International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

The Animations of Hayao Miyazaki with Special Reference to the Child – Protagonists

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Abstract:
This research explores that Miyazaki's animated films consistently foreground child protagonists whose emotional journeys illuminate the complex relationships between humans, nature, and war. Through characters like Chihiro, Nausicaä, Ashitaka, and Mahito, Miyazaki depicts children navigating worlds fractured by human conflict and ecological imbalance, revealing how innocence becomes a site of resistance and renewal. His narratives portray childhood trauma - loss, displacement, fear - and simultaneously chart processes of healing, aided by supportive magical companions who guide, challenge, and morally sensitise the protagonists. These fantastical figures, whether spirits, animals, or hybrid beings, function as ethical catalysts, encouraging courage, empathy, and responsibility. Miyazaki's cinema thus works as a subtle mode of moral education, framing environmental ethics, pacifism, and emotional resilience through visually rich storytelling. This paper examines how Miyazaki constructs children as agents of transformation, using fantasy to critique violence and to propose harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world. Ultimately, the paper presents that Miyazaki's vision of childhood offers a universal philosophy of harmony, courage, and compassion - making his animated narratives both artistically profound and ethically inspiring.

Keywords: Hayao Miyazaki, Ghibli, Child Protagonists, Animation, anti-war

Objectives:

- To study the portrayal of strong leads and non-stereotypical roles of children
- To analyse how Miyazaki portrays childhood through imaginative and emotionally complex child protagonists.
- To explore the moral and psychological growth of children within his fantasy worlds.
- To study the relationship between children, nature, and ecological awareness in his films.
- To understand how Miyazaki's child-centred narratives convey universal values of empathy, courage, and harmony.

Methodology: The study follows a qualitative, analytical, and interpretative research design. It aims to explore the symbolic, psychological, and cultural dimensions of child protagonists in Hayao Miyazaki's animated films. Rather than measuring data quantitatively, the research emphasizes critical interpretation of visual narratives, character development, and thematic structures to understand Miyazaki's unique construction of childhood and morality.

Data Sources: The research relies primarily on secondary sources and film analysis:

Primary data (films): My Neighbor Totoro (1988), Kiki's Delivery Service (1989), Spirited Away (2001), Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984), and Ponyo (2008) and other movies.

Secondary data: Scholarly articles, interviews with Hayao Miyazaki, books on Studio Ghibli, film criticism, and cultural studies on Japanese animation, folklore, and studies related to ecological ethics.

Supporting resources: Documentaries like 'The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness', and essays on Japanese aesthetics, childhood, and environmental philosophy.

Review Literature: A comprehensive review of the literature on Hayao Miyazaki's films reveals extensive scholarly engagement spanning animation theory, cultural studies, environmental philosophy, and gender discourse. Major publications and research papers develop various critical perspectives on his visual language, storytelling ethics, and symbolic construction of worlds.

Dani Cavallaro's the Animé Art of Hayao Miyazaki (2006) and its sequels, The Late Works of Hayao Miyazaki (2014) and Hayao Miyazaki's World Picture (2015), trace his animation aesthetics, mythic structure, and recurring ecological motifs. Raz Greenberg's Hayao Miyazaki: Exploring the Early Work of Japan's Greatest Animator (2018) explores Miyazaki's Pre-Studio Ghibli career, analyzing developmental themes of idealism and historical imagination. Miyazaki's own writings, notably Starting Point: 1979–1996 (1996), collect his essays, interviews, and reflections on creative philosophy and the moral purpose of animation.

Shoko Yoneyama's Miyazaki Hayao's Animism and the Anthropocene (2021) connect films like Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, Princess Mononoke, and Spirited Away to ecological ethics and the critique of modern materialism through Japanese spiritual cosmologies. The paper The Films of Hayao Miyazaki: Shinto, Nature, and the Environment (Association for Asian Studies) situates his environmentalism within Shinto belief, interpreting nature as a moral and sentient force shaping human identity.

Recent sociohistorical approaches highlight Miyazaki's anti-war vision. A 2023 journal article, The Impact of War as Seen through Hayao Miyazaki's Ghibli Films, frames movies like Grave of the Fireflies and The Boy and the Heron as allegories of Japan's postwar pacifist identity, exploring how trauma reshapes collective cultural consciousness. Similarly, analyses note that Princess Mononoke's historical fantasy was inspired by real archaeological and ecological research, blending mythology with critique of imperial history.

The 2025 paper Female Agency in the Films of Hayao Miyazaki: Challenging Gender Norms in Japanese Fantasy examines the autonomy of female protagonists as a subversion of patriarchal storytelling traditions. It situates heroines like Chihiro, Nausicaä, and San within feminist discourse, emphasizing moral strength and relational ethics rather than domination.

The essay Experiencing the Elsewhere in Hayao Miyazaki's Films (2022) examines how spatial displacement and the motif of travel define Miyazaki's narrative imagination, drawing parallels with Gaston Bachelard's philosophy of poetic space. This approach emphasizes the interrelation between movement, identity formation, and aesthetic empathy as core traits of his cinematic language.

The Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli Bibliography (updated June 2025) compiles English-language academic works, including monographs and peer-reviewed articles addressing philosophy, adaptation, and

mythology in his films, such as Tomoki Sakata's study linking Spirited Away to Goethe's Bildungsroman and Nietzsche's Nihilism. Collectively, this bibliography confirms that Miyazaki's work now bridges anti-war approaches, environmental humanities, gender theory, mythological studies, and indigenous cultural identity.

Introduction: Hayao Miyazaki is a renowned Japanese animator, director, producer, screenwriter, author, and manga artist, widely considered one of the most influential figures in animation. His works are known for their lyrical storytelling, imaginative-magical worlds, and deep thematic exploration of human experience, nature, and indigenous culture. He is fundamentally anti-war, shaped by his childhood during World War II and his father's involvement in Japan's wartime aircraft industry. His work rejects militarism and national pride, expressing deep regret for Japan's war actions and a wish for peace, especially within his critiques of government attempts to re-militarize Japan. His pacifism appears across movies like Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984), Howl's Moving Castle, and The Wind Rises, in which war is depicted as destructive not only to humanity but to nature itself. Other notable films directed by him include My Neighbour Totoro (1988), Princess Mononoke (1997), and the Academy Award-winning Spirited Away (2001).
Using allegory and symbolic imagery, Miyazaki's films reinterpret Japan's wartime trauma through accessible, emotionally resonant stories. For example, Princess Mononoke frames ecological destruction as a form of spiritual warfare against life itself. His narratives often replace explicit violence with visual metaphors - flying machines, ruins, and natural disasters - underscoring how technological ambition and greed lead to devastation.

Miyazaki's Early Life and Post-War Japan: Miyazaki was born in 1941, during the height of World War II. His early childhood coincided with wartime hardships, including food shortages, bombings, and the general atmosphere of fear and instability. His father worked in an airplane parts manufacturing company for the military. Miyazaki often cited that seeing the machinery of war up close - the planes and industrial production - left a lasting impression on him. This familiarity with aviation and technology would later inspire his fascination with flight and flying machines in films like Porco Rosso and The Wind Rises.

Political and Social Context of Post-War Japan: Widespread destruction, poverty, and food shortages shaped the collective psyche of post-war children like Miyazaki. After Japan's surrender in 1945, the country was occupied by Allied forces (primarily the U.S.) until 1952. This period was marked by westernization and democratization. Japan adopted a pacifist constitution, which renounced war (Article 9) and emphasized peace. The trauma of atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki created a strong anti-war consciousness in Japanese society. This sentiment permeates Miyazaki's films, which often highlight the futility of war, the destruction it brings, and the human cost.

Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli: Miyazaki began his career at Toei Animation and worked on several projects before co-founding Studio Ghibli in 1985 with fellow director Isao Takahata and producer Toshio Suzuki. It emerged as a powerhouse of Japanese animation producing high-quality, hand-drawn animated films. The studio was named by Miyazaki after the Italian word Ghibli meaning a hot desert wind, symbolizing their aim to bring a fresh breeze to the anime industry. With core members Miyazaki,

Takahata, and Suzuki, the studio quickly gained acclaim for its unique storytelling, detailed animation, and emotionally rich films. Studio Ghibli has created around 20 feature films and numerous shorts, becoming globally beloved for its artistic quality, emotional depth, and appeal across ages. Their beloved movies often focus on themes such as the balance between humans and nature, the complexities of growing up, and cultural tradition versus progress. Miyazaki's retirement in 2013 was followed by a return with the film The Boy and the Heron (2023), reaffirming his lasting impact on the medium. Studio Ghibli remains a significant cultural force in animation worldwide, with a legacy shaped significantly by Miyazaki's visionary works and creative leadership.

Children protagonists in Miazaki's storytelling: Miyazaki respects children's intelligence, allowing them to explore and learn independently, while also showing the importance of parental support without constant supervision. His films emphasize childhood as a foundation for identity and self-esteem, portraying children as peers capable of insight and growth rather than mere dependents. Miyazaki's films frequently centre on these young protagonists who embody innocence amidst destruction. In many of his films, children act as moral agents navigating a world ravaged by conflict, using empathy rather than aggression to restore balance. Through their eyes, war becomes not a battleground of heroes and villains but a tragic consequence of fear and ignorance. This perspective emphasizes that moral courage originates not from military valour but from emotional intelligence and compassion. In many of his films, children or young protagonists become the moral anchors of war narratives. The Boy and the Heron (2023) and My Neighbor Totoro contrast war's external chaos with internal resilience, offering children protagonists who preserve empathy and imagination amid trauma. This approach turns children's cinema into moral education—using fantasy to cultivate emotional literacy about historical violence without desensitization or despair. Apart from this, Miyazaki often presents child protagonists who face normal anxieties and transitions of childhood, such as separation from parents and emotional challenges, in imaginative and symbolic ways. For example, his child characters, like Chihiro in Spirited Away, grapple with feelings they may initially suppress, such as fear and sadness, and grow into more responsible, mature individuals by overcoming these inner conflicts through magical, symbolic journeys.

Psychology of Children protagonists: Hayao Miyazaki's children protagonists serve as profound psychological vessels for exploring trauma, war, and resilience. His films convert childhood suffering into imaginative acts of healing and moral awakening, making them powerful studies in how children internalize and survive wartime realities. Using theories such as Stuart Hall's representation model and Roland Barthes' semiotics, scholars describe Miyazaki's depiction of trauma as an encoding process where visuals, symbols, and narrative patterns reshape lived memory. For example, in From Up on Poppy Hill, Umi's gestures - raising signal flags for her lost father - become semiotic acts of remembrance and unspoken grief, embodying post-traumatic stress through habitual motion and visual rhythm. These scenes translate silent emotional suffering into visible, culturally resonant imagery.
His works portray post-war trauma through the lens of childhood. Grave of the Fireflies reveals how war transforms childhood into confrontation with existential despair - trauma reshaping reality itself through horror and loss. In The Boy and the Heron, Mahito's grief over his mother's death and estrangement from his stepmother translate into a surreal inner journey that mirrors collective trauma. The film uses fantasy as a symbolic structure for mourning, suggesting that psychological healing requires accepting emotional complexity rather than erasing painful memory.

Additionally, the emotional and psychological journey of children in his films often includes facing societal and environmental threats, highlighting themes of innocence, courage, and the struggle to maintain one's inner child in the face of adult pressures. Overall, Miyazaki's depiction of children is complex, compassionate, and deeply rooted in psychological realism and symbolic growth.

Act of Healing and Catharsis: Miyazaki's child protagonists also function within a therapeutic framework: they navigate fantasy worlds that serve as safe realms for confronting emotional wounds. The lush visual art of Studio Ghibli, rich in colour and texture, offers what researchers recognize as a form of visual therapy, helping both characters and audiences process grief through beauty and tranquillity. Catharsis arises when children find renewal in reconciling with loss, a narrative cycle that affirms survival and hope amid devastation.

In analytical terms, Miyazaki constructs an ethical and psychological language of resilience through his child protagonists. Their journeys translate trauma into imagination, reconciling personal loss with collective memory. This synthesis of pacifism, fantasy, and child consciousness allows Miyazaki's cinema to stand as one of the most humanist explorations of wartime trauma ever rendered in animation - teaching that survival, for both child and world, depends on empathy rather than enmity.

Salient Features of Miazaki's storytelling: Hayao Miyazaki's storytelling in animation is characterized by his frequent use of children as protagonists, whose journey through the narrative reflects themes of innocence, growth, and resilience. These child characters are portrayed as good-hearted, confident in their own agency, and capable of facing adversity with optimism and resourcefulness. Miyazaki often depicts these young protagonists as independent, sometimes orphaned or separated from parental figures, which emphasizes their autonomy and allows them to navigate challenges and the world on their own terms. This independence is seen as essential for promoting children's self-reliance and growth, drawing inspiration from classical children's literature where children fend for themselves.

Miyazaki's films do not simplify complex issues but instead tackle them in a manner accessible to children, incorporating themes like environmental protection, pacifism, and the role of women, among others. His storytelling often includes moments of childhood innocence juxtaposed with the anxiety and challenges of growing up, such as fear, loss, and responsibility. For instance, in films like "Castle in the Sky," "My Neighbor Totoro," and "Spirited Away," children navigate unfamiliar worlds, face moral dilemmas, and develop courage and leadership qualities, all while maintaining their essential curiosity and inner spirit.

A distinctive aspect of Miyazaki's style is that he does not burden his child protagonists with the expectation of saving the world; instead, their focus on personal growth and survival allows the story to convey empowerment naturally. His child characters experience real emotions such as fear, doubt, and selfishness but consistently show growth by learning from mistakes and facing their fears. This treatment fosters a deep emotional engagement between the audience and the characters, as children watching can relate to these struggles and triumphs on a personal level.

Overall, Miyazaki's storytelling with child protagonists embodies a philosophy that respects children as capable and complex individuals. His films are celebrated for their gentle pacing, lyrical visuals, and use of childhood perspectives to explore profound themes, making them resonant for audiences of all ages. Brief is as follows;

- **Reflections of War:** Miyazaki's films frequently explore war, militarism, and environmental destruction, often indirectly.

- **Anti-war Themes:** Films like Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind and Howl's Moving Castle portray the devastation of war and critique its senselessness. They focus on human greed, the destructiveness of power, and the moral dilemmas of technology.
- **Empathy and Innocence:** Child protagonists in Miyazaki's films often navigate war-torn or politically unstable worlds. This reflects his own post-war generation's experience of growing up in uncertainty and witnessing the effects of conflict from a civilian perspective.
- **Aviation and Technology:** While fascinated by planes and machines, Miyazaki often juxtaposes technological marvels with their destructive potential, reflecting his father's wartime factory work and Japan's industrial-military legacy.
- **Shōwa Era Trauma:** The Shōwa era (1926–1989) encompassed Japan's imperial ambitions, wartime devastation, and post-war recovery. Miyazaki's work often echoes the tension between tradition and modernization, human ambition versus nature, and moral responsibility versus societal pressure—issues central to post-war Japan.
- **Environmental Consciousness:** The destruction of land during wartime and post-war industrialization inspired Miyazaki's environmental themes (Princess Mononoke, Nausicaä), where human exploitation mirrors the historical devastation Japan experienced.

Table-1: Significant animations and their protagonists' description

Animation Film	Year	Protagonist Character	Protagonists' Act	Film Synopsis
Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind Image 1	1984	Nausicaä	Protecting nature and bringing peace between humans and toxic forests	In a post-apocalyptic world, Princess Nausicaä seeks harmony between humanity and the poisonous ecosystem, opposing war and destruction.
Castle in the Sky	1986	Sheeta & Pazu	Searching for the mythical floating city of Laputa	Two children race against pirates and the military to uncover the secrets of a floating island holding ancient technology.
My Neighbor Totoro	1988	Satsuki & Mei	Discovering magical forest spirits	Two sisters explore rural Japan and meet gentle forest spirit Totoro, finding comfort amid their mother's illness.
Kiki's Delivery Service	1989	Kiki	Achieving independence through work and self-discovery	A young witch starts a flying delivery service in a new city, learning confidence and self-reliance.
Porco Rosso	1992	Porco Rosso Marco Pagot	Battling air pirates and inner disillusionment	A World War I pilot cursed to look like a pig becomes a bounty hunter, confronting lost ideals and love.

Princess Mononoke Image 2	1997	Ashitaka & San	Restoring balance between nature and human industry	A cursed prince mediates between forest gods and an iron-mining community amid ecological and moral conflict.
Spirited Away	2001	Chihiro (Sen)	Surviving and maturing in a spirit world	A 10-year-old girl enters a magical bathhouse world to rescue her parents turned into pigs, finding courage and identity.
Howl's Moving Castle Image 3	2004	Sophie & Howl	Overcoming curse and finding love	A young woman cursed with old age enters the mysterious moving castle of wizard Howl and discovers inner strength amid war
Ponyo	2008	Ponyo & Sosuke	Love and balance between human and nature worlds	A goldfish-girl desires to become human, causing chaos in the natural world that can only be restored by true love.
The Wind Rises	2013	Jiro Horikoshi	Pursuing dreams versus moral consequences	Based on a real engineer, Jiro dreams of creating beautiful airplanes while facing the tragedy of war.
The Boy and the Heron	2023	Mahito	Coping with grief and self-realization through fantasy	A boy grieving his mother's death is drawn into a surreal world through a talking heron, confronting loss and legacy.

The Ambience and Magical Character of Hayao Miyazaki's Films: Hayao Miyazaki, the visionary co-founder of Studio Ghibli, has created a cinematic universe where reality and fantasy coexist in seamless harmony. The ambience of his films is uniquely immersive—gentle, nostalgic, and filled with a sense of wonder that transcends age and culture. Each frame of a Miyazaki film feels alive, breathing with wind, rustling leaves, drifting clouds, and the quiet hum of nature. This organic stillness often serves as a spiritual counterpoint to the chaos of modern life, inviting viewers to slow down and listen to the world's subtler rhythms.

Miyazaki's magical characters are not mere fantasy beings; they embody moral and emotional truths. From the forest spirit Totoro to the mysterious No-Face in Spirited Away, his creations often blur the boundaries between good and evil, innocence and corruption. Their magic is not only supernatural but also deeply humane, rooted in empathy, ecological awareness, and transformation. Even his young protagonists - such as Chihiro, Kiki, or Sophie - discover strength through compassion rather than conflict, reinforcing the idea that growth is an internal, spiritual journey.

The ambience of Miyazaki's worlds combines traditional Japanese aesthetics with universal themes of wonder, loss, and renewal. Whether it's the floating islands of Laputa: Castle in the Sky or the lush forests of Princess Mononoke, his landscapes are charged with the sacred energy of life itself. This delicate

balance of realism and fantasy creates a timeless cinematic experience - one that transforms the ordinary into the magical and reveals the hidden beauty of existence.

Ultimately, Miyazaki's films remind us that magic is not an escape from reality but a way of perceiving it with heightened awareness and love. His cinematic ambience - tranquil yet powerful - makes his work a meditation on humanity's fragile but enduring connection to nature and imagination.

Table-2: Supportive characters' (fictional) description

Film Name	**Supportive Character(s) & their Features**	**Significance**
Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind	**Ohmu**: (giant insects), intelligent, protective	Magical creatures symbolize nature's intelligence and moral complexity. Ohmu emphasizes environmental responsibility and empathy.
	Teto: (fox-squirrel) small companion	
	God Warriors: destructive relics of past war	
Castle in the Sky	**Robot guardians:** (Laputian tech)	Protective, intelligent, loyal
My Neighbor Totoro	**Totoro:** Gentle forest spirit	Totoro embodies the magic of childhood imagination and the spiritual connection to nature. Provides comfort and wonder to children during times of stress.
	Catbus: large, furry, silent, playful	
Spirited Away	**No-Face:** mysterious, shape-shifting reflects greed	Magical beings reflect moral and emotional truths. No-Face embodies human greed and loneliness; Haku guides the protagonist, highlighting trust and friendship.
	Haku: loyal dragon, protector	
	Yubaba: strict witch	
	Boh: oversized baby mouse	
Kiki's Delivery Service	**Jiji:** talking cat companion	Jiji provides comic relief and emotional support. Magic is subtle, symbolic of personal growth.
Princess Mononoke	**Moro:** wolf goddess, wise, fierce,	They highlight the conflict between human industrialization and ecological balance. Magical beings represent the sacredness and fragility of nature.
	Nago: Boar God, revengeful	
	Tatarigami (cursed boar): destructive, vengeful	
	Kodama: small tree spirits, silent, ethereal	
	Deer God: (Forest's protector): free spirit	
	Monkey Gods: destructive, vengeful	
Howl's Moving Castle	**Calcifer:** loyal, fiery demon	Magic is tied to identity, love, and transformation. Calcifer binds Howl's heart metaphorically, reflecting human vulnerabilities.
	Witch of barren lands: greedy & wrathful	
	Scare crow: Sophie's helper and companion	
The Wind Rises	**Caproni:** mentor figure in dreams; subtle magical realism	Magic is poetic and visionary, blending dreams with reality.

		Encourages reflection on creativity, ambition, and mortality.
Ponyo	**Ponyo** (fish-girl): curious and rebellious	Magic is linked to nature, transformation, and innocence. Ponyo's journey emphasizes love, freedom, and ecological harmony.
	Fujimoto (sorcerer): balanced & typical	
	Granmamare (sea goddess): nurturer, cosmic power	
Laputa: Castle in the Sky	**Robots:** Intellectual and sensitive beings	Magical/technological beings explore themes of human hubris and the balance between progress and compassion.
The Boy and the Heron	**The Grey Heron:** Man-Bird, shape-shifter and guide	Characters helped protagonist to complete his journey of trauma, healing, acceptance and liberation
	Himi: Mahito's mother, Youthful, hope and memory, protector	
	Granduncle: creator-architect, balancer,	

Conclusion: Ultimately, Miyazaki's portrayal of war in children's film is not anti-realistic but deeply ethical: he presents war as humanity's greatest failure and compassion as its only redemption. His pacifism teaches kids the cost of conflict while equipping them with hope and agency to resist war's dehumanizing logic. Hayao Miyazaki's representation of war in children's films intertwines pacifist ideals, moral complexity, and empathetic storytelling. Rather than glorifying combat, his films transform war into a moral, environmental, and emotional allegory designed to teach young audiences about peace, compassion, and responsibility.

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Picture plats

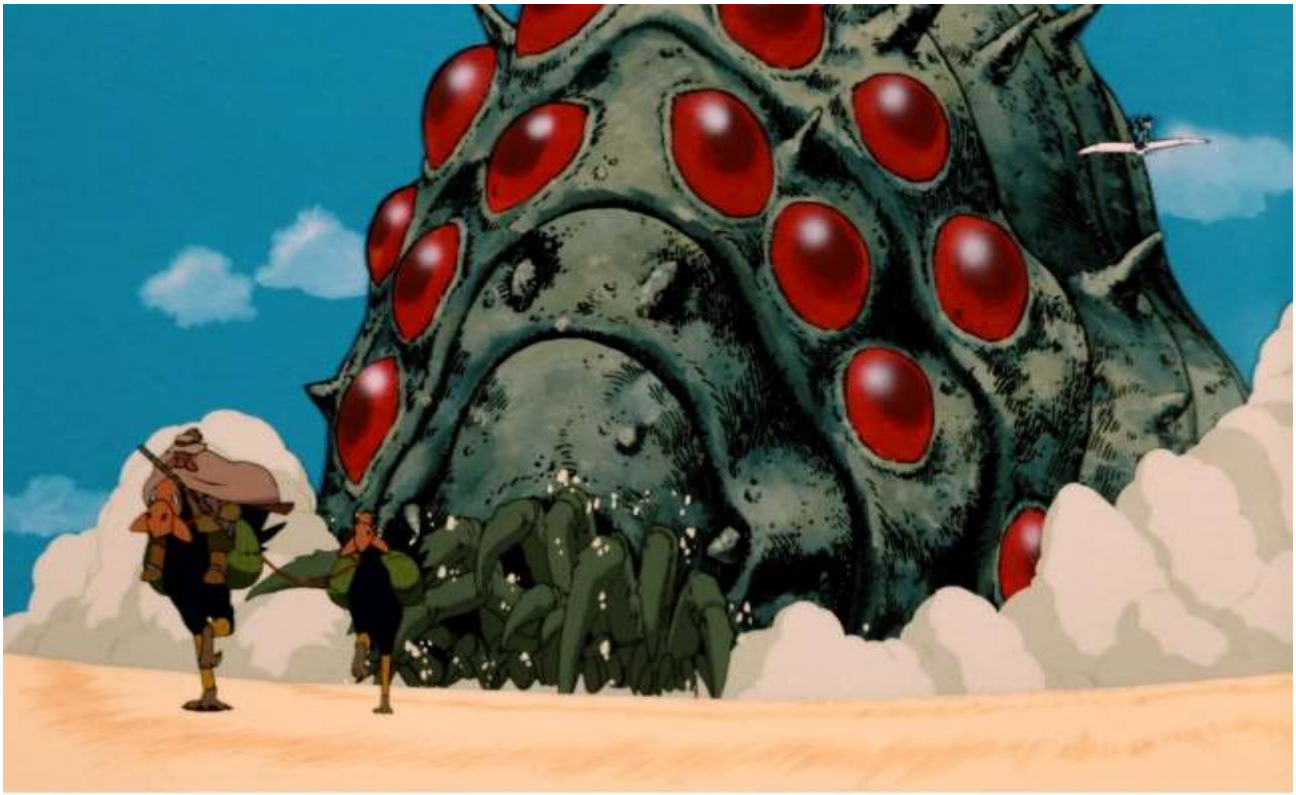

Image 1: Ohmu, a giant insects (Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, 1984)

Image 2a. Ashitaka & San with Moro's sons

Image 2b. Forest spirits Kodama

Image 2c. Boar deity transformed into Tatarigami

Image 2d. Deer God of forest

Group Image 2: Princess Mononoke, 1997

Image 3a: Sophi and Howl

Image 3b: Calcifer, the fiery demon

Image3c: Sophi and Scare crow

Image 3d: Howl's Moving Castle

Group Image 3: Howl's Moving Castle, 2004