

American Censorship of Japanese Media

By Ksenia Baranova

Since I was a child, I have always been fascinated by the creations of Studio Ghibli, a Japanese animation studio, and the mastery of its co-creators, Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata. My enchantment with these films only grew as I got older and my interest in Japanese media expanded to manga and other anime, which I imagine my Korean ancestors were none too pleased about.

Even if you have never watched a Studio Ghibli film, you must have at least heard of the single non-English movie to ever win an Oscar award for Best Animated Film – *Spirited Away*, or the only full-length adaptation of Diana Wynne Jones' novel *Howl's Moving Castle*, or perhaps seen some imagery of the fuzzy, smiling creature Totoro. I would definitely recommend taking an evening out of your life to indulge in a movie or two. These films may seem childish at first glance because of the simplistic animation style, but the intricate plotlines and deep themes make them entertaining for all ages and totally worth watching.

However, it wasn't until I started doing extensive research on the background and behind the scenes of Studio Ghibli that I realised not everyone held Miyazaki and Takahata's work in as high regard as I did. The co-creators of Ghibli both grew up during World War 2 and many of their films reflect that trauma and spread an anti-war message, which was not well received by foreign translators.

In 1984, one year before the official opening of Studio Ghibli, Hayao Miyazaki directed *Kaze no Tani no Naushika*, or *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*. The film follows Nausicaa, a young princess who was unwillingly dragged into a war with a neighbouring kingdom to save not only her people, but the entire ecosystem of her dying planet. These events take place one thousand years after the "Seven Days of Fire", when titans wreaked havoc and caused destruction following a long war.

The film was a hit in Japan, so obviously, an English translation was due. Manson International soon released *Warriors of the Wind*, a heavily cut version of the film. It was shorter than the original by twenty-two minutes, Nausicaa's name was changed to Zandra, and the most important themes, environmentalism and anti-war sentiments, were almost completely removed. For example, in *Nausicaa*, a prominent feature are these huge, bug-like creatures called the 'Ohmu' who are shown to be harmless and docile unless provoked by humans. In *Warriors of the Wind*, the Ohmu are portrayed as inherently aggressive instead.

Nausicaa holds many allusions to post-war Japanese cities and towns, in particular Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the atomic bombs were dropped, which poses the following question: Why in the world America attempt to hide the consequences of their actions to the point that they would so severely edit an animated film, but then expect the opposing forces to fully admit to all their faults?

Another brilliant example of American censorship is Isao Takahata's *Hotaru no Haka – Grave of the Fireflies*. The movie tells a heart-wrenching story of two orphaned siblings, teenager Seita and his four-year-old sister Setsuko, who are trying to survive during the final months of World War 2. As the film starts off with Seita narrating the following line: "September 21st, 1945. That was the day I died." the audience knows from the beginning that unfortunately, due to the cruelty and lack of compassion of the people around them, the pair do not make it.

While an English translation of the film was made, it is incredibly hard to track down online, especially since it was taken off Netflix in many regions. In short, it is only really accessible on DVD. The reason for this is not hard to guess – early in the film, Seita and Setsuko lose their mother in one of the many uncalled-for bombings of Japanese civilian towns done by American forces.

I would like to ask you a question: Please raise your hand if you have heard of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki following the attack on Pearl Harbour. And, be honest now, please raise your hand if you have heard of the incendiary bombs dropped by Americans onto the town of Kobe. I will allow you to make your own conclusions from that.

Eventually, by 1997, Studio Ghibli executives had enough of American censorship. When news came out that an American media distributor was planning to make large edits to *Mononoke-Hime* (*Princess Mononoke*), yet another instalment in Ghibli's anti-war and pro-environmentalism saga, Hayao Miyazaki, who directed the film, arranged for an authentic Japanese katana to be sent to the distributor with a simple, no-nonsense engraving - "No cuts."

Before I leave you today, I would like to present one final example, not by Studio Ghibli this time, but by Toho Company, to demonstrate that this problem is not exclusive to a single studio.

I'm sure everyone here has heard of Godzilla, a giant, mutated lizard known for destroying Tokyo over and over again. The very first *Godzilla* film was released in 1954, entirely in black and white with an all-Japanese cast. When America got the movie, they changed a few major and key details:

By comparison, the least serious offense is that they edited in a new character – a white Canadian reporter – for absolutely no reason. He serves no purpose to the plot but to make the film more marketable to Western audiences who may not have been as willing to watch a Japanese film, especially after all the anti-Japanese propaganda spread during and following World War 2.

The most emotional part of the movie is when a school choir sings the 'Prayer for Peace' over scenes of a burning Tokyo intermingled with shots of adults and children dying in a hospital because of the Godzilla attack. In the English translation the whole sequence is replaced with a scene where the Canadian reporter gets a head injury. Why was this change made? Simple. Godzilla is an

embodiment of nuclear weapons and the destruction that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused. The texture of Godzilla's scales is even modelled after radiation scars. The original film ends with a warning against the use of nuclear weapons, while the American version ends on a happy and hopeful note, as if the tragedy didn't happen or did not matter.

For my parting words, I would like to say that most countries are guilty of media censorship, but America is easily one of the worst offenders. We must stop ignoring this issue and start holding translators and media distributors accountable for trying to cover up and alter the true messages of foreign movies and other forms of media. Thank you.