

The Advent of Anime Philosophy: Hayao Miyazaki and Neighborliness

Hitoshi OGAWA

In this article, first of all, I want to propose the possibility of “anime philosophy” as a new genre. When we hear the word “philosophy,” we usually think of reading difficult classic books. Especially in academic society, this is a mainstream idea. However, philosophy has more possibilities because it means seeking the essence through thinking. In that sense, we could philosophize not just by reading difficult books, but by watching anime films, as well. Indeed, some kinds of anime works are more philosophical than traditional philosophy books. Miyazaki Hayao’s anime films are such examples because they always make me philosophize about his deeper thoughts behind his work. Second of all, in order to prove my hypothesis, I want to focus on the concept of “neighborliness,” as the essence of Miyazaki’s anime. One of my intentions is to propose neighborliness as a global philosophy which was born in Japan and could be applied even in the global society. In the end, I want to broaden my horizons to world peace. The world is suffering from some persistent global issues, including wars, terrorist attacks, environmental problems, and poverty. I truly believe anime philosophy as symbolized by the concept of neighborliness will solve those problems. We shouldn’t face the problem directly all the time. We sometimes need to neighbor each other. This brings us to a completely new perspective.

The Advent of Anime Philosophy: Hayao Miyazaki and Neighborliness

Hitoshi OGAWA

Introduction

When we hear the word “philosophy,” we usually think of reading difficult classic books. Especially in academic society, this is a mainstream idea. However, philosophy has more possibilities because it means seeking the essence through thinking. In that sense, we could philosophize not just by reading difficult books, but by watching anime films, as well. It is possible to philosophize and enjoy films at the same time.

I love Hayao Miyazaki’s anime films because they always make me philosophize about his deeper thoughts behind his work. Therefore, in this article, through analysis of Miyazaki’s anime, I want to broaden the scope of philosophy by opening a new genre, “anime philosophy.”

I want to situate the concept of neighborliness, as the essence of Miyazaki’s anime. My purpose is to propose neighborliness as a new philosophical concept which was born in Japan and could even be applied in the global society. In the end, I want to broaden my horizons to world peace because the concept of neighborliness could solve a lot to which Western society is powerless: wars, terrorist attacks, environmental problems, and poverty.

I depend on the reader’s evaluation to say whether my attempt went well or not. However, in two international conferences, which inspired me to write this article, I was honored with approval from the audience. Judging from those responses, I guess I am not going in the totally wrong direction.

Moreover, I have already published my result of anime philosophy practice in Japan, as a book titled *Philosophizing Through Ghibli Anime*.¹ I am grateful to say that this book has also been met with approval. Nevertheless, as this is my first time to explain the logic of anime philosophy from an academic viewpoint in a paper, I believe this article is significant in this sense.

1. An Experiment

Did you know anime could be philosophical? Anime is a good source of philosophy -just as good as philosophical texts. When we compare the feeling of watching anime to the experience of reading philosophy books, there is a contrast between the two. Have you ever watched the classic anime by Miyazaki, *My Neighbor Totoro*? How did you feel afterwards? If you are like most audiences, you must have enjoyed it. If you haven't watched the film, I would highly suggest that you do to fully appreciate this article.

This is a short excerpt from Tetsuro Watsuji's *Rinrigaku*. He is one of the most famous Japanese philosophers. Let's read a little.

Simply speaking, we exist in our daily life in the being in betweenness. Moreover, this being in betweenness is, from the commonsense standpoint, grasped from two angles. The first is that betweenness is constituted "among" individual persons.²

This is just an experiment. You don't need to read the entire text. From what you have read, I think you understood it was philosophical.

Another example; this is worse. Hegel, a top philosopher in the modern era. Read this quote:

Ethical life is the Idea of freedom in that on the one hand it is the good becomes alive ---the good endowed in self-consciousness with knowing and willing and actualized by self-conscious action.³

You probably know where this is going. I am convinced that these three examples, including *My Neighbor Totoro*, are philosophy. But you must have felt some difference among them, especially between *Totoro* and the other two. The substance of this difference is what I want to propose here. I will just introduce the conclusion first. "Anime philosophy" is a new genre and Hayao Miyazaki is an anime philosopher who has produced many works as philosophy.

2. What's Anime Philosophy?

Before deepening the topic, let me clarify the meaning of “anime as a topic of philosophy.” I analyze that there are three kinds of relationships between anime and philosophy. Number one: philosophizing about anime itself. I mean asking “What is anime?” Number two: philosophizing about each anime work, for example, by asking “What is the meaning of this film?” These two are traditional philosophy. Number three is philosophizing through anime works as philosophy. This is what I want to do in this article. I want to call this “anime philosophy.” On one hand, when you watched *Totoro*, you thought something, right? That is anime philosophy. On the other hand, when you read Watsuji or Hegel and thought about its meaning - that is traditional philosophy.

What are the features of anime philosophy? While traditional philosophy consists of text and truth, anime philosophy consists of animation and fiction. Evidence of this is found in a book written by Taihei Imamura, who is a pioneer of anime film theory. In his legendary book, *Anime Film Theory*, Imamura says as follows:

It's amazing that pictures can move. This is all that moving pictures can provide us. And this is the essence of the films and an active picture itself. [...]. On the contrary, anime film is two-dimensional. This is extremely beneficial to the imagination of anime films. The audience has previous knowledge that the pictures they are about to see are not real. Therefore, they expect an experience not close to reality, but far from reality. Here, the laws of real life are ignored and ideas that don't exist in reality could persistently exist. It is an alternative world which is different from ours.⁴

Such different features between traditional philosophy and anime philosophy influence the difference of the purposes. In other words, this is the difference of what we get from them. The purpose of traditional philosophy is to seek clear truth, but the purpose of anime philosophy is to seek alternative truth, which is “ambiguous truth” like hope, future, potential, and illusion. As a result, anime philosophy has the potential to express what we cannot express with text and truth.

Live action films are similar to anime in terms of visual images. But they are less fictional because they involve real people or animals. In that sense, anime is more quintessential as an alternative to reality. We can think of several combinations of

forms and contents. When we describe fiction through text, it becomes a novel and produces clear truth. When we describe truth by animation, it becomes a documentary and produces clear truth. So, only when we depict fiction by animation, does it become anime and produces ambiguous truth. As for films other than anime, they are similar because they consist of continuous progress and fiction. But, the extent of ambiguity in live action films is lower because these films are less fictional than anime films.

Regarding this point, when I gave a presentation on this topic, a famous movie critic, Aaron Gerow, pointed out one critical issue.⁵ He says that from the viewpoint of auteurism, there is no difference between text and animation. As you may know, auteurism refers to the idea that all expressions in a film can be linked to the director's philosophy. It is certain that auteurism is effective when we analyze the film itself. However, when we compare anime to philosophy books, unfortunately, it becomes a violent device because that kind of perspective not only prevents us from focusing on the essential difference between anime and text, but it also ignores the differences in thinking which occur in the receiver's mind.

3. A Philosopher, Hayao Miyazaki?

Next, I want to explore concrete mechanisms of anime philosophy, how we think things and how we understand things, using anime as philosophy. I think the main characteristics of anime are pictures and continuous progress.⁶ The film is continuing at its own speed. So, when we watch anime, we are synchronizing with the work. Consequently, as compared to traditional philosophy, it brings more direct and intuitive understanding of things.⁷ This is philosophy by sensibility rather than reason. Actually, you did this subconsciously while watching *My Neighbor Totoro*. Did you notice?

Of course, we cannot recognize all anime works as philosophy. Only anime works by animators as philosophers can be categorized as "philosophy." Typical examples are Miyazaki's anime works, including *My Neighbor Totoro*. What about other anime works? This is as difficult as meeting the criteria of philosophers. Hegel is a philosopher, but what about Jacques Derrida? Some still say Derrida is just an author, not a philosopher. I think there are two factors to consider when we judge whether someone is a philosopher or not. One is a depth of thinking. It should contain profound substance. This is still subjective. The other is the amount of evaluation by other

people. This is objective.

According to my criteria, some others like Hideaki Anno, director of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, should also be philosophized, but they haven't been evaluated as highly as Miyazaki. On the other hand, Osamu Tezuka is a philosopher; he is famous for *Astro Boy* and *Phoenix*.

By the way, what makes Miyazaki a philosopher? His title is not "philosopher," but he has sought the truth and expressed what he thought through anime, not by books or theses. That's why people think he is just an animator, although he has philosophized. We tend to classify people by their titles. Some might say Miyazaki doesn't write texts which are essential for philosophy. I admit text has been essential for philosophy in the past. However, now we live in a new era with not just text, but also movies and even virtual reality. We have to consider philosophy without text if we want to continue philosophy. As the media has evolved, the presentation of philosophy has evolved as well. A study that doesn't evolve is fated to be forgotten.

Since Miyazaki has been engaged in so many works in his life, let me narrow the target of our study. When we talk about Miyazaki's thoughts, I think these 10 anime works should be examined: *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Castle in the Sky*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Porco Rosso*, *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, and *The Wind Rises*. All of these were directed and written by Miyazaki. Only when a certain work is both directed and written by Miyazaki can we say that work is "his."

How about other Ghibli works? Anime works are made by a lot of staff members. When we philosophize Miyazaki, we need to be strict about the definition of his work. In that sense, a script should also be written by the director. Original stories of some works I introduced are written by other people. However, we can say screenplays are completely different from original stories because original stories are just materials to philosophize for scriptwriters. For this reason, Miyazaki's works mentioned above are the target of anime philosophy here.

4. What's Miyazaki's Philosophy?: Philosophy of Neighborness

Then, what is Miyazaki's philosophy? I want to examine this question, using the concept of "wind" as a clue. In *Reconsidering Hayao Miyazaki*, Manabu Murase, a

literature scholar, says as follows:

Hayao Miyazaki's feature-length films started with *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and ended with *The Wind Rises*. Or we should say he started with wind and ended with wind.⁸

Yes, wind even symbolizes Miyazaki's life. The title of one of his biographies is *Kaze no kaeru basho* or *Where the Wind Blows*. Actually, in almost all his works, wind has played an important role, which is the role of mediacy.

Wind brings us many things: smells, information, happiness, and even death. Speaking of information, in Japan we have an expression, *kaze no tayori*, which literally means "a letter of wind." Especially in Miyazaki's works, wind brings destiny which protagonists cannot control. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, wind was an indispensable factor to living in the rotten sea. In *Castle in the Sky*, strong wind was like a divine test to reach the truth. In *My Neighbor Totoro*, wind helped Satsuki and Mei. In *Kiki's Delivery Service*, Kiki couldn't fly without wind. In *Howl's Moving Castle*, "howl" itself means the sound of wind. In *The Wind Rises*, wind was a catalyst for Jiro and Nahoko meeting, while it was also a metaphor for World War II.

We are always surrounded by wind. In other words, we live with wind. Miyazaki expressed this wind in all of his works.⁹ How can we describe the substance of such wind? I would say *My Neighbor Totoro* depicts it. That is the concept of the neighbor. As depicted in *My Neighbor Totoro*, "neighborliness" is like a spirit which surrounds us. In *Studio Ghibli*, Colin Odell & Michelle Le Blanc write about a symbolic scene which is expressing neighborliness.

Totoro joins them and the girls give him their umbrella when his leaf-based broom proves somewhat ineffectual. The film's iconic moment is this dialogue-free scene of three waiting in the downpour.¹⁰

This is one of the most memorable scenes in the film. After this, Totoro supported the protagonists. Totoro prayed for the growth of trees because that is Satsuki and Mei's dream, and trees appeared next to their house. This is the symbol of neighborliness as a possibility. That kind of miraculous thing could happen, more importantly just next

to us. Everything has a possibility as neighborliness. For example, in the film, a spinning top flew to the sky like a flying vehicle. That was also a realization of the possibility. Totoro seemed as if he were a god of wind. We might be able to say neighborliness is the substance of wind. "We are the wind." This phrase implies Totoro is a wind as an intermediation because Satsuki and Mei are part of Totoro in the sky. This is how neighborliness appears in our life. In that sense, neighborliness is similar to a god, but it is not the same as God. In *On Hayao Miyazaki*, Shunsuke Sugita, a critic, says as follows:

Monsters and eight million gods "neighbor" us. They just stay there. Some things which we don't know their identities and names just "neighbor" us, and as it turns out we are allowed to live by them; this is Miyazaki's basic sense of existence.¹¹

Neighborliness exists around us as an absolute exterior or the fourth existence for ourselves, others, and gods. Neighborliness always stays with us and gives us possibilities not only in a good way, but also in a bad way.

Sugita interestingly indicates that anime as fiction has a meaning of neighborliness for the real world.¹² If I follow this insight, I think the philosophy of neighborliness could be situated as an alternative to mainstream philosophy like Western philosophy. Therefore, the potential of this alternative philosophy should be argued. I might be getting off track. Let's go back to the topic.

5. Mediatory Sensibility

We can say neighborliness is an intermediation for the existence of human beings. Or we can say human beings have such a mediatory sensibility like neighborliness. Mediatory sensibility is likely a core of Miyazaki's philosophy or philosophy of neighborliness. Can we see the philosophy of neighborliness in all of Miyazaki's works? Yes, we can. Of course, even when Totoro doesn't appear in the other films, something as neighborliness is depicted in all his movies. Mainly, it is wind.

We can say when we see Miyazaki's works that we are synchronizing with such neighborliness by using sensibility.¹³ This sensibility should be called mediatory sensibility, which intermediates us with the object.¹⁴ Mediatory sensibility makes it possible for us to empathize with the work and we can feel neighborliness in the film or

recognize the film as neighborliness.

This kind of mediatory sensibility must be a feature of Japanese sensibility. Japanese people coexist with nature as mediacy. Furthermore, Japanese people feel things through *kehai*, or intimation. Moreover, mediatory sensibility can be seen in a lot of traditional Japanese cultural works including Mononohare in *The Tale of Genji* or some Waka poems like the those by Sugawara no Michizane.

Is a mediatory sensibility just one aspect of Japanese sensibility? It's not the only characteristic of Japanese sensibility, but apparently the main one. Here I want to confirm the meaning of sensibility. In *Japanese Sensibility*, Kenichi Sasaki says that sensibility is reverberation under the skin of human beings.¹⁵ The question is, with what does it reverberate? It's experience. Since we have experienced spring, we can feel spring by warmer wind. That's why Sasaki says sensibility is the activation of the memory embedded in human bodies by responding to stimulation. I agree with this definition. However, if it's true, we have a problem now because Miyazaki doesn't depict the world just from the human viewpoint. If Japanese sensibility is a human experience, then how can he describe it from a nonhuman viewpoint?

The clue here is Miyazaki's organicism. In Miyazaki's world, human beings, the earth, and even gods are depicted as if they were one organic body. This organic body produces reverberation under the skin. In fact, he often emphasizes the importance of the viewpoint of other creatures aside from human beings. In a public lecture for kids, Miyazaki has said that for anime, what's important is to expand human beings' five senses to the non-human phase, that is, to depict the world as bees see it by really entering into the bee's world.¹⁶ This may be related to the anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, and metamorphosis that Miyazaki often uses in his works.

Incidentally, it is his organicism that explains Miyazaki's difficult and, on the face of it, contradictory expressions - for example, distorted reconciliation between nature and civilization, acceptance of war as a fact and his aloof description of battle scenes, the glorification of grotesque beauty, and anti-anthropocentrism. Some say this is his sense of balance, but I disagree. Rather, this is similar to "the sense of earth" by Manabu Murase. Murase says Miyazaki has a perspective which can sense earth-scale matters from daily small matters within a 3-meter radius.¹⁷

That's why Miyazaki's sensibility, which is a Japanese one, could be globally sympathized. As Sasaki said, sensibility is based on our experience. This is true, and all

of the experience Miyazaki depicts is universal because of his organicism.¹⁸ This makes it possible for everybody or even every creature to sympathize with his sensibility. Even your pet watching Miyazaki's film with you might be sympathizing; you are just not aware of it. Seriously. Who knows?

In this sense, neighborliness is different from other similar Western concepts, for example, "Mitsein" by Martin Heidegger or a concept of coexistence. Rather, it considers all kinds of existence including existence which doesn't exist in this world. Neighborliness might resemble the "vengeful ghost," or *yurei*, which ruled Japanese society until the medieval era. In the past, people believed in the vengeful ghost as part of their reality. Totoro is also a kind of ghost. Therefore, neighborliness is an extremely Japanese concept. If I say this, some might think neighborliness is the same as the animism which has existed in Japan. What's the relationship with animism? It is certain that Miyazaki's films are fully or partially imbued with animism. Regarding this topic, in *Miyazaki's Animism Abroad*, Eriko Ogihara-Schuck points out the relationship between Miyazaki's anime and animism as follows:

Miyazaki's commitment to the topic of animism both inside and outside his films has been part of the wider animism discourse in Japan since the 1980s.¹⁹

In this regard, we may be able to connect neighborliness to animism. For example, animism is partially overlapping with the philosophy of neighborliness because animism requires respect for nature as a neighbor. However, neighborliness is not the same as worship. It is a possibility or more like a situation. Animism is attribution or thought. We can also say animism has a vector, but neighborliness does not. Animism is something human beings have. Oppositely, neighborliness is something that just exists around human beings. As we have examined here, neighborliness is an extremely unique concept in the history of philosophy.

6. A Remaining Problem and Possibility of Miyazaki's Philosophy

After all, what's the uniqueness of Miyazaki's philosophy as compared to that of two other traditional philosophers, Hegel and Watsuji? I just want to point out some important differences. Of course, among those three only Miyazaki's philosophy

is anime philosophy. And its main concept is philosophy of neighborliness which requires sensibility rather than reason. As for the results, I think, in general, Japanese philosophy has a tremendous potential to lead to global peace.

For example, while Hegel's philosophy leads to the affirmation of war or severe competition of capitalism, Watsuji's philosophy could propose "one world" through the dialectic of worldwide structural relation. However, this is not enough. For me, his "one world" just means globalism in which everything is the same color. On the contrary, Miyazaki's philosophy can lead to world peace. I'm going to conclude by talking about this.

The problem here is an inevitable underestimation of anime. However great Miyazaki's philosophy is, people tend to think anime is just a form of entertainment, especially for kids. Therefore, we need to sublimate it by philosophizing. This is the reason why I tried to introduce Miyazaki as a philosopher in this paper. This attitude will illuminate his anime as a philosophy.

If we succeeded in this project, Miyazaki's philosophy could be beneficial to world peace. The merit of the philosophy of neighborliness is a possibility to seek the ambiguous truth. Especially when we philosophize Miyazaki's works, we can sympathize with each other or even with all things, due to mediatory sensibility and his organicism. This could lead to world peace.

Actually, many people point out the message for peace in Miyazaki's works. Daisuke Akimoto is one such person. In *Peace Theory of Hayao Miyazaki*, he says as follows:

Among Japanese anime works, I think no other contains more various 'messages for peace' such as the importance of life and peace, fear of war, ugliness of killing each other, wonderfulness of coexistence with nature and so on as in Miyazaki's Ghibli anime.²⁰

He is right, but besides these particular factors Miyazaki's philosophy has more fundamental potential for peace, especially global peace. There is no philosophy that everybody in the world can sympathize with beyond nationalities and generation until now.

Conclusion

My intention was to propose a new concept of philosophy, which is anime philosophy. Neighborliness symbolizes the potential of this new philosophy. Anime philosophy could provide us with an alternative truth that we haven't sought and even world peace that we haven't achieved. Before Miyazaki, anime was just a form of entertainment. However, since Miyazaki, anime has become philosophy. Then, anime was literally animated to change the world. Now, anime might be the only hope in the darkness, where people have lost everything. Let's celebrate together the advent of philosopher Hayao Miyazaki.

Notes

1. Hitoshi Ogawa, *Philosophizing Through Ghibli Anime: Hints to Change Your Perspective of the World*, PHP, 2017.
2. Watsuji Tetsurō, *Watsuji Tetsurō's Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter, State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 57.
3. G.W.F.Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford University Press, 1943, p. 105.
4. Taihei Imamura, *Anime Film Theory*, Iwanami Shoten, 1992, pp. 7, 21-22.
5. Aaron Gerow, a professor at Yale University pointed out this issue in the Media Studies and Popular Culture in Contemporary Japan Conference convened at Syracuse University on Saturday, February 25, 2017.
6. If Gilles Deleuze's concept "image," is the same as my concept of continuous progress and his concept, "signe" is the same as the philosophy of sensibility, I agree with him. However, if he says all "cinemas" as film are philosophy, I disagree. We have to separate films as objects of philosophy from films as philosophy.
7. Music philosophy could exist. In this case, as long as the content is philosophical, the logic is the same as anime philosophy. But, we would use a different sensibility because of the lack of visual images. VR (virtual reality) is just content made of fiction, so the logic of anime philosophy could be applied as long as it is provided as a form of continuous progress. If not, it is just an object of traditional philosophy.
8. Manabu Murase, *Reconsidering Hayao Miyazaki: From Future Boy Conan to Wind Rises*, Heibonsha, 2015, p. 250.
9. What about elements besides wind? Yes, of course, Miyazaki deals with other elements, including fire, water, stone, and iron. All these natural elements surround human beings, but

wind is the most symbolic one as a mediatory element, which can lead to the philosophy of neighborliness. Only wind was depicted in every movie as an important factor. Intermediation is an important factor in Miyazaki's film. In that sense, wind is the most suitable factor for intermediation.

10. Colin Odell & Michelle Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The Films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata*, Kamera Books, 2015, p. 78.

11. Shunsuke Sugita, *On Hayao Miyazaki: Stories on Gods and Children*, NHK Shuppan, 2014, p. 72.

12. *Ibid.*, p.69.

13. What's the difference between sensibility and sensitivity? Sensitivity is a more active reaction in our mind. It's a personality. Sensitivity is not related to culture. Its extent changes depending on a person's character. There are some people who are easily moved emotionally.

14. Regarding intermediation, what does it mediate with? It mediates with the self and the rest of the world because we can feel self-aware enough to separate ourselves from those we label as others. Despite this, everything is a part of one organic body.

15. Kenichi Sasaki, *Japanese Sensibility: Structure of an Antenna and Sliding*, Chuokoronshinsha, 2010, p. 10.

16. Sugita, *On Hayao Miyazaki*, pp. 83-84.

17. Murase, *Reconsidering Hayao Miyazaki*, p. 9.

18. Miyazaki also depicts other topics which are not related to Japan. Nonetheless, do they contain Japanese sensibility? Yes, they do because superficial settings are not so important. Regardless of what Miyazaki depicts, it always has to do with Japanese topics to some extent.

19. Eriko Ogihara-Schuck, *Miyazaki's Animism Abroad: The Reception of Japanese Religious Themes by American and German Audiences*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014, p. 33.

20. Daisuke Akimoto, *Peace Theory of Hayao Miyazaki*, Shogakukan, 2014, p.219.