

# Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's Influence in Studio Ghibli's Artistic Expression of Humanism and Peace.

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**Abstract.** This paper observed the interplay of ideals between the literary and cinematographic elements of the books *Terre des Hommes* (1939) and *The Little Prince* (1943) with Studio Ghibli film *Grave of Fireflies* (1988), as well as some aspects of other films from the studio. The study has an interdisciplinary approach involving peace education, cultural exchange and stating the significance of humanistic elements/language in creations, set aside when oriented to younger audiences. The paper also adopts the concept of reception and intermediality from Professor Claus Clüver to entail the connection of the analysed works and their possible impact on society; previous studies on Ghibli films and Saint-Exupéry works are also present. The definition of peace considered in the analysis is the concept made from the perspective of philosopher Masahisa Goi. Expressing that the works of both sources are to be seen as anti-war narratives or in consonance with the peace concept presented, and highlighting the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry as a direct influence on director Hayao Miyazaki and Ghibli's general artistic expression/language and themes due to the similarity of elements considered as humanistic, emphasising their impact and value, contrary to how these works tend to get undervalued in academic environments for being categorised superficially as "for children".

**Keywords.** Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Studio Ghibli, Hayao Miyazaki, Humanism, Peace Education, Literature and Cinematography.

## 1. Introduction

Studio Ghibli is a Japanese animation studio that originated in 1985 and has reached a significant amount of acknowledgement over the past decades, with two Oscar-winning films by the present day, being considered a global phenomenon.[1][2] Ghibli's films have a set of unique elements involving visual aesthetics, themes, soundtracks, and remarkable storytelling. The widely known success can also be attributed to the recurring themes and narratives that are expressive and complex, aligned with the dynamic emotions from characters and scenes. These dimensions create well-known topics of discussion among the studio's fans and critics, some of them include the representation of female characters and the portrayal of war narratives.[3][4] Despite being possibly viewed as "Children's cartoons/animation" in a negative or inferior manner, the mentioned points are sufficiently relevant for a thoughtful critical analysis.

The co-founder and director of Studio Ghibli, Hayao Miyazaki is a Japanese animator and artist. He

directed *Spirited Away* in 2001, which later became the first and only hand-drawn and non-English language animation film to win an Oscar[5], and he has recently won another one for *The boy and the Heron*(2023) with the original title *How Do You Live*.[6]

Among the many interviews and hints the Japanese artist has given about his creative process, there is an artistic influence that can be traced in particular: the French pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, perhaps for the shared interest in aviation, as shown in other studio's films such as *The Wind Rises* and "*Porco Rosso*". Another link is that Miyazaki's father worked in a company that manufactured aeroplane pieces, and Hayao also named the studio after an Italian military reconnaissance aircraft "Ghibli", meaning "the hot air blowing in the Sahara Desert".[7][1] Interestingly it's the same desert in which most of Antoine's stories took place. Another evidence of Miyazaki's admiration for the French pilot's work is his participation in writing the foreword of the 2006 collection book "*Antoine de Saint Exupéry: Dessins*" published by Gallimard to

celebrate the author's legacy.[8][9]

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was a writer, journalist, aviator, and poet who lived in the 20th century. He often engaged in philosophical and humanistic themes, in "memoirs" like *Terre des Hommes* translated as *Wind, Sand and Stars*. The author also received numerous prizes for literature in his lifetime. But his most remarkable success was the 1943 children's novel *The Little Prince* or *Le Petit Prince*. [10]

Children's Literature and other elements related to the childhood universe are the essence of artworks like *The Little Prince* or *Ghibli* films but sometimes they can have their importance dismissed or easily brushed off. This is notably a misjudgment, because not only are they valuable for their initial purposes, but they also offer motifs to studies exploring the nuanced presentation of humanistic values for children and young adults, associated with Education for Peace in interdisciplinary fields like International Relations, and many others.

In the field of Literature, according to the concept that illustrates the reception phenomenon, proposed by Professor Claus Clüver: "Between the creation of texts and its reception, it is possible to exist even great distances of time and space, and texts created in different times/or cultures will be received in different ways, sometimes even inaccessible to the original target audience." (CLÜVER, 2007, p.20, self-translated, 2024).[11]

Now considering that the reception of works can influence other creations as an everlasting cycle for the history of Humanity. It is possible to perceive the interplay of thematics and ideals in the artistic expressions of creators from different times and nationalities, similarly to cultural exchange. Animations like the ones created by Miyazaki and Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* are examples of meaningful works, appreciated by people across the borders of Japan and France throughout different generations.

## 2. Methodology

Aiming to show the influence by correlation of themes and language from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry to Studio Ghibli. In the several existing literature about the Japanese studio, the ones related to *Grave of Fireflies* and its implications to discussions based on language, structure and theme, were suitable for composing an observation of the possible connection to the recurring themes, ideals and language also present in Antoine's books, with a focus on the conveying manner and effects created in these works from different occasions and mediums. The main text from Saint-Exupéry is his philosophical and semi-biographical story *Terre des Hommes* along with *The Little Prince*. To build a justifiable argumentation, some views elaborated in previous literature are also taken into account to establish a sense of known effects, motifs and use of language in the films and books, such as the

expression of nature, young characters, sensibility, and correlated ideals to the concepts of peace from Masahisa Goi and the unfolding of the reception phenomenon from Claus Clüver, here combined with the idea of an influence/inspiration cycle.

## 3. Works and Expressions

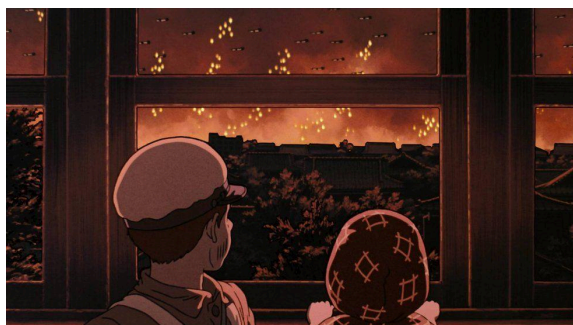
Antoine's literature is explicitly chained to war, for his experience as a war pilot until the end of his brief life, was the foundation motif in most of his books. But he did not solely present war tropes in a "usual" way. In the 1939 book *Terre des Hommes*, within the memoir structure of surviving a plane crash incident in the Sahara desert, Antoine plunged deeply into the heart of humanity's beliefs, actions and sensations, entailing themes like peace, camaraderie/solidarity among mankind, death and life's meaning. Similar themes can also be found in his unfinished piece *Citadelle*, and in the children's novel *The Little Prince* with a young prince as a protagonist who goes on a journey across the universe, the book reflects upon life, childhood, relationships with nature, loss and the human condition. [10]

*Grave of Fireflies* from 1988, plays an uncanny role in building Studio Ghibli's artistic identity, especially for this discussion. Directed by the studio's co-founder Isao Takahata, it has roots in the semi-autobiographical 1967 story of the same name by writer Akiyuki Nosaka. The film portrays the struggle of war orphans, the siblings Seita and his younger sister Setsuko, during the final months of World War II in June 1945, in the devastated city of Kobe, Japan.[1]

With this premise, the animation's visual language creates a closeness and vivid sensation to characters, combined with realistic and well-pondered elements like "silent scenes" and simple actions from characters, which Miyazaki referred to as characteristic of the studio's movies. He calls it the "Ma technique." When interviewed by Roger Ebert in 2002, Miyazaki clapped his hands and said: "The time in between my clapping is Ma. If you just have nonstop action with no breathing space at all, it's just busyness, but if you take a moment, then the tension building in the film can grow into a wider dimension. If you just have constant tension at 80 degrees all the time, you just get numb." [12]

This idea can also be intertwined with Antoine's writing style in most of his works even beyond *The Little Prince*, for the author had the habit of refining a book as much as possible, shortening it numerous times.[10] Both creators also share a common taste for the youthful atmosphere of childhood experiences that are nourishing to their storytelling. Their lives, even with the difference in epoch and nationality came to share yet another thing, their memories were infused with war.[10][7] Though *Grave of Fireflies* was mostly directed by Isao Takahata, Miyazaki's recent production *The boy and*

the Heron also depicted war elements that were quite familiar and correlated to the representation of war in other Ghibli movies, as *The Wind Rises* from 2013, and confirms the reoccurrence of the theme even when the films are directed by Hayao Miyazaki.[1]



**Fig. 1** - Grave of the Fireflies movie “still/silent scene”(Ma technique) shows the representation of war scenarios through a visual language that creates an effect of sensibility. © Akiyo Nosaka / Shinchosha, 1988, All rights reserved. [13]

#### 4. Peace Concept

Following the concepts of Japanese philosopher Masahisa Goi, who preached that by uniting the hearts of humanity under one common message for peace, a great transformation would take place in global consciousness, bringing peace and harmony in our personal lives as well as in the world at large.[14]

Goi dedicated his life to humanitarian causes after his experience with World War II, his message inspired the origin of institutions such as the International Organization for World Peace “May Peace Prevail on Earth”(formerly known as The World Peace Prayer Society) was established in 1988 and “Goi Peace Foundation” was established in 1999 having official relations with UNESCO.[14][15]

The Goi Peace Foundation presents in a declaration of vision and beliefs, the broad and transcendental idea of peace, stating the need for respect for all life forms, within all of its differences, harmony with nature, and balance between material and spiritual in society.[15] This rich view of peace from the embodiment of Masahisa’s words is an elementary orientation to perceive the language in the cinematographic creations of Miyazaki’s studio and Saint-Exupéry’s books.

The paper “The Insertion of Cultural Identity and Ecological Recovery through a Critique of Materialism and Overconsumption in *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbor Totoro*” from the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies*, proposes relevant aspects of an ecological message coined in famous Ghibli movies. Stating nature as one of the main characteristics of the studio’s artistic style.[16] In the previously cited “Ma” technique used by Hayao Miyazaki, there is usually a peaceful landscape combined with a remarkable soundtrack, to balance

the lack of action from the characters, these “moments of contemplation” on the screen are responsible for setting the style identity. One that embodies the enjoyment of the present instance, location and possible inner sensations of the young characters. This style is often compared to Western productions of similar categories, exposing discussion about the representation of the social, political, and philosophical ideas in each culture.

In this scenario, *Grave of Fireflies* has been subject to the international discussion regarding peace education as attested in another article entitled “Peace Education through the Animated Film *Grave of the Fireflies* Physical, Psychological, and Structural Violence of War” in which the author coins the idea that although director Isao does not consider the film as “anti-war”, it is useful to the scope of peace education.[17]

Some factors that contribute to this idea are the pieces that compose the essential plot, which is the sole case of two young siblings and their struggle to survive while the big action (War) is happening in the background. This approach is responsible for inspiring empathy in the viewers, an effect in which the viewer can reflect upon the impacts of war on the individuals involved, from their perspective, as illustrated in the article “Challenge towards War as Grand-Narration Represented in Studio Ghibli’s Film *Graves Of The Fireflies*” that presents a “binary opposition” concept of “Seita vs society”, and the author also states that the condition of Seita and his sister depicts a form of humanism criticism, which is when the existing ideology fails to sustain itself (the war narration) and crumbles apart to the individuals, but they are still entitled to receive the results of their society’s standards and choices at the time[18].

As for Antoine’s Saint-Exupéry’s book, there is another article titled “It’s Such a Small Planet, Why Do You Need Borders?: Seeing Flying in *Le Petit Prince* and Its Screen Adaptations” discusses how “[...] aerial perspectives on children’s understanding of their place in the world, with *Le Petit Prince* envisioning a borderless world of ecological and social unity.”[19] Supporting a noticeable presence of humanistic speech in the book, for the approach of a “borderless world” reasoning with ideals presented by Masahisa Goi, in the words of unity, human potential and once more, the peaceful relation with nature.



**Fig. 2** - Ghibli's Kiki's delivery service film scene shows the relationships of characters with nature as a recurring characteristic of style in visual storytelling. © 1989 Eiko Kadono/Hayao Miyazaki/Studio Ghibli, N, All rights reserved. [13]

## 5. The Expression of Humanity

As mentioned at the beginning of the discussion, although not highly considered by the academic environment, the works of the Japanese director and the French author are undoubtedly popular, for they have received high praises and awards, even as productions oriented to younger audiences. The Little Prince for example has given Saint-Exupéry the record of the most translated author, having been translated into over 300 languages.[20] Such milestones are a step toward contemplating the powerfulness embedded in these stories and their artistic languages.

With the concepts of International Relations, when a change occurs without the use of common force means, this is known as "soft power", and is usually attributed to cultural aspects that create a degree of influence. Therefore, as in the article about peace education, the creations here in focus can be considered as conveyors of action and change to today's reality, for the sense of anti-war messages, through subtle elements, such as cultural productions. [21]

Along with the main children-oriented works, Terre des Hommes has several times in which Antoine strongly expresses his ideals in consonance with what is conceived as being anti-war, and humanistic as in the following quote "In a world that became desert, we are thirsty to find comrades: the taste of shared bread among comrades made us accept the values of war. But we didn't need war to have the warmth of neighbouring shoulders in a path with the same end. War fooled us.[...]Why hate each other? We stand together, carried by the same planet [...]"(Saint-Exupéry, Terre des Hommes, 1939, p.175, self-translated, 2024).[22]

The human factor during the war, which is Antoine's motif, is connected to the sensibilisation created by Studio Ghibli's style of film, as seen in Grave of the Fireflies. The humanistic lenses and the peace messages surface notably from these stories.

The real influence on society that such narratives might cause is not quite easy to calculate, but at least from what is known in the field of Peace Education/International Relations, for example, these narratives do offer some glimpses into the expected changes, so it's already a bright path to begin.

But the evaluation/categorization of impacts must not outshine the intent of the creators, with or without a scheduled moral agenda in the expression of their works, their effort should be recognized and honoured, especially when they have created an artistic legacy filled with a history of talent, throughout many works, with the challenges of creating each one of them thoughtfully as if walking on a long path.

## 6. War and Peace

Considering all the remarks previously made and analysed in this paper. An argument in favour of highlighting the humanistic elements in artworks categorised superficially as "for children", here seen as conveyors of change and composing factors to today's discussion of peace worldwide, especially through peace education, was built based on the views elaborated in previous literature and established through the observation of effects, motifs and use of language in the focus works; as the earlier mentioned: expression of nature, young characters, sensibilization and others. Along with the flourishing of the reception phenomenon, represented as an everlasting cycle in the history of Humanity's creations, referring to the aspects of influence/inspiration, from those who receive to those who create.

And while the amount or preciseness of influence Antoine had in Hayao Miyazaki, still might be discussible, a valid approximation between the artists and their works has been made because of the similar themes, styles and languages while differing in medium, both had a significant amount of importance in growing the value given to children's narratives worldwide.

The war themes narration element was born mostly from the experience of the children these creators once were; with their long to express their spirit, even amidst war scenarios, it unfolds their thoughtful gaze, and how their essence of peace has bloomed in the heart of humanity.

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