

Friday, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015

## The Wind Rises (PG)

dir: Hayao Miyazaki

sponsor: Paul Hancock

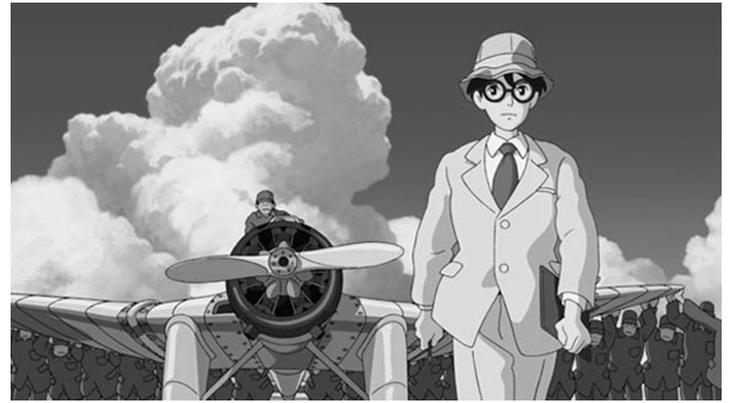
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The Japanese animation director Hayao Miyazaki, best known for his 2001 fantasy *Spirited Away*, says that *The Wind Rises* will be his last film. While it's very unlike *Spirited Away* in most respects, it's similarly fascinating and baffling, with wild narrative lurches and seeming non-sequiturs. It's Miyazaki's most atypical cartoon, yet it might be his most personalised representation, a portrait of the artist as a myopic dreamer. The chief character is a historical figure, Horikoshi Jirô, the aircraft engineer who designed the Zero fighter plane used at Pearl Harbour, though his story is heavily fictionalised.

At first, there's no warning of how unusual the film will be. Presented in Miyazaki's lush, hand-drawn style, it opens with a bespectacled young boy climbing onto the roof of his house. He takes off in a tiny sparrow-like plane over an old-world Japanese landscape. It could be the start of one of the filmic dream-trips for which Miyazaki is famous. Instead, just after some fabulous monsters appear, the boy wakes up. Soon after, the same character, now a young man, is caught up in the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923, Japan's worst disaster of the past 100 years. The scale is epic. There are massed crowds, Tokyo in flames and terrifying exhalations from the earth. There are also more dreams, theme parks of the imagination, as Jirô climbs around gigantic planes in flight, led by his Italian idol Giovanni Caproni, a moustachioed Michaelangelo of aircraft design.

But much of the film takes place in a most unexpected territory for a Studio Ghibli film: that of grown-up work. In many scenes we see Jirô sitting in an office, at an artist's desk, like those Miyazaki has sat at over his long career. It's as if he's declaring the holiday's over. True, the animation does a sterling job of enlivening Jirô's labours – the character's alert intensity belies his colourless politeness, and we see the beautiful flying machines riding winds in his mind. The script is deft in sketching the worldly issues Jirô chooses not to dwell on, such as why Japan is developing hugely expensive military hardware while the people go hungry.

But Jirô's successive projects and failings have little momentum: taken together, these scenes become boring. A populist film-maker of three decades' standing Miyazaki may know this without caring. As (ostensibly) his last film, *The Wind Rises* feels like a statement of how Miyazaki has lived, an artist like Jirô, trying to articulate dreams in an industrial environment. Some scenes towards the end of the film feel especially



autobiographical – for example when Jirô is hustled between shouting clients (but doesn't listen to what they say) and excites his awed young workers with his vision for what they can accomplish, like a director holding forth in the studio. If Caproni is Jirô's dream self, Jirô is Miyazaki's.

In the second half, the populist Miyazaki returns, offering a wholly fictional love story. Jirô meets a woman Naoko, who's the girl he helped during the earthquake, though she's really lifted from the tragic fiction of novelist Hori Tatsuo. Many reviewers have found the ailing Naoko wispily sentimental, a betrayal of Miyazaki's more active heroines in earlier films. Yet her story is charmingly presented, never more than when Jirô courts her with paper aeroplanes, which he launches towards her balcony. This scene accords with an old idea of animation, being told entirely in images and music. Despite the couple's formality their drawings convey passions. The film even gently confirms that, despite Naoko's frailty, the lovers consummate their marriage on their wedding night.

Afterwards, Jirô tries to reconcile his two rival passions, his art and his wife. One scene shows him working at home and holding Naoko's hand as she falls asleep next to him. It's a moment that is at once tenderly underplayed and melodramatically overstated. More melodrama is provided by the animated weather, with Jirô and Naoko caught up in a torrential storm before seeing a rainbow. Naoko reacts: "Life is wonderful, isn't it?" It might be Miyazaki's response to the most famous line in the Japanese classic *Tokyo Story* (1953) - "Isn't life disappointing?" - though he's not necessarily contradicting it.

The film shows the terrible destruction wrought by Jirô's planes, but only glancingly. Caproni says he prefers a world with pyramids to one without – is this an aesthete's dismissal of the human suffering that pyramids and planes entail? For viewers paying attention, the script refers to the German engineer Hugo Junkers and his principled opposition to the Nazis, in implicit contrast to Jirô's indifference. But the film judges Jirô for his failing as a husband far more than it criticises his political passivity.

At the film's arresting climax, Jirô attends his crowning professional (and military) triumph and is horrified when he

**Synopsis:** The film relates the story of Japanese aeroplane engineer Horikoshi Jirô, born in 1903. As a boy, Jirô dreams of planes. In 1923, he's caught up in the Great Kanto earthquake in Tokyo, where he helps a young girl to safety. Later he becomes a plane designer working for Mitsubishi in Nagoya, where he tries to create new war planes, though his efforts are frustrated. Hoildaying at a summer resort, Jirô encounters a young woman, Naoko, who reveals that she was the girl he helped in 1923. They grow close and become engaged but Naoko has tuberculosis and her condition worsens. She comes to Nagoya where she and Jirô are privately married. They enjoy a brief period of happiness together. However while Jirô is away testing a triumphantly successful design – the precursor to the Zero fighter plane – Naoko leaves Nagoya quietly, knowing that she is dying and wanting Jirô to remember her as she was.

### Credits (selected)

**Jirô:** Anno Hideaki

**Naoko:** Miori Takimoto

**Honjo:** Hidetoshi Nishijima

**Kurokawa:** Masahiko Nishimura

**Caproni:** Mansai Nomura

**Director/Screenplay:** Hayao Miyazaki

**Editor:** Sayami Takeshi

**Music:** Joe Hisaishi

**Art direction:** Yôji Takeshige

**Japan 2014. 126 mins**



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realises that something terrible has happened and that he has been oblivious. We cut to Japan in flames again, all Jirô's aircraft destroyed. Yet the whole film builds up Jirô as an admirable romantic figure, separated from the military machine, which is depicted as impersonal and threatening. This is no defence of Japan's wartime conduct. The muddier issue is whether a 21<sup>st</sup> century Japanese film about Horikoshi has any duty to condemn crimes facilitated by his inventions. *The Wind Rises* does not; instead, it abstracts and fantasises Jirô the artists and his lovely dreams of flight.

## Another View...

*Hayao Miyazaki's brilliant swansong is a complex, swooning melodrama on aviation and the caveats of creativity.*

*The concept of taking flight, of casually defying the sorry lot of the human land-lubber, is a central concern of Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki. That gossamer film which separates the realms of bustling fantasy and horrific reality is often punctured by some plucky hero (or, more often, heroine) lifting off the ground and leaving such Earthbound givens as the laws of physics in a beautifully rendered dust trail.*

*Animation, the creative medium in which Miyazaki operates, is fantastical by design, meaning that suspending disbelief when "human" characters take flight is far less of a push. It's ironic, and perhaps even a little perverse, then, that the director's purported final encore opts to literally chronicle the wondrous world of early aviation, particularly the creation of the Mitsubishi A6M Zero, which was pivotal to the Japanese fire-bombing of Pearl Harbour.*

*Studio Ghibli diehards may be unsure of what to do with the film, how best to categorise and compartmentalise it among a catalogue of films that all make some kind of affirmative concession towards age, gender and (relatively) broad taste. Gone are the loopy, expressionist flights of fancy, the occasionally hectoring environmental sub-themes and the customary panoply of cute critters and goofy comic side-players.*

*In their place, though, is a melodrama so earnest, rousing and robustly built that you'd swear it had been penned by some on-the-clock huckster chain-smoking in the backrooms of a Hollywood studio circa 1940. Miyazaki has selected Jirô Horikoshi as his subject, a goggle-eyed boy wonder engineer from the pre-war era working for the then-fledgling Mitsubishi corporation and given creative free rein to invent fighter planes to rival those of Germany and the US. Yet Horikoshi's pacifist tendencies mean that he finds it tough to hand over his designs for use in war games.*

*In many ways, *The Wind Rises* is biography as autobiography, telling of the triumphs and traumas of Horikoshi's young life as much as it does the director's own, much publicised feelings about his chosen metier. Horikoshi's aviation idol, Count Giovanni Caproni, assures him during a number of markedly restrained fantasy sequences that, "Airplanes are dreams" — could the same not be said of cinema, with the two men tasked with producing a product that's ideologically rooted in the realms of fantasy?*

*Both men are also prone to biomorphing — that is taking the simple, sturdy designs offered up by nature and co-opting them as*

*inspiration to execute their craft: Horikoshi bases his wing ribs on the dainty curve of the mackerel bone; Miyazaki, for example, uses samples of human voices for all of the film's sound effects (propellers, trains, an earthquake, etc).*

*Though *The Wind Rises* would arguably fall into the bracket of the traditional biopic, it's interesting by dint of it being a formal conceit never before adopted by the Ghibli stable. And yes, it does adhere to conventional story arcs and reaches a somewhat predictable conclusion, yet Miyazaki stands at a valuable distance from his subject, never second guessing his intellectual development and never overplaying his lengthy bouts of sadness and confusion.*

*Satisfyingly, for a film about an inventor, there's a noticeable dearth of "eureka!" moments, where circumstances handily conspire to move the plot forward. Instead, this comes across as a dramatically unadorned take on Horikoshi's life, a saga that works as a collection of episodes and imperative moments and that steers thankfully clear of contrivance — something that Miyazaki the writer has, in the past, not always been capable of.*

*The *Wind Rises* stands alongside *Grave of The Fireflies* as one of Ghibli's most adult-oriented works. Though it's choreographed with all the priggish whimsy of a pre-code romance, it even offers up the studio's first bona fide sex scene. Still, it's doubtful that ankle-biters will get very much at all from the film, unless they're ankle-biters with a fixation on cross versus flat-head screws or the mechanical minutiae of wing struts.*

*With its abrupt downer ending, the film finally reveals its concealed sense of morbid curiosity, juxtaposing the mass destruction of Horikoshi's gliding dream machines with the natural, very sad disintegration of the human body. On deeper reflection, this is perhaps a film which — like all great works of art — strives to embed its themes so deep within the text that, to some, they might appear invisible. More than a film about one man's mystification as to how creativity can directly equate to violence, the overarching philosophical intimations suggest a work which highlights the unseen knock-on devastation that comes from any and all acts of nobility.*

**David Jenkins, *Little White Lies***

**Our next film: Friday January 16<sup>th</sup>, 7.30pm (rearranged from October 31st)**

**Locke (15)**

Making a funding pitch for *Locke* must have been a real challenge for director Steven Knight. Imagine it: "It's about a man who spends the night driving back to London from Wales, talking to people on the carphone. The entire film is set inside the car and no other characters appear."

It isn't difficult to believe after that that Knight might have been shown the door. Fortunately he must either have extraordinary powers of persuasion, or he was able to convey the real drama that unfolds throughout the film's runtime. Either way, the film's backers found a winner.

Tom Hardy gives a wonderful display of acting as he creates an entirely believable character (Ivan Locke) whose professional and personal lives implodes during the course of the journey and yet who manages to attract and retain our sympathy throughout the film, which won rave reviews at last year's Toronto & London Film Festivals.

If however you decide that it sounds like an exercise in tedium and decide not to come, you will undoubtedly miss one of the film highlights of last year and a quite engrossing and totally cinematic drama.