William (2018a) *Going 'global' 'Studio Ghibli', 'global anime' and the popularisation of a 'medium-genre'*. PhD thesis. SOAS University of London. <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/26182> (30th of January 2026).
- Carter, Laz (2018b): "Marketing anime to a global audience: A paratextual analysis of promotional materials from *Spirited Away*." In: *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 4.1, pp. 47–59.
- Caughie, John (2008): "Authors and auteurs: The uses of theory." In: Donald, James/ Renov Michael (eds.): *The Sage Handbook of Film Studies*. London: Sage, pp. 408–423.
- Christensen, Jerome (2012): *America's Corporate Art: The Studio Authorship of Hollywood Motion Pictures*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Coleman, Lindsay/Denison/Rayna/Desser, David (2025): *The Many Worlds of Takahata Isao*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Corrigan, Timothy (1990): "The commerce of auteurism: a voice without authority." In: *New German critique*. 49, pp. 43–57.
- Denison, Rayna (2018): "Before Studio Ghibli was Studio Ghibli. Analysing the historical discourses surrounding Hayao Miyazaki's *Castle in the Sky* (1986)." In: *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 4.1, pp. 31–46.
- Denison, Rayna (2023): *Studio Ghibli. An Industrial History*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Denison, Rayna (2015): *Anime. A Critical Introduction*. London/New York/Oxford/New Delhi/Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Densetsu Media (09.12.2023): "Metaphor in the Boy and the Heron ~ The Meaning of Ghibli ~" *YouTube.com*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jI-HdIplz7VU> (31.08.2025).
- Distelmeyer, Jan (2003): „Vom auteur zum Kulturprodukt. Entwurf einer kontextorientierten Werkgeschichtsschreibung.“ In: Nolte, Andrea (ed.): *Mediale Wirklichkeiten* (Film- und Fernsehwissenschaftliches Kolloquium 15). Marburg: Schüren, pp. 86–97.
- Distelmeyer, Jan (2005): *Autor Macht Geschichte. Oliver Stone, seine Filme und die Werkgeschichtsschreibung*. München: edition text + kritik.
- Dyer, Richard (1998): *Stars*. London: BFI Publishing.
- Fleming, Ryan (28.11.2023): "'The Boy And The Heron' Producer & Studio Ghibli Co-Founder Toshio Suzuki On Hayao Miyazaki's Most Personal Work." *Deadline.com*. <https://deadline.com/2023/11/toshio-suzuki-the-boy-and-the-heron-producer-studio-ghibli-co-founder-animation-1235640920/> (30th of January 2026).
- Frater, Patrick (21.11.2023): "Studio Ghibli, Miyazaki Hayao's Iconic Japanese Cartoon Home, Selling Controlling Stake to Nippon Television." *Variety.com*. <https://variety.com/2023/biz/news/studio-ghibli-miyazaki-hayao-ntv-1235730638/> (30th of January 2026).

- Frisch, Simon (2007): „Politique des auteurs‘: der subjektive Faktor in Film und Filmkritik.“ In: Becker, Andreas R. (ed.): *Medien - Diskurse - Deutungen*. Marburg: Schüren, pp. 158–165.
- Frisch, Simon (2020): „Auteurismus: Film als Artefakt.“ In: Hagener, Malte/Pantenburg, Volker (eds.): *Handbuch Filmanalyse*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, pp. 253–274.
- @GKIDSfilms (06.12.2023): “I’m not crying, you’re crying. Experience Hayao Miyazaki’s THE BOY AND THE HERON in theatres & IMAX Dec 8.” *X.com*. <https://x.com/GKIDSfilms/status/1732193452257923118> (30th of January 2026).
- Grant, Catherine (2001): “Auteur Machines? Auteurism and the DVD.” In: Bennett, James/Brown, Tom (eds.): *Film and Television After DVD*. London: Routledge, pp. 101–115.
- Grăjdian, Maria-Mihaela (2010): *Takata Isao*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang.
- Hadas, Ledora (2020): *Authorship as Promotional Discourse in the Screen. Industries Selling Genius*. London/New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis.
- Hasebrink, Felix (2022): “Showing How They Made Them Move: Early Making-of Documentaries on the Production of Animated Films.” In: *Animation*, 17.1, pp. 110–126.
- Hasebrink, Felix (2024): *Die Filmkultur des Making-of. Dokumentarische Produktionsästhetik im 21. Jahrhundert*. Bielfeld: transcript.
- Hernández-Pérez, Manuel (2016): “Animation, Branding and Authorship in the Construction of the ‘Anti-Disney’ Ethos: Hayao Miyazaki’s Works and Persona through Disney Film Criticism.” In: *Animation* 11.3, pp. 297–313.
- Hickethier, Knut (2010): *Einführung in die Medienwissenschaft*. Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler
- Hight, Craig (2005): “Making-of Documentaries on DVD: The Lord of the Rings Trilogy and Special Editions.” In: *The Velvet Light Trap* 56.1, pp. 4–17.
- Hills, Matt (2003): “Star Wars in Fandom, Film Theory and the Museum. The cultural status of the cult blockbuster.” In: Stringer, Julian (ed.): *Movie Blockbusters*. London/Oxon, Routledge, pp. 178–189.
- Hui, Gan Sheuo (2013): “Auteur and Anime as Seen in the *Naruto* TV Series. An Intercultural Dialogue between Film Studies and Anime Research.” In: Berndt, Jaqueline/Kümmerling-Meibauer, Bettina (eds.): *Manga’s Cultural Crossroads*. New York/Milton: Taylor & Francis, pp. 220–242.
- @Into_the_Oh (19.12.2023): “クレシヨフ効果みたいに「それ一つでは意味をなさないが、並べられることで編集者の恣意的な意味合いを持つ」ってことかな” [Like the Kuleshov effect, "It doesn't mean anything on its own, but when put together, it takes on the arbitrary meaning of the editor," right?], *X.com*. https://x.com/Into_the_Oh/status/1737108219305291918 [30th of January 2026].
- Kohara, Istutoshi/Niimi, Ryosuke (2013): “The Shot Length Styles of Miyazaki, Oshii, and Hosoda: A Quantitative Analysis.” In: *Animation* 8.2, pp. 163–184.
- Law, Jo (2022): “The Kraft of Labour, Labour as Craft: Hayao Miyazaki’s Images of Work.” In: *Animation* 17.2, pp. 195–208.
- Marshall, David P. (2021): “The Commodified Celebrity-Self: Industrialized Agency and the Contemporary Attention Economy.” In: *Popular Communication* 19.3, pp. 164–177.
- Mes, Tom/Agnoli, Francis M. (2021): “A Modular Genre? Problems in the Reception of the Post-Miyazaki ‘Ghibli Film.’” In: *Animation* 16.3, pp. 207–220.
- Moist, Kevin M./Bartholow, Michael (2007): “When Pigs Fly: Anime, Auteurism, and Miyazaki’s *Porco Rosso*.” In: *Animation* 2.1, pp. 27–42.
- n.A. (29.03.2025): “Documentaires.” *buta-connection.net* <https://www.but-connection.net/index.php/autres-oeuvres/oeuvres-non-cinematographiques/documentaires> (30th of January 2026.)

- Nichols, Bill (2017): *Introduction to Documentary* [3rd Edition]: Bloomington. Indiana University Press.
- Papastavros, Vanessa (2021): "Miyazaki's monstrous mother: a study of Yubaba in Studio Ghibli's Spirited Away." In: *Feminist Media Studies*, 23.3, pp. 1157–1172.
- Pellitteri, Marco/Manuzzato, Lisa Maya Quaianni (2015): "Japan, Asiatic Giant." In: Bendazzi, Giannalberto (ed.): *Animation. A World History: Volume III: Contemporary Times*. Milton: CRC Press, pp. 214–248.
- Promkhuntong, Wikanda (2023): *Film Authorship in Contemporary Transmedia Culture. The Paratextual Lives of Asian Auteurs*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Rendell, James/Denison Rayna (2018): "Introducing Studio Ghibli." In: *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 4.1, pp. 5–14.
- Rugg Linda Haverty (2014): *Self-Projection. The Director's Image in Art Cinema*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Russellâ, Michael (2005): "The Kuleshov Effect and the Death of the Auteur." In: *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & The Arts* 1, <https://doi.org/10.2218/forum.01.547>.
- The Local Mangaka (06.12.2023): "The Boy and the Heron, EYPLAINED (SPOILERS)." *YouTube.com*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZDbKBOFdM4> (31.08.2025).
- Varleite, Martin Duy (2025): "Medium, Message, and Miyazaki: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Creativity in the Ghiblification of AI-Generated Art on Online Platforms." M.A. Thesis. Malmö University. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1965264/FULLTEXT02> (30th of January 2026).
- Wells, Paul (2002): *Animation. Genre and Authorship*. London/New York: Wallflower Press.
- Wells, Paul (2011): "The Language of Animation." In: Nelmes, Jill (ed.): *Introduction to Film Studies*. New York/London: Taylor & Francis 2011, pp. 229–259.
- Wollen, Peter (2013) (1972): *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. London: Palgrave.
- Yoneyama, Shoko (2018): *Animism in Contemporary Japan. Voices for the Anthropocene from post-Fukushima Japan*. London: Routledge.

Filmography

- 『スタジオジブリと宮崎駿の2399日』 2399 Days with Hayao Miyazaki & Studio Ghibli J 2023, Kaku Arakawa, 78 Min.
- 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki. J 2019, Kaku Arakawa, 196 Min., NHK World
- Evangelion: 3.0+1.0 Thrice Upon a Time* (J, 2022, Hideaki Anno).
- Hayao Miyazaki and the Heron*. J 2024, Kaku Arakawa, 120 Min. Netflix.
- Hideaki Anno: The Final Challenge of Evangelion*. J 2021, Aki Kubota. 100 Min.
- Howl's Moving Castle*. J 2004, Hayao Miyazaki, 119 Min., DVD.
- Never-Ending Man: Hayao Miyazaki*. J 2016, Kaku Arakawa, 70 Min., DVD.
- Princess Mononoke*. J 1997, Hayao Miyazaki, 128 Min., DVD.
- The Boy and the Heron*. J 2023, Hayao Miyazaki, 125 Min.
- The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness*. J 2013, Mami Sunada, 118 Min., DVD.
- The Wind Rises*. J 2013, Hayao Miyazaki, 127 Min., DVD.
- Spirited Away*. J 2001, Hayao Miyazaki, 125 Min., DVD.