

## The long goodbye

[Kate Barlow](#) looks back on the life and career of Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki

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The decision to quit while still ahead is an underrated one in the modern age. So frequently do we see our heroes grow old disgracefully, and whether it be musician, actor, writer, or director, we see their talents crumble as they attempt to hold onto their dwindling fame.

Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki's decision to retire at the age of 73 following the release of his final, and most controversial, film *The Wind Rises*, the tale of fighter-pilot designer Jiro Horikoshi, therefore comes as a welcome change. Although the film animation industry will be lacking following his departure, to see someone finish their illustrious career with a flourish, rather than a gradual bumbling decline, is a rare thing.

Miyazaki is incontestably one of cinema's greats. His most popular offering, *Spirited Away*, is the highest grossing film in Japan, the first to gross \$200m worldwide, and received an Oscar for best animated film. His cinematic prowess has been compared to the likes of Walt Disney, Nick Park and Steven Spielberg. The foundation of Studio Ghibli alongside Isao Takahata in Tokyo in 1985 kick started Miyazaki's animation career. The studio went on to make 19 feature films, eight of which are directed by Miyazaki.

Miyazaki takes an extremely active role in the creative process of his films, often acting as both writer and director. What makes them so extraordinary is the overwhelming effort put into the process: Miyazaki is an advocate of traditional animation with each frame being drawn painstakingly by hand (with the exception of *Princess Mononoke* where computer-generated imagery was used for both time and creative reasons). In his early days, the filmmaker even insisted on personally reviewing each frame used, a duty he only delegated to others with age and health concerns. Ghibli productions frequently contest American

animation methods, developing scripts and storylines together, using watercolour images, and offering more complex moral lessons than their Disney-clad counterparts, giving each film a more personal human touch.

As with a number of great filmmakers, Miyazaki's career isn't short of controversy. In 2003 he refused to attend the Academy Awards to claim his well-deserved statue for *Spirited Away* based on America's involvement in Iraq. He doesn't sway from broad political themes, with pacifism, feminism, and environmentalism all cropping up throughout his work. More recently, the release of *The Wind Rises* sparked debate over his take on a man who went onto develop the Japanese fighter planes used in World War II: the Japanese government claimed he was 'Anti-Japanese' while others have accused the film of glorifying the country's war effort.

While Miyazaki is a household name in Japan, his films only began to hit the western world after the release of *Princess Mononoke* in 1997. However, his influence expands further than just the big screen. His impact on Japanese culture is enormous, as his animation style has become synonymous with the country's artistic movement, as seen in the eruption in popularity of manga in the last ten years. One of his previous childhood homes has now been turned into a museum dedicated to the works of Studio Ghibli, located in the Tokyo suburb of Mitaka.

No doubt the itching anticipation one feels upon the release of new a Miyazaki offering will be sorely missed. However, with eight perfectly constructed masterpieces under his belt, perhaps it is time for the Japanese master to step down and open the floor for new animation talents. Miyazaki's magic will be missed but certainly never forgotten; neither generation nor geography will undermine his influence.

While we may be saying goodbye to Miyazaki's directing career, he has stated that he is to continue with his manga illustrations and is set to begin work on a samurai series. Similarly, it is certainly not the end of Studio Ghibli who have recently expanded their power base by opening their first foreign office in Hong Kong.

After making at least six claims to have retired over the previous years, claimed which he shortly after revoked, the only question we have now: is this really the end for Miyazaki?



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