

## Foreword

Japan is not only an economic superpower (with certain ups and downs), but also a powerful nexus on a global level, given the originality of its influence on popular culture (particularly *anime*/cartoons and *manga*/comics) as well as on Media Studies. In this respect, Studio Ghibli has always been a milestone in the acclaimed Japanese animation and it has been built on four massive pillars: the animation directors Miyazaki Hayao and Takahata Isao, the producer Suzuki Toshio and the composer Hisaishi Jô. This long-awaited book by Maria Grajdian is, in fact, a heartwarming tribute to one of these pillars, Takahata Isao, and his lifelong contribution to the Japanese animation. The author skillfully combines her research and field observations (she has had the privilege to meet and interview Takahata Isao) with an empathic view on Takahata's delicate world.

In the 'Introduction', the author walks us through Takahata's detailed biography (the university years, the beginning of his career, his first animation films and the collaboration with Tôei Animation Studio, his subsequent TV animation series and movies), highlights the people, studios and art styles (*emaki-mono*, *ukiyo-e*) that influenced him and his multivalent genius (writer, producer, composer, scriptwriter, storyboard creator) and reviews briefly his filmography, placing special emphasis on the Oscar nominated movie (*Ponpoko: The Tanuki Heisei War*) in 1994 and his (last) masterpiece, *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*.

Triggering participatory understanding of Takahata's legacy throughout more than five decades of creative activity, the book is, in fact, an update on another book by Maria Grajdian, published in

German language, with insightful additions regarding the movie *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (2013), depicted in the tenth chapter, which was later on added to the original outline of the book (nine chapters covering the most representative works by Takahata). However, the contents of the chapters have been heavily edited and enhanced, based on new information, up-to-date scientific bibliography as well as popular publications.

Considered the 'birth certificate' of the so-called progressive animation trend, *The Prince of Sun: Horus' Great Adventure* (1968), depicted in the first chapter, has a dynamic plot and it overtly points at the Ainu cultural background, revealing a subtle interplay of victories, defeats and human solidarity. As the author suggests in her first chapter, "Takahata Isao's debut work demonstrates an animation vision of fluid moves and of dynamic, well-balanced scenes, counterpointed by convincing characters with profound inner lives, which would later become synonymous with animation art à la Studio Ghibli."

*Panda, Little Panda* (1972) and *Panda, Little Panda: The Circus during Rainy Days* (1973), analysed in the second chapter, are two short movies which already display the *kawaii* syndrome of the Japanese consumption industry and share certain similarities with Miyazaki Hayao's later *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988). Both films center on the friendship between a little girl and two pandas and celebrate the joys of everyday life. However, beyond the bright overtones, the two movies also bring into focus the nuclear family and the inter-generational contract.

The next three chapters ('The universal girl', 'Beyond friendship' and 'Life as a fairytale of hope') form a charming triptych (*Heidi, the Girl from the Alps*, *3.000 Miles in Search of Mother*, and *Anne of Green Gables*) revolving around two major themes in Takahata's works: 'the orphan' and 'the beauty of nature'. These TV animation series, which became very famous in the 1970s, particularly stand out due to their coherent Japanisation – a fine-tuning to the sensibility of Japanese audience –, even if they are all based on Western books (whose actions take place in Switzerland, Italy and Canada).

Takahata draws again on the recurrent theme of 'the orphan' when releasing his animated version of *The Grave of Fireflies* (1988),

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but this time the two orphan children, Seita and Setsuko, are not set against the magnificent background of nature, but against the gloomy landscape dominating the end of the Pacific War. In the sixth chapter, 'Disenchanted reality', the author tries to grasp Takahata's animated version of *The Grave of Fireflies*, which "represents an almost surreally calm, sepia-colored apocalypse that contains strong subliminal messages. Throughout the entire film, the viewer's gaze is constantly, regularly guided towards Setsuko and Seita's ghost-like figures, overflowed by red light reminiscent of the colour of the blood."

Reconstructing the idyllic landscape of Yamagata prefecture, the movie *Memories like Raindrops* (1991) (introduced in the chapter 'Conformism as an individual choice') appears as a nostalgic story of the beauty of *furusato* (hometown) and the fascination of the increasingly distant childhood. Takahata employs dynamic narrative lines and a fluid drawing style to display the domestic drama viewed through the lenses of psychological realism.

The chapter 'Nostalgia and humanism', imbued with the same longing for the *furusato*, is taking into account the movie *Ponpoko: The Heisei Tanuki War* (1994) for whom Takahata chooses the *tanuki* (raccoon dogs) as protagonists. However, besides the environmental concerns, the film expresses, on the one hand, the struggle to adapt to the flow of time (by reconsidering mythology and folklore) and, on the other hand, it is a subtle plea for life and its brief moments of happiness.

A cheerful family comedy, *Hôhokekyo: My Neighbours, the Yamadas* (1999), captured in the chapter 'Optimism as healing', talks in a gentle, yet serious manner of the importance of family as a balanced set of aspirations. In spite of its box office failure, the generous message of this film still stands: embrace life and other humans in their unconditional uniqueness.

With the turn of the century/millennium, Takahata's style has also changed, as the chapter 'Transcendent predictably' suggests. Based on *Taketori Monogatari* ("The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter"), a 10th century Japanese folk-tale, the film *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (2013) tackles the "feminine woman" in an empowering and liberating manner, transcending the fears and limitations imposed by the feminist

discourse. In soft, emotional strokes, Takahata urges us to ponder on the concept of love as a core element of the female identity.

In the end, a warning... Please do not be deceived by the simplicity of the title of this book because within its pages you will find a treasure of hand-picked information, thorough research, spiritually awakening ideas, original interdisciplinary scholarship and an emotional-mental intake which usher the readers into the discrete magic of Takahata Isao's works.

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