

Hayao Miyazaki's *The Wind Rises*: Blocking out the rest of the world

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The Wind Rises (*Kaze Tachinu*) is the latest release from Studio Ghibli creator and famed Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki (born 1941). It is also, according to his public statements, the director's last feature film.

The animated work opened in Japan in July and will open in New York and Los Angeles on November 8, so that it can qualify for Academy Award nominations. A wider release in North America is scheduled for February.

The animated film centers on Jiro Horikoshi, the designer of the World War II-era Mitsubishi A6M Zero fighter, used in the attack on Pearl Harbor and later, kamikaze missions. It is very loosely based on the novella of the same title by Tatsuo Hori (1936-37). The latter in turn borrows its title from a 1920 poem by Paul Valéry (“Le vent se lève! ... Il faut tenter de vivre!”) [“The wind rises! ... We must try to live!”]

Valéry's line is emphasized throughout the film, and seems imbued here with a quite limited meaning: that one should live and perform as well as possible in one's immediate circumstances, while disregarding the wider conditions of life for which one cannot take responsibility anyway.

Hori (1904-53) was a writer, poet and translator whose early work, according to a commentator, was done “in the spirit of proletarian literature,” i.e., presumably left-wing in character, while his later work “tended more toward modernism.” *The Wind Rises* is a love story set in a mountain sanitarium, “reflecting his [Hori's] own struggle with tuberculosis, to which he eventually succumbed.” The original work had nothing to do with Horikoshi, the warplane designer; his insertion is entirely Miyazaki's doing.

The Zero fighter is a major source of pride for Japanese nationalists and militarists, who see it as a

symbol of the early victories of Japanese imperialism in the Second World War. In an interview with *Asahi Shimbun* on August 4, Miyazaki remarked that “Zero symbolizes our collective psyche,” and “the Zero represented one of the few things that we Japanese could be proud of.”

The film opens with Jiro Horikoshi as a boy dreaming of flying, or designing the planes himself. He follows his dreams to university in Tokyo, where he experiences a massive earthquake (the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923). In the course of the ensuing chaos, he helps a girl and her injured maid return home, a big mansion in Tokyo. Jiro then vanishes without waiting for thanks.

Employed by Mitsubishi designing warplanes, Jiro exerts himself more than his coworkers, showing intuitive genius for the work and climbing the corporate ladder. At the resort town of Karuizawa he is serendipitously reunited with the girl he helped after the quake—Naoko—and eventually wins her hand in marriage. However, she is seriously ill with tuberculosis, which provides the film with its tragic element.

The Wind Rises unfolds at a slow pace over the course of its two hours. However, the work reveals remarkably little about the main protagonists, Jiro and Naoko, not to mention anyone else. As a consequence, the characters' situation evokes little emotional response in the viewer.

Jiro seems to take both Naoko's ultimate fate and the scenes of war devastation in stride. This latter destruction, incidentally, is depicted in much the same manner as the earlier quake, implying that war has an almost inevitable, “natural” character.

Miyazaki (best known in the US for *Princess Mononoke* [1997]) has a half-century-long history in

Japanese cinema and animation. No one would deny his considerable talents. The animation in *The Wind Rises* is beautifully done, and the historical scenes are minutely researched and meticulously recreated. Whether it is a rustic countryside, bustling metropolitan Tokyo, or the efforts at industrialization in the suburbs of Nagoya, the scenes ring true and are clearly the product of many hours of work.

At certain moments as well Miyazaki provides a wider context. In one scene, Jiro and a colleague discuss how many starving children could be fed by the spending on war. In another, Jiro's boss warns him about complacency toward the secret police—"They've already taken three who had nothing to hide." There is also a bank panic. However, such moments are few and far between, and do not flow organically from the rest of the story.

That Jiro worked for Mitsubishi Heavy Industries—one of the handful of trusts that have controlled much of the Japanese economy to the present day—offered the possibility of exploring important social, economic and moral problems. These are never pursued, and this is largely due to the perspective of the filmmaker.

In the *Asahi* interview, Miyazaki comments: "I have learned to accept the fact that I can be useful only in an area in my immediate proximity ... I've got to accept my own limitations. In the past, I used to feel obliged to do something for the world or humanity. But I have changed a lot over the years. There was a time when I dabbled in the socialist movement, but I must say I was quite naive."

Miyazaki has sometimes been considered a pacifist, and some of his earlier works indeed warned of the dangers of war and other social ills. However, he has undoubtedly moved to the right.

In an essay he published only a couple of days before *The Wind Rises*, for example, Miyazaki voices support for the Japanese "Self Defense Forces" missions in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, supposedly because Japanese troops didn't fire a single shot and suffered no casualties.

The filmmaker rejects his previous admiration for "neutral countries like Switzerland or Sweden," arguing that armament is necessary "to a degree," and warns about the "expansion of China." He questions the international division of work from the standpoint

of national self-reliance and blames "overpopulation" for war, claiming Japan should have a population of "around 35 million," without explaining what should be done with the remaining 90 million or so people!

On the domestic front, Miyazaki accepts austerity measures uncritically: "We have to become poorer inch by inch. It's the way it is, and it can't be helped." So rather than having "hopes for the future," one must focus on the present: friends, family, work. Lastly, he dismisses prevalent "anxieties" of the younger generation, saying, "So in the past, there were no worries? ... If you're in good health and working, that's enough. If there's no work, make your own."

Miyazaki does not openly glorify imperialism and war, but his promotion of militarist symbols such as the Zero fighter, his equivocal position on World War II and war in general and his appeals for a focus on the purely private, immediate sphere objectively help to disarm his audience in the face of such dangers as the next regional or world war, which would immediately involve his native Japan too.

These political and social positions inevitably lead to a deplorable stance in regard to artistic questions. In the same interview Miyazaki was also asked: "You say you can't be responsible for anything that happens beyond your figurative boundary, but in reality you are influencing countless people through your films. What do you say about that?" The filmmaker replies: "I make films as a business, not as a cultural endeavor. My films just happened to be successful. If people weren't interested in what I make, my company would go belly up in no time." A very limited outlook indeed.



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