The World of Anime Fandom in America

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What I think the various fan subcultures do is provide a space for community. They allow people of diverse background and experience to form bonds around a common interest. They let people know that they are not alone in their likes and their passions. Fan subcultures provide the sense of belonging that used to be common among most American communities and families prior to the 1980s. Today kids are raised by day-cares and public schools. Parents are too busy working and building careers to devote significant time for family building and family life. Kids are just one of the many entries on the day planner. . . . Fan subcultures help to provide a space for community where people can come and be accepted for who they are. In a society as fragmented as America has become, fan subcultures can provide an oasis for the weary soul.

—Thirty-eight-year-old utility company tech support worker and member of the Miyazaki Mailing List

Miyazaki's film is about social interaction, historical context, responsibility, and coordination within a society. Towards the end, the story is about a certain consensus—a group coming together to agree and rally around a certain set of values, experiences, goals.

—Mike A, member of the Miyazaki Mailing List

Q. What's the fascination of Hayao Miyazaki?
A. Even though Hayao Miyazaki is so successful, he seems to prefer to work hard and earnestly with people rather than distancing himself from people with walls of money and bureaucracy. He shares his wonderful stories of hope and courage with his audiences. He earnestly cares for the environment and helps young and old people share the enthusiasm for the real and imaginary parts of nature as large as a forest full of Catbuses and as small as a tree under which one Totoro stands in the rain.

—Michael Johnson, owner, Miyazaki Mailing List

In his landmark book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), the political scientist Robert D. Putnam charts the increasing decline of what he terms "social capital" in contemporary American society. Chronicling the fading of civic groups, union organizations, church socials, and sports clubs, Putnam paints a picture of American society (and, by inference, other postindustrial societies) growing ever more disconnected and fragmented. He makes a strong case for how these trends lead to alienation and passivity, including offering a melancholy vision of 2010 where future Americans will spend their leisure time "sitting passively alone in front of glowing screens."[1] While he does acknowledge the potential role of the Internet as a facilitator of communication—quoting the sociologist Barry Wellman, who maintains that "computer-supported social networks sustain strong, intermediate and weak ties that provide information and social support in both specialized and broadly based relationships"—Putnam also worries that overuse of the Internet will lead to "single strand" cybercommunities and "Cyberbalkanization" in which individuals speak only to a circle of "like-minded intimates."[2]

This essay examines one such "single strand," the Miyazaki Mailing List, an international group of fans devoted to the works of Miyazaki Hayao, who is Japan's, and arguably the world's, greatest living animator. I discuss this group not only in terms of its status as an Internet community but also in relation to anime fan culture overall, one of the world's fastest-growing subcultures, and in relation to the question of Japanese "soft power," what Douglas McGray defines as "the art of transmitting certain kinds of mass culture."[3]

I have chosen the Miyazaki Mailing List (MML) for a variety of reasons. First, it is one of the oldest ongoing groups of Internet anime fans, begun at Brown University by Steven Feldman in 1991 and now being run out of Seattle, Washington, by Michael Johnson. Second, its members are a particularly articulate, engaged, and varied group, encompassing a wide range of ages and

a fair number of female participants and representing numerous countries, from Australia to Belarussia. Finally, and most important, the objects of their interest—Miyazaki, his partner Takahata Isao, and everything related to their animation studio, Studio Ghibli—comprise an impressively rich range of materials from which to draw discussion. These materials include approximately a dozen or so feature films, including the American Academy Award–winning *Spirited Away;* several television serials; and a new and immensely popular museum, the Ghibli Museum, in Tokyo. Most important of all are the less tangible aspects of what I call MiyazakiWorld, an overt ideological agenda encompassing environmentalism, humanism, and what might be called "Ghibli (or Miyazaki) family values," and a concern with presenting works of a psychological and moral complexity unusual not only in animation but in most cinematic offerings today.

MIYAZAKI MAILING LIST MEMBERS ARE A PARTICULARLY ARTICULATE, ENGAGED, AND VARIED GROUP, ENCOMPASSING A WIDE RANGE OF AGES AND A FAIR NUMBER OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS AND REPRESENTING NUMEROUS COUNTRIES, FROM AUSTRALIA TO BELARUSSIA.

These latter concerns are particularly interesting in relation to the global transmission of cultural values. In "Japan's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy," Kondô Seiichi, a Japanese diplomat, argues that "the Japanese do not find it easy to project their ideas in the form of values. Japan's ideas are better conveyed by being translated into cultural products through the mediation of feelings than by being translated into logical strings of words through the mediation of language." In fact, Studio Ghibli films contain much articulate and intelligent dialogue and some memorable phrases (perhaps the most famous one is the exhortation "To see with eyes unclouded" from Miyazaki's 2001 film *Princess Mononoke*). It is probably true, however, that it is initially the extraordinary beauty of the artwork (Miyazaki still does his original drawings by hand), the sumptuous music, and the gripping stories which first attract the viewer. Once attracted to MiyazakiWorld, however, the viewer is often drawn further in by the subtle yet rich emotional palette (giving rise to a far more complex range of emotions than most Hollywood films), the complex characterizations of the protagonists (who are frequently female), and the willingness to deal with powerful themes, from environmental and social collapse (*Future Boy Conan*, *Nausicaa*, *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away*, *Grave of Fireflies*, *Ponpoko*) to heartfelt coming-of-age tales (*Only Yesterday*, *Totoro*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Spirited Away*). Even in simpler, more child-oriented

fantasies, the studio never fails to evoke what the *New Yorker* in a profile on Miyazaki calls "a sense of wonder."[4]

From the viewpoint of fan studies, there is one other particularly intriguing aspect of MML members: how in many ways they differ, not necessarily from most anime fans, but from critical and conventional expectations of the kinds of people who comprise fandom. Reviewing the literature on fandom, one is struck by how much space and energy is spent on what Lisa Lewis calls the "fan pathology," the sense that "fans operate from a position of cultural marginality."[5] As Lewis says of how fandom is presented in cinema, "Fandom is overwhelmingly associated with adolescence or childhood, that is, with a state of arrested development or youth-oriented nostalgia. Furthermore, the fan impulse is presented as feminine."[6]

MML fans on the whole do not fit this stereotype, not only because many of them are older, male, and well educated but because their online discussions reveal them to be notably mature and thoughtful people whose attraction to Studio Ghibli products seems less a case of "arrested development" or "youth-oriented nostalgia" than a considered response to the complexities and problems of the contemporary world. In fact, on finishing a rough draft of this essay and reviewing the literally hundreds of pages of discussion I had examined, I became aware that I was drawing something more than a portrait of a particular fan community (and indeed some members of the MML resist even being called "fans"). Instead, the members' words and thoughts came to constitute a portrait of our contemporary millennium society, at least as seen by thoughtful people hoping to do the right thing in the face of a world that seems increasingly captured by consumer capitalism, the desires of the powerful (and the concomitant alienation of the powerless), and frightening environmental problems. The fact that these are all problems explored in detail in the works of both Miyazaki and Takahata is of course why people are drawn to Studio Ghibli's output.

As such, I cannot argue that the MML members are exactly "typical" fans, but in a sense they are typical in their atypicality, at least among anime fans. In my research into anime fandom over the last five years, I have found it increasingly difficult to draw a portrait of any one "typical" anime fan, especially as anime has become more and more pervasive in American culture. What was once, even five to ten years ago, a rather small and tight-knit community—largely male, frequently Asian American, and most often found on either of the coasts or else in big cities—has blossomed into a remarkably diverse group of fans, both demographically and geographically (including enthusiastic aficionados in the heartland states), and with a remarkable span

of political and religious beliefs (from conservative evangelical Christians to a self-described "Atheist/Shintoist anarchist").

This essay attempts to profile the MML and to show how the mailing list itself has become a form of virtual community. This community might be called a "sacred space," to use Roger Aden's term from *Popular Stories and Promised Lands*, a site for fans not only to discuss their specific interests in Ghibli products but also to deal with larger philosophical, intellectual, and political issues arising from the Ghibli oeuvre and Miyazaki's pronouncements, and, occasionally, emotional and personal ones as well. Just as fan conventions provide fellowship and solidarity by offering a means for fans to interact in a liminoid space outside their "regular" lives, the MML provides a liminoid virtual space where fans can enjoy the fellowship of others who appreciate visiting MiyazakiWorld, a world that is frequently seen by the members as more ethically, aesthetically, and intellectually appealing than the world around them.

Aden describes these virtual visits on the part of fans in general to their favorite fictional sites (such as J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth or George Lucas's *Star Wars* fantasies) as "symbolic pilgrimages" in which "individuals ritualistically revisit powerful spaces that are symbolically envisioned through the interaction of story and individual imagination."[7] Indeed, the MML members sometimes jocularly refer to making "pilgrimages" to the Ghibli Museum, but it is their imaginative interaction with the sacred space of Studio Ghibli films that particularly concerns me here. By interacting with others who share their interest in appreciating and interpreting MiyazakiWorld, the members participate in actively constructing what Lawrence Grossberg calls "mattering maps" or, more simply, what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms the "making of meaning," which, among other things, includes "learning to unite with other entities around us without losing our hard-won individuality."[8]

While MiyazakiWorld is not as all-encompassing as the realm of *Star Wars*, which Will Brooker describes as "for some people . . . the most important cultural text of our lives. . . . a culture: a sprawling detailed mythos they [the fans] can pick through with their eyes closed"; it also can be said to represent a detailed alternative reality that, as Joli Jensen says of fan culture in general, can present "an implicit critique of modern life."[9] It should be emphasized, however, that Studio Ghibli's works, while often fantasies, are far from simply escapist. In comparison with the *Star Wars* offerings, they are often much more downbeat, eschewing the grand heroics and triumphant endings crucial to Lucas's universe (and to much of Hollywood cinema in general).

In comparison with most anime fans, the MML community has a particu-

ANIME, MANGA, VIDEO GAMES, AND, TO A LESSER EXTENT, JAPANESE POPULAR MUSIC ARE ALL EXAMPLES OF THIS NEW POWER THAT, FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS, HAS BEGUN TO WIELD AN ENORMOUS INFLUENCE IN THE WORLD'S CONSUMPTION OF POPULAR CULTURE.

larly intimate quality to it. A 1995 article in *Wired* magazine mentions how "anime otaku [a word roughly equivalent to *nerd* or *geek*] [were] one of the more computer networked subcultures around."[10] This is certainly the case for the MML, a large percentage of whom are involved with computers and technology. As Brooker says of *Star Wars* fandom in relation to the Internet, "The Internet enabled many fans to take their first step into a larger world."[11] Even among dedicated fans, however, the MML stands out, not only for its longevity, high volume of traffic, and international makeup but for the generally high and remarkably civil level of discussion.[12] While the members may not be physically in a room interacting around a scratchy tenth-generation videotape, as the original anime fans were forced to do back in the early 1980s, the sense of immediacy, the enthusiasm and depth of the discussion, and the palpable feeling of fellowship on the part of many of the fans suggest that in some ways they still are gathered together. In fact, a number of MML members actively shy away from conventions and more typical fan activities, citing their dislike for the commercialism and frivolity of these engagements.

Of course, even in the MML, commercial aspects of MiyazakiWorld also play a more important role than perhaps they used to. Postings from fans include many references to finding Miyazaki collectibles, such as the various dolls in the shape of Totoro, a cuddly spirit-animal who is one of Miyazaki's most felicitous creations; key chains with figures from *Spirited Away;* and vintage posters from *Nausicaa*, Miyazaki's first major film and one for whom the actual net part of MML is named (Nausicaa.net). Furthermore, virtually all the members are concerned with getting the latest and best DVD releases from Studio Ghibli (several threads concern the question of when a release will appear on the market and how attainable it will be).

On the whole, however, commercial and marketing aspects are small in comparison with other types of discussion, which can range from a dispute over the frame counts of a particular scene to intense interactions over the philosophy, imagery, and overall message of a particular film. In fact, rather than calling them "consumers," a term often used in the literature of fandom,[13] I would prefer to call the Miyazaki fans "appreciators and interpreters," since so much of their discussion is on an emotional and intellectual level rather than a material one.

This brings me to a basic question about fandom: what do the fans get out of their fan behavior? In the case of the MML, the more specific question would be: what is it about the imagined community that I call MiyazakiWorld that attracts such a variety of people? This question is particularly intriguing for two reasons: the first is that, like other fantasies, such as those of George Lucas and perhaps Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek* (or, on the literary front, Tolkien), MiyazakiWorld offers a definite worldview—even, to some extent, an ideology—and we can assume that, to some degree or another, the fans are responding to it.

Much work has been done on the notion of fandom as a form of compensation for the disappointment of the quotidian world. This notion is not always presented negatively. Aden speaks of fandom as a form of escapism that is "purposeful play" in which we symbolically move away from the material world to an imaginative world that is in many ways a *response* to the material.[14] As the MML's list owner, Michael Johnson, says of anime in relation to U.S. animation, "American cartoons browbeat the viewer with pithy platitudes and morals-of-the-story. Japanese cartoons engage the viewer and let or force hir [*sic*] to watch actively and arrive at hir [*sic*] own conclusions." What is intriguing here, and this brings up the second reason why MiyazakiWorld is so interesting, is that Americans, Europeans, South Americans, and Asians feel comfortable in engaging in an imaginative world created by a Japanese director and targeted, initially at least, at an exclusively Japanese audience. In an age of increasing fragmentation and growing nationalism, what is it about Miyazaki's message that has struck a chord with so many people around the globe?

Part of the answer to the second question is undoubtedly related to what McGray in a famous article in *Foreign Affairs* refers to as Japan's new "soft power," by which he means essentially cultural and economic rather than military strength. Anime, manga, video games, and, to a lesser extent, Japanese popular music are all examples of this new power that, for a variety of reasons,[15] has begun to wield an enormous influence in the world's consumption of popular culture. Certainly, Miyazaki's popularity is linked with the general rise of interest in anime over the last decade. To explain the depth, breadth, and longevity of Miyazaki's popularity, however, is a more complicated task involving both his fans and the nature of MiyazakiWorld.

First, Miyazaki is hugely popular in his own country. Many of his films, including his three most recent, have broken box office records, appealing across generation and gender. The richness of his imagination, along with his essentially wholesome vision, makes his works perfect for family viewing.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Miyazaki's films should be appreciated internationally to some degree. What is interesting, however, is that, at least among the members of the MML, their favorite works of his are often the most "Japanese" of his oeuvre, specifically *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *Spirited Away*.

Koichi Iwabuchi has suggested that one reason for the proliferation of Japanese popular culture is that it has been rendered "culturally odorless" through such products as Hello Kitty or Pikachu, whose origins cannot easily be traced back to Japan.[16] To a certain extent, many of Miyazaki's early works do take place in relatively "odor free" cultural contexts, in some cases post-apocalyptic future worlds (*Future Boy Conan*, *Nausicaa*) or Europeanesque fantasy worlds (*Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Porco Rosso*), but this can certainly not be said of the three mentioned above, all of which deal with Japanese traditions, the Japanese landscape, and (in *Princess Mononoke*'s case) Japanese history. It should also be noted that several members of the MML list also particularly love the films of Miyazaki's partner Takahata Isao, such as *Grave of Fireflies*, *Only Yesterday*, and *My Neighbor Yamada*, all of which are clearly specific to Japanese culture.

We need to go beyond the "odorless" explanation to understand the appeal of MiyazakiWorld. One way to do this is to examine the makeup of the MML. I have developed the following portrait based partly on information provided by Michael Johnson, partly on my own years as a "lurker" on the list and a detailed examination of discussions that took place from January to April of 2003 (not coincidentally, the period when *Spirited Away* won the Academy Award and the war in Iraq began), and partly on the responses I received to a questionnaire mailed out by my research assistant Michael Roemer in February and March of 2005. I have been using this questionnaire over the last five years to survey anime fans throughout the country; for the MML members, I added a few specific questions. Although the list membership technically comprises over a thousand, only a relatively small percentage of members are active on the list. In any given week, perhaps ten members are actively vocal, with another ten chiming in more occasionally. We received sixty-four questionnaires from the list, and, although self-selected, they seemed to be a reasonably representative sample.

To anyone with knowledge of fandom in general or anime fandom in particular, one of the most surprising aspects of the MML is the relatively older age of the members. Twenty-six percent of the fans were between forty and forty-nine years old, 23 percent were between thirty and thirty-nine, and 14 percent were between fifty and sixty. The second largest group was between

twenty and twenty-nine, however, comprising 25 percent of the respondents; the remaining 10 percent were between sixteen and eighteen. While this result may partially be explained by the possibility that young people are less likely to fill out questionnaires, the age demographic accorded well with the members' own perceptions of themselves as an older, more mature group than the average anime online mailing list.

The older age of the fans may also be responsible for the fact that our respondents were 75 percent male. Although, in the early days of fandom, anime fans tended to be overwhelmingly male,[17] this has changed enormously over the last several years. From observation at conventions plus exposure to other anime fan groups, I would say that female fans are getting close to 50 percent of fandom, at least among younger fans.

Background as to race and nationality was a little more complicated to ascertain, since non-American list subscribers sometimes didn't identify themselves ethnically. Of the American members, thirty identified themselves as white, four were Asian American, one was African American, and one was Hispanic American. The other twenty-three (40 percent of the total respondents) were not Americans but, judging by their names and countries represented (five from Australia, four from Canada, two from Sweden, two from France, and one each from Mexico, Ireland, Spain, Belarussia, Norway, and one "BrazilianDutch"), it seems reasonably safe to conclude these members were largely Caucasian (although there was one self-identified Chinese Australian), which was another slight surprise, since, early on at least, many members of anime clubs were Asian American, and, at least on the West Coast, Asian Americans still constitute a fairly high percentage.

Also intriguing was the relatively high education level of the respondents. Forty-five percent (25) had received a BA; 20 percent (11), an MA; and 5 percent (4), a PhD. This statistic also accords well with the members' perceptions of themselves as "better educated" and "more informed" than the average anime fan group. As one respondent, a fifty-year-old female artist, put it: "I think they are more intelligent and polite. They can argue without rancor for the most part. They cite scholarly examples, they are loyal to the genre. They're a lot more fun and

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cheerful than most grownups!" Another member called the list "an island of sanity and fascinating discussion in wild anarchy that was the world of the usenet and nowadays, message boards."

Initially less surprising was the most represented occupation: 33 percent were in computers and engineering (and 39 percent had majored in computer sciences or engineering in college). This statistic accords well with profiles of science fiction fans, many of whom have a technology background. But perhaps more interesting was the variety of other occupations represented. These included a video producer, two stay-at-home mothers, a number of artists (or students majoring in art), an attorney, a janitor/translator, a retired helicopter pilot, and a worker for the IRS. The diverse occupations and interests seem much in accord with the face of anime fandom in general. Although technology workers and artists are probably still somewhat overrepresented in comparison with the general population, the increasing pervasiveness of anime and the increase in female fans have led to a much broader representation of occupations and interests.

But I also suspect that the wide variety of occupations may have something to do with Miyazaki's appeal that can be seen as both broad and specific. The superior aesthetic quality of his and Takahata's films undoubtedly attracts artists and designers. The relatively wholesome nature of Studio Ghibli's stories, as well as the emphasis on children, clearly attracts a family audience (several respondents mentioned that they were parents who enjoyed watching the films with their children, although, as one person wryly remarked, "My children are grown now and I can't use them to hide behind"). Finally, Miyazaki and his partner's concerns about the state of the world, the environment, and the future resonate with thoughtful people regardless of occupation.

The stereotype of fans in general has often been that they tend to be on the edges of society, resolutely nonmainstream. In my interviews with midwestern fans, however, I have been interested to see a relatively high (although by no means the majority) percentage of conservative fans, including fundamentalist Christians. My questionnaire for the MML included a section on religious beliefs, and here, too, the results were somewhat surprising. Although 54 percent could be described as liberal to left wing (twenty-seven Democrats and three socialists), 9 percent were center-to-Republican, one person was a libertarian, and 22 percent (often the younger respondents) described themselves as having no politics at all. In terms of religion, results varied widely as well. Twenty-one percent were practicing Christians (including two members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), almost

20 percent were atheists (including one "atheist with some Ghiblist influences"), and 20 percent said they had no religion or were agnostic, while 28 percent said that they had some religious feelings but did not belong to an organized faith (a number of these mentioned an interest in Buddhism or Shintoism), and one respondent was a practicing Jew. Interestingly, several respondents reported having been raised in a strong religious faith (generally Jewish or Catholic) but had lost faith over the years.

The respondents were more in agreement when it came to the question of how they saw their beliefs in relation to American mainstream values and what they thought were the good and bad aspects of American culture. Fully 68 percent saw themselves as outside American mainstream values, while 26 percent saw their values as mainstream, and 6 percent (presumably foreign) said they didn't know. The answers to the questions about values were often intense and elaborate. The most often-cited negative aspects of America were consumerism and materialism, followed closely by various permutations of "arrogant" or "bullying." (It should be noted that, while the non-American residents were often critical of the United States, the harshest critiques were from American respondents, including one who was "ashamed of being American.")

Often these responses were some of the longest in the questionnaire. One person summed up the negatives as "anti-intellectual bias, the problems of bigotry and sexism, the loss of community, the loss of the value of the family, and tendency to think of those we disagree with as the enemy." A fifty-two-year-old bureaucrat/attorney cited "familial breakdown, lack of community ties, lack of genuinely humane values, arrogance, selfishness," while a forty-eight-year-old bookseller (also male), mentioned "selfishness, short-sightedness, smugness, religiosity, hostility to the imagination." One respondent, a forty-one-year-old female novelist, described the worst aspects of American society as our "attempting to enforce a system of privilege that finds poverty and human suffering acceptable, so long as the results are that they live a wealthy life that supports and leaves unchallenged their sense of righteousness in holding their privileged position." Another woman, a forty-seven-year-old software engineer, brought up "rampant anti-intellectualism, an incredible over-regard for money and material things, a lack of respect for or interest in other cultures—parochial and arrogant." A conservative respondent, a twenty-three-year-old Mormon tech support worker, mentioned that Americans are "lazy and self-centered."

The above statements are illuminating in light of Aden's theory about how the "imaginative world [of the fans] is a *response* to the material" (i.e.,

outside world). In contrast to an America (and also, as some of the members readily admit, much of the industrialized world) that is materialistic, bullying, narrow, self-centered, and in danger of losing all human connection, MiyazakiWorld, as shown not only in the films of Studio Ghibli but in interviews with Miyazaki and Takahata, is seen as expansive, open to new possibilities—be they ideas or new creations—family oriented, and, to use one of the members' favorite words, "humanistic." Where America and other industrialized societies are perceived as bent on destroying (the environment, the human soul, the family and community), MiyazakiWorld is seen to be about cherishing (traditions, family ties, natural beauty). This cherishing is never pursued simplistically or sentimentally, however. Many of Studio Ghibli's films have at least a metaphorical apocalyptic subtext, but the final message is always one of at least the *possibility* of hope and redemption on the part of ordinary human beings.

One consistently sees in both the questionnaire responses and in conversational threads a feeling that Miyazaki and Takahata value down-to-earth human values as opposed to technological or commercial ones. Thus one respondent commented on an early Miyazaki film, *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, that "the film delves deep into the flaws of what high technology may bring to mankind in today's world." A long-running thread from around the time of *Spirited Away*'s opening in America concerned whether Miyazaki was attacking American consumer values or those of the Japanese when he showed the heroine's parents transforming into literal pigs of consumption. After much discussion, one member summed up what seemed to be the general consensus, that "concern about gluttony in *Spirited Away* was about consumption and greed. . . . Any supposedly civilized culture would rue losing its traditions and watching their people become ignorant of the things that should be cherished."

The comments on the positive elements of American culture and society were more uniform but also in line with a worldview that we might expect from fans of Miyazaki. Both American and non-Americans found U.S. society to be optimistic, energetic, and (somewhat surprisingly, given the many criticisms of "bullying") altruistic. A French PhD student wrote approvingly that Americans "don't seem to shy away when it comes to faith." Many commented on the tolerance and diversity of American society, although a significant minority saw Americans as "not open to accepting different cultures," as a twenty-six-year-old Chinese American responded.

This minority view may tie into an aspect of fandom that is often noted among scholars of fan theory: the feeling, on the part of some fans at least,

of being an outsider from a mainstream society that they see as bullying or rejecting on a personal level. Thus a thirty-six-year-old Spanish journalist described himself as "a music fan, cinema fan, anime fan" but went on to insist that "I will never kick in the face another person because they cannot love anime films, and soccer fanatics can use these kind of attitudes." Many other members seemed comfortable in describing themselves in terms that could be considered pejorative. One respondent summed himself up as a "nerd, otaku, trekkie, goth witch, net junkie," and a number of others simply answered "nerd" or "geek."

On the other hand, another member described himself more prosaically as a "married nearly-middle-aged father of two who lives in the suburbs and works in the movie business." Many others, however, saw themselves in positive terms and in ways that seemed particularly appropriate for Miyazaki fans. These included "a pragmatic romantic," a "bit of a dreamer," "someone who likes unique and unusual things," "a little more culturally aware than most," and "a science/technical major (recent UC Berkeley graduate) with a foreign background, a rationalist/technical technological mindset, and a strong attraction toward the humanist message e.g. Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata, Yoshitoshi Abe's Haibane Renmei series, and from literature, Charles Dickens, Ursula Leguin, Phillip [*sic*] Pullman." This last self-description, which notes an interest in other "world building" artists (*Haibane Renmei* is an anime series that takes place in a fantasy world that people go to after death), again suggests that these highly colored fantasy realms are both compensations for and critiques of a less-satisfying real world.

At the same time it should be emphasized that members of the list are not simply escaping a disappointing reality. Many are extremely aware of the problems of the real world and see in Miyazaki's environmental and humanist message a call for action. One respondent described himself as "a research scientist who values peace, justice and wanting to make this a better world." Many (a majority) of respondents mentioned the environment as being the most significant issue of the day. As a female thirty-year-old Swedish student writes: "I think the environment question is the most important one for our survival as a species and is likely to remain so for the next hundred years at least." Miyazaki and Takahata's emphasis on environmentalism is seen as something that could change the world. A twenty-two-year-old Norwegian student suggests that "Miyazaki Sama [*sama* is a highly honorific form of address] puts messages in his story that I believe is something the world should listen to."

Overall, however, the MML does not see MiyazakiWorld ideology as being simplistic. A major thread of discussion throughout the lifetime of the list

has been Miyazaki's approach to good and evil. Many consider one of Studio Ghibli's major offerings to society to be precisely the lack of a clear-cut vision of good versus evil. One twenty-two-year-old French student compared Studio Ghibli with American animation, saying that "the difference . . . may come from Miyazaki (and Ghibli) producing movies that display real imaginative universes and do not need to show violence eroticism and manicheanism to please the audience. . . . thus, people who like Ghibli may have a more reflective approach to animation." When a member of the list mentioned that "one of the most refreshing aspects of this movie *Spirited Away* is that Good and Evil are not delineated with simple and obvious cues that we often get from pop culture," several members leapt in to say that one attraction of Studio Ghibli offerings was the fact that they refuse to paint characters as purely good or purely evil. As one respondent said in another context, "Miyazaki's films contain too much ambiguity towards concepts of good and evil to be understood as recognizably didactic."

WHILE MIYAZAKI AND TAKAHATA REMAIN INTENSELY JAPANESE IN THEIR STORYTELLING, THEIR THEMES AND IMAGES ARE UNIVERSAL ENOUGH TO TOUCH PEOPLE AROUND THE GLOBE. IN THIS THEY RESEMBLE OTHER CREATORS WHO HAVE ATTRACTED GREAT FANDOM, FROM RODDENBERRY AND LUCAS TO J. K. ROWLING OF THE *HARRY POTTER* SERIES.

Clearly, it is Miyazaki's and Takahata's willingness to entertain a worldview that acknowledges the ambiguity of life but at the same time exists within a moral framework that is one of MiyazakiWorld's major attractions. For example, David, in answer to another member's claim that "Christian themes abound in *Spirited Away*," asserted that "these themes are much older than Christianity itself" and cited "baptism/redemption/resurrection/temptation/healing/love" as being "all over the place in every religion and culture, popular stories, myths, legends, etc. What makes SA universal is precisely the fact that despite its very 'localized' settings and characters (everything is clearly by/for Japanese) it manages to tap into universal themes where everyone will recognize themselves."

Not all the discussion is on such an abstract level. One of the most passionate and emotionally resonant threads that I have seen occurred against the background of the beginning of the Iraq war, a war described by one member as "the elephant in the doorway throw[ing] a shadow on everything."

A young male student wrote in to talk about his feelings of shame and powerlessness at being unable to do anything about the war beyond organiz-

ing teach-ins on his campus. In an affecting passage he wrote, "Considering how Miyazaki's words are amongst those who have brought me to tears even before the bombs started falling, I wish Miyazaki could see these words."

The response from the MML was swift and heartfelt. Laying aside their own personal politics, many of them framed their words of encouragement in terms of what they thought Miyazaki could offer. One respondent wrote, "One of [Miyazaki]'s talents as a director and a writer is in his ability to make us examine our own views of the way things are, the way they should be and what we should do towards those ends. In *Princess Mononoke* the forest-god is killed despite the best efforts of the main characters. The death of the forest god resulted in a devastating catastrophe that looked as though it would undo all that was done in the course of the film. Yet his death . . . was merely the beginning of a new era, with the promise of learning from the past and forging a new world. . . . The heroes don't always have to be the ones saving the world, they can be the ones that live every day doing for others what they would hope for themselves. Sacrifice isn't always glorious, but it is often necessary, and that is another Miyazaki lesson. :)."

Another member responded that "the issue of power and powerlessness is an interesting one and perhaps there is even a Miyazaki connection to be made here. . . . we all have the ability to clean up some little corner of our world in some small way. We all have the ability to love. Mei and Kiki and Chihiro are not heroes because they have whole-heartedly devoted themselves to some giant CAUSE . . . but because they do their best to be decent to those around them."

Akito, a member from Japan, recommended "a book of human's liberation" that Miyazaki had cited as an essential influence on him. Jonathan, who described himself as proud to be an American and an Italian, told him to "think about *Nausicaa* for a moment: Their valley was one of the few safe places on earth. They were surrounded by hostile nations. The toxic jungle was creeping up on them. Yet did they fear? No!"

Sharon, a long-time member, went back to Miyazaki's own dialogue, telling the student that "in Princess Mononoke even with death happening all around them, even though San thought the world was over, Ashitaka corrected her that it was not over because they were still alive. Live like Ashitaka and see with eyes unclouded. He didn't regret being human, he didn't regret being cursed. Don't regret being who you are."

The responses of these fans reveal how the appeal of MiyazakiWorld becomes far more than enjoyable entertainment. While Miyazaki and Takahata remain intensely Japanese in their storytelling, their themes and images are

universal enough to touch people around the globe. In this they resemble other creators who have attracted great fandom, from Roddenberry and Lucas to J. K. Rowling of the *Harry Potter* series. Unlike these examples, however, Miyazaki and Takahata revel in ambiguity and what might be considered a non-Western worldview in which good does not always triumph over evil and the only appropriate response is to continue to look at the world "with eyes unclouded."

The fact that fans worldwide find this viewpoint compelling suggests as much about the contemporary period as it does about Miyazaki. Aden has suggested that fans sometimes appreciate fandom because it allows them to "break the rules" or at least offers an opportunity to see "how the rules limit us."[18] In the case of Miyazaki fans, particularly his Western ones, it is possible to speculate that Miyazaki's subtle and complex worldview allows them to "break the rules" of Western culture, to go beyond the Hollywood happy endings, or the need for a defined good and evil, and embrace the world in all its ambiguity, heartbreak, and hope. By creating and interacting in their own "sacred space" on the Internet, the fans are able to produce a form of community that, in its emotional supportiveness, intellectual atmosphere, and passionate zeal to improve the world, ironically echoes the larger "sacred space" of MiyazakiWorld itself.

Notes

1. Roger D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 11.

2. Ibid., 171, 178.

3. Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, May–June 2002, 48.

4. Margaret Talbot, "The Auteur of Anime," *New Yorker*, January 17, 2005, 66.

5. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 26.

6. Lisa Lewis, "Fan Stories on Film," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 158.

7. Roger C. Aden, *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 69. Aden defines *liminoid* in relation to the more well-known *liminal* as a phrase "used to describe the increasingly optional ritual experiences found in industrial and postindustrial societies" (82).

8. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 214–40.

9. Will Brooker, *Using the Force: Creativity, Community, and Star Wars Fans* (New York: Continuum, 2002), xii; Joli Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," in Lewis, *Adoring Audience*, 9.

10. Andrew Leonard, "Heads Up Mickey," *Wired*, April 1995.

11. Brooker, *Using the Force*, xiv.

12. Credit for the "civilized" quality of the discussion must go, at least in some part, to Michael Johnson, the list owner. As was clear from his conversation with me (January 2005) and in the rules that he set up to govern the list, Michael is extremely conscious of wanting to promote a free-flowing, friendly, and polite environment. As he says, "I don't tolerate irresponsible behavior on the list." Michael's examples of undesirable behavior include everything from poor spelling and grammar to flaming, spamming, spoofing, or trolling. It is clear from the other list members' comments that the framework is much appreciated. Over half the respondents when asked to compare the MML with other anime fan groups mentioned the civilized atmosphere. Or as one member, a Canadian stay-at-home mother, put it, "MML members seem invariably polite and respectful." On the other hand, consistent with what Matt Hills sees as the "performance" aspect of Internet fandom (*Fan Cultures* [London: Routledge, 1992], 179), some members report being occasionally turned off by the more "pretentious" (i.e., literary, philosophical, or psychoanalytic discussions) that certain members of the group enjoy engaging in.

13. On the notion of fans as "specialist consumers" or even "ideal" consumers, see Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 29.

14. Aden, *Popular Stories and Promised Lands*, 6.

15. Space does not permit me to go into this discussion at great length, but some of the reasons behind the ascension of Japanese soft power include (1) globalization and the rise of technology engendering the need for entertainment to fill the newly available electronic media, (2) the fact that Japanese popular culture could be seen by Westerners as an exotic alternative to American popular culture and the perception by Asians that Japanese cultural products were closer in spirit to Asian culture in general, and (3) the relatively high quality of Japanese animation and manga in terms of aesthetics and story content in comparison not only with American cartoons but with Hollywood films in general. For further treatment of this question see Susan J. Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 239–56.

16. Koichi Iwabuchi, "How 'Japanese' Is *Pokemon*?" in *Pikachu's Global Adventure*, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 7.

17. In her 1994 study of West Coast anime fans, Annalee Newitz concluded that about 86 percent of the members of California university clubs were male ("Anime Otaku: Japanese Animation Fans outside Japan," *Bad Subjects*, no. 13, April 1994, 161). In my study of anime fans, I found between 76 and 85 percent (depending on what group I was surveying) were male (Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, 247).

18. Aden, *Popular Stories and Promised Lands*, 9.