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# Triumph OF THE PAST

**Fish will not live where the water is too clear. But if there is duckweed or something, the fish will hide under its shadow and thrive. Thus, the people will live in tranquility if certain matters are a bit overlooked or left unheard.** -Yamamoto, *Hagakure*

## March 2004: White Moments and Miyazaki's *Kiki*

Donald Richie, writing about *The Seven Samurai*, makes the following observation:

Besides technique, however, there is something else about this film (and about most of Kurosawa's pictures) that defies analysis because there are no words to describe the effect. What I mean might be called the irrational rightness of an apparently gratuitous image in its proper place. . . . [A scene] moves me to tears and I have no idea why. . . . Part of the beauty of such scenes is just that they are "thrown away" as it were, that they have no place, that they do not ostensibly contribute, that they even constitute what has been called bad film-making. It is not the beauty of these unexpected images, however, that captivates . . . but their mystery. They *must* remain unexplained. It has been said that after a film is over all that remains are a few scattered images, and if they remain then the film was memorable. . . . Further, if one remembers carefully one finds that it is only the uneconomical, mysterious images which remain. Kurosawa's films are filled with them. . . . Actually, these isolated images are his most beautiful, and (because so mysterious) his most profound.<sup>1</sup>

I believe Daniel Neyer is referring to exactly the same phenomenon when he says: "There are moments in the great stories of the West, when we see Christ clearly in the faces of His creatures; like St. Christopher, we suddenly realize that Christ comes to us through humanity. . . . There are white moments in those stories, moments of white heat, when the heart warms and expands and enables one to feel Christ's presence."<sup>2</sup>

This can be a whole aesthetic unto itself. One can say that such transcendent white moments are the be-all and end-all of the aesthetic experience and that the story or film itself is just a vehicle to give birth to them. The story or film is economical or uneconomical as it moves swiftly or sluggishly to the next white moment. Miyazaki's films, like Kurosawa's, are filled with such moments. Moreover, with repeated viewing, not only does one find the white moments undiminished in power, but their numbers increase.

Music contributes enormously to this effect because music speaks to the

heart. Kurosawa and Miyazaki have in common that both were blessed with gifted musicians who worked intimately with them over a long period of time. The Miyazaki scores by Jo Hisaishi have so "become" the films that it is impossible to imagine them with any other score.

*Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989, 102 minutes) is the first Miyazaki movie I ever saw, an unforgettable, life-changing experience. I can say of it what Miyazaki said of *Hakujaden*: "I have an embarrassing confession. I fell in love with the heroine of a cartoon movie."

## The Story

Kiki, a thirteen-year-old country girl, is lying on her back on a grassy slope, listening to the radio and enjoying the breeze. When she hears the forecast—a clear, full-moon night—she starts up and runs home. Her mom is mixing liquids in glass vessels. Kiki says, "I'm leaving tonight." Her mom is taken by surprise, and the liquid in the vessel in her hand goes poof and turns black. She is a witch, you see, and her magic is affected by her feelings. Kiki means she is leaving for her year-long witch's internship: she must find her own town and support herself.

"You know you tend to make impulsive decisions," complains her black cat, Jiji. Jiji is the eternal pessimist, to whom the bottle is always half empty, rather than half full, and every silver lining has a black cloud. He provides a sort of Greek chorus of complaints and defeatist comments to their adventures.<sup>3</sup>

She shows off her black outfit with red hair-ribbon to her proud father: "When did you get so big?" He lifts her up like when she was little, and she collapses on his neck in a big hug. The first white moment. It wouldn't be a white moment if the music and the actors didn't conspire with the animation and the sympathy with the characters from previous scenes to make it one. But there it is.

How do I know it is a white moment? My eyes well up with tears every time I see it. Would everyone respond the same way? There are people too insensitive to respond to white moments at all; but I believe that anyone who can be moved by white moments at all will be moved by this one, for it is particularly powerful. Some people will see less, some people, more of what is there; but I don't think people will just pick out different moments altogether. How does Miyazaki achieve these moments? There is only one way an artist can do this: he has to feel his way and create what moves *him*.

All the neighbors and her school-friends gather to see Kiki off. She mounts her broom and concentrates, and her hair and dress begin to move as if blown by a wind of their own. Then there is an electric crackle and boom, she's off, ricocheting off a tree ("Clumsy as usual!"). In this (as in all of his movies), Miyazaki indulged his passion for flight. Kiki and Jiji head south toward the sea, to which she feels an attraction.

However, the forecast was wrong. A sudden lightening crash, and down comes the rain! Kiki ducks into an open door in the roof of a sleeping train, landing in hay, and snuggles in for the night. When she wakes, the train is moving, and there is the sea! Then she sees "a city floating on the sea" (patterned

after 1940s Stockholm), where she and Jiji alight. As they fly past the clock tower, the little man says, "My, a witch! How rare!" and assures Kiki the town hasn't had a witch for quite some time. This is typical of how Miyazaki blends the supernatural and the everyday. Kiki's appearance in town evokes surprise but not disbelief or horror.

She flies down at street level, smiling for good PR; but her clumsiness nearly causes a traffic accident. The hotel won't take a minor with no ID, and when the clock strikes six, they still have not found a place to stay. Very discouraging! They are wandering when a pregnant woman, Osono, runs out of a bakery with a nipple in her hand. Her last customer left it but is already far down the hill, out of earshot. Kiki offers to deliver it, takes it, and hops off the wall. Osono sees her fly with a delighted *wow!* It is a white moment. Kiki, all alone in the big city for the first time, so needs a friend, has so much to give, is so eager to prove herself. This is her first little triumph, her first chance to be of use.

She returns, mission accomplished. Finding Kiki and Jiji have no place to stay, Osono offers them a room. Her merry laugh puts you right at ease. (The voice of Osono is a particularly happy feature of this film.) Kiki is so happy. Another white moment. In the morning, Kiki says she's thinking of starting a flying delivery service for her witch's internship. Osono says how about no rent, free phone, and breakfast if Kiki will watch the bakery sometimes? She takes Kiki right into her heart. Another white moment.

A muscley man who never talks and never smiles is a little intimidating. Such is Osono's husband. But we are subtly shown another side of him in that he is particularly aware of the cat, Jiji. For example, he nonchalantly spins trays around on his big hands watching Jiji out of the corner of his eye—and then winks at him (sending him into a sweating fit).

Kiki gets her first delivery, a bird cage with a black cat-plush inside that looks just like Jiji. It's a birthday present for a little boy. On the way, however, a tremendous wind causes her to crash in the treetops. She regains the air only to discover the cage empty. To make her delivery on time, Kiki delivers Jiji as the plush and returns to the woods. She recovers the plush from a painter, Ursula, who had picked it up, and so makes a new friend. Meanwhile fainthearted Jiji as plush has been adopted by a big, sleepy old dog. When he picks Jiji up in his mouth, Jiji nearly dies of fright; but the wise dog is just taking him outside, where Kiki is waiting to make the exchange.

When Kiki returns to the bakery, there is a carved wooden logo in the window advertising her delivery service. She leaps into the arms of the intimidating man and gives him a great big hug. White moment.

One day Kiki is minding the store when Tombo, a boy who has been following her around and whom she has been snubbing, comes in to bring her a written invitation. He and the Flight Club want her to be guest of honor that evening. He'll come back at 6:00 to pick her up.

Kiki shows up at a home where two old ladies live to pick up a herring pot-pie for delivery; but the oven is on the fritz, and the pie is still raw. Noticing an old wood-burning oven in the wall like they use in the country, Kiki offers to help. The pie is eventually delivered safely in the pouring rain to an uncaring granddaughter, and Kiki gets back soaking wet just in time to see Tombo leave.

In the morning, she wakes up sick.

In a few days when she is feeling better, Osono sends her on a walking delivery to a nearby address that turns out to be Tombo. He invites her to ride on his bike to see the Antarctic-bound airship that is all the news because it has made an emergency landing in the city. Tombo's bike has a big pedal-driven propeller on it because when he finishes it, it's going to be a man-powered airplane.

They zoom down the hill on this, and when Tombo suddenly pulls up to avoid a car, the bike lifts into the air! They go sailing over the guard-rail and beyond until the propeller spins off and they are dumped in the grass. Once they know they are okay, Kiki laughs and laughs and laughs so hard her stomach hurts. She says, "I was so scared," and Tombo says, "Me too!" This is the first time she's let loose like this since she's come to the city. A white moment. Tombo asks if their flying had anything to do with Kiki's magic, and Kiki isn't sure. They make friends with one another. However, when he wants her to join his pals to have a look inside the airship, Kiki gets mad and walks off.

She falls onto her bed exhausted after the long uphill climb. She says, "Jiji, I'm not myself. I just made a friend and suddenly I got spiteful. The gentle and sunny Kiki went somewhere else." And Jiji, strangely for him, acts just like a cat: he ignores her. Later, he acts the same way, and even meows. She tries her broom: she can't fly! If we remember the opening scene with Kiki's mother and the liquid that went poof, we realize that it is Kiki's new and confusing feelings about Tombo that are interfering with her magic.

A pleasant distraction comes in the form of Ursula, who invites Kiki out to her cabin for an overnight. In the cabin, Kiki sees a magical picture—housetops, a starry sky, and a girl riding a winged horse. Otherworldly music. A white moment. The flying girl was inspired by Kiki. Ursula's laugh is infectious and brimming with good nature, just like Osono's.

While Kiki models, they have a conversation:

U: Magic is like art. I, too, don't paint very well sometimes. K: Really? What do you do? . . . I used to fly without thinking. Now I can't even remember how. U: All you can do when it gets like that is struggle. Draw and draw again. K: But if I really can't fly . . . U: I stop drawing. I walk, look at the scenery, take a nap. Or even nothing at all. Then all of a sudden, I want to draw. K: Does that really happen? U: It does.

Clearly, this is from Miyazaki's experience as a drawing artist. Later, they pick it up again:

U: When I was about your age, I decided I wanted to draw. I loved to draw so much, I'd never want to stop to get some sleep. Then one day I couldn't draw. I drew and drew but didn't like what I'd done. Up to that point, my drawings were unoriginal, things I'd seen before. I knew I had to draw something that was from myself. K: Did it hurt? U: It still does. But now I know what it means to draw. Magic isn't just chants. K: They say you fly by your gift. U: Witch gifts. I like that. Witch's gifts, artist's gifts, and baker's gifts. It is a power that God or someone gave to you. Because of that, we have to go through some hardship. K: I never thought about magic. I just thought the studying was an old custom. I'm very glad to hear what you told me today. I could only struggle on alone. U: You see, I thought about erasing this picture a lot. K: Even when it's this beautiful? U: When I met you I saw your suffering face. I thought "This is it!" Then I got the urge to paint. K: Meanie! U: So we're even.

Next morning Kiki gets a message that the old lady with the herring pot-pie would like her to stop by again, so she does. She has baked Kiki a cake with her logo on it. White moment. On TV the airship is getting ready to resume its journey when suddenly there is chaos. The airship is sweeping around out of control hanging by only a few cables. Then it breaks lose entirely with a boy still hanging on—Tombo! Kiki dashes to the scene.

She takes a broom from a street-sweeper and mounts it. As she concentrates, all goes eerily quiet. Can she fly? Finally there is the familiar crackle, her hair and dress move as if blown by a wind of their own, and she's off. White moment. As she tries to maneuver near him, Tombo's strength gives out, and he falls (gasp!), but Kiki dives and grabs him in midair. She's a hero! Jiji shows up and takes his usual place on her shoulder.

The closing credits give little scenes from later on. Tombo has completed his man-powered airplane, and he and Kiki fly together. Osono has had her baby and her husband is acting uncharacteristically goofy. Jiji is also a father and is teaching the little one to ride a broom, with a training leash. Kiki's witch's outfit has become a craze with little girls. Her first letter home is a happy one. Her mother is so excited when it arrives that her vial goes poof again.

## Thoughts

One of the first things you notice watching a Miyazaki movie for the first time is the realism of the animation, a trademark of his Studio Ghibli. For example, the way the rain falls. For example, the weight of Kiki's body when she falls into her father's arms or when she collapses exhausted on her bed. For example, the substantiality of wind and clouds. Weather is always a strong presence in Miyazaki just as it is in Kurosawa—and since all his films involve flying, you are up in it.

Then there are Jo Hisaishi's scores providing the emotional coloring for the scenes. Then there are the voices, their emotional trueness, especially the women's: Kiki, Osono, and Ursula are all transparently pure-hearted characters, rich and deep, and utterly convincing. Miyazaki has the gift of conveying depths of feeling economically and thus bringing us at once into the story.

Then there is the subtle brokering between the natural and the supernatural: witch's magic is just an art like any other; or, if you like, all art is supernatural. Life, lived with a pure heart, is a fairy tale—with the same struggle between good and evil and the same happy ending that we expect from a fairy tale. Miyazaki believes this passionately. Ugly, coarse qualities don't make a character more believable, nor do they make him more interesting: they make him ugly and coarse. Miyazaki could certainly embody evil when he wanted to; but in this movie, the evil is Kiki's own doubts and fears. These are what she has to struggle with, but they never make her unlovable to us. That is why we so badly want her to succeed and are so happy when she does.

The broad theme of the film is that Kiki has to lose her art to find it. While her confused feelings about Tombo and the loss of her magic seem to her to be "evil," they are really gifts to her, forcing her to grow in art and in life. So her

vulnerability is really a good thing, the very source of her strength. If only we, as adults, could stay vulnerable like Kiki (and the stronger we become, the more vulnerable we could dare to be), we would never stop growing! The strongest strength is the strength that dozes until it's needed (like the big old dog). And sure enough, when she needs it most, Kiki's magic comes back to her.

In their deep conversation, which occupies the center of the movie, Kiki says she always flew without thinking, and now having to struggle with it causes her pain. Ursula tells her that these talents are gifts that "God or someone" gave them. That person wants us to grow, and so it is not enough just to fly or draw or live heedlessly. One's art must deepen and come more and more from the heart. Suffering is part of the process, and this is what Ursula wanted to express in her painting—suffering that is reborn in wings. Or as that wind-rider Nausicaa puts it, "Life is the light that shines in the darkness!" And as the girl of the flying horse becomes Kiki, Kiki begins to feel her suffering could be a prelude to a wonderful birth—a birth of something good beyond her imagining that "God or someone" plans for her. Life becomes an adventure again!

It is in fact Osono who serves as midwife to Kiki's new birth, for she is the one who gets Kiki and Tombo together, from which follows Kiki's confused feelings and artistic crisis. Fittingly, Osono herself is pregnant. Osono goes into labor while watching the rescue on TV, so she and Kiki "give birth" at the same time.

I found nine white moments in this movie. Some of them almost run into one another, and there are probably more waiting to be revealed by a deeper communion with the film and anticipation of things that are about to happen. The human personality is a miracle. Every act of simple kindness for the sake of a human personality is a miracle. This is Miyazaki's rather simple vision. When he makes you see it too, it's a white moment. His artistry casts its spell on you till you are soft and crumbly; and then a single pebble dislodged brings on the avalanche.

## Notes

1. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 105.
2. *One Sword at Least*, Winter 1998, p. 1.
3. In the English-language dub, Jiji's voice makes him *coarse* (the very opposite of all that is Miyazaki) and so ruins the entire film. In addition, Kiki's voice is too old for her. Watch this movie in Japanese with subtitles or not at all.

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