

Nausicaä, a hopeful memory

by Daniel MacKeith

On a day that I can't remember, on a holiday that is now just another fond memory floating in my mind, I happened to find myself in the Forbidden Planet store in London. I say happened to, the fact is I very consciously sought it out, as massive nerds like myself tend to do. During this little moment of me-time, buried in my own little bubble, isolated from the other worlds around me inhabited by bubbling not-so-alone fellow shoppers, I happened to find myself pleasantly surprised. I was surprised because I had found something that I thought I might never see, and yet had at many points thought about regardless. I had found a book all about the process of the production of Hayao Miyazaki's 1984 film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. A film that had a profound impact on me when I first watched it, in fact all of Miyazaki's works have had a profound impact on me, as they have had on the millions and millions of people who have watched them.

But it wasn't the incredibly well known and world-renowned filmmaker and occasionally controversial figure Hayao Miyazaki who worked on, wrote and directed this film. It was the at the time relatively unknown Hayao Miyazaki who wrote and directed this film, without the kind of worldwide acclaim and criticism that he receives and faces today. Nausicaä has all the trademark aspects of a Miyazaki film, and I would go so far as to argue that it does this job as good if not better than any that Miyazaki has made since. It is a film that gives me hope, as someone who is still finding his footing in the world, who feels unsure about his future, who doesn't know what it holds, who isn't always sure if it's even there, if he will even live to see the outcome of his present struggles, if he will survive the things that at times drag him down and suck the air out of his life. It is a film that tells me that it is never too late to create something that so purely communicates your artistic spirit to the world, that it is never too late to stand up and fight, that it is never too late to find hope, wherever it may come from for you, it is always there, we need only look to it, even if it is the hope to simply live another day.

Miyazaki's films ooze life. Pure life, the kind that wakes you up one day, wherever you are, and reminds you that you are **alive**. Not just surviving, not just living day to day. That you are fully in tune and focused on the wonderful, exciting, breathtaking beauty that is all around you, that you so often take for granted, that

beauty that you may not recognise because you are fully immersed in it. That makes your hair stand on end, that makes you feel as though no matter what happens, no matter what may be weighing you down, there is so much joy within you and within the world, that it will always be there, even if you cannot see it, that it will be waiting for you when you can. That things will be alright. It's a warm hand on your own after a day you couldn't stand, the wind in your hair, an explosion of flavour in your mouth, a song on your lips. It's a reminder that even in a cruel dark unforgiving world, there will always be things to live for, to fight for. The reminder that as long as we are willing to fight for true happiness, we will never be alone.

If I'm waxing poetic in a little too snobby and stick up the ass-ish way for you, then I apologise, it's these kinds of films that spark the drive in me to go on and on in the most insufferable ways possible, pure passion that flows through me and makes me unbearable to anyone within range to be rambled at. Getting back to the point somewhat, it was in that comic bookstore that I really felt what I had thought made Miyazaki's films so special. All too often I think we're fed the idea of the artist's ego. We see someone's works and deem them 'special' that they are above the rest of us, looking down on us even, that they are made of something we are not, and that this makes them worth more than us. Even I am somewhat guilty of this in this very piece of work, it's undeniable that I am putting Miyazaki up on a pedestal somewhat, that my praise for his work makes him seem to be more important than you or I. We put them up on a pedestal and we claim they have some quality that is beyond us, and that this makes them beyond reproach. And all too often, I think we see artists who truly believe this view. We see artists who are unwilling to question themselves, artists who are unwilling to learn, unwilling to even consider that they could ever be wrong. And this goes without saying, but not questioning things is exactly how they stay broken.

What I saw in that book, that I so briefly flicked through, was a man willing to question himself, a man trying to constantly change his work for the better, a man who wasn't just willing to be wrong, but who actively wanted to find out where he was wrong. Miyazaki's level of attention to detail, his level of care, speaks the story of a man who vigorously thought of every aspect of his piece of work. Who put love and care into making sure that each detail mattered, that it was given the attention it deserved, and who wasn't happy with anything lesser than that. It is with that insight

in mind that I would like to assert that, despite what Miyazaki himself may have said otherwise, the things that Nausicaa does, the things that make it stand out, that make it and his other works special, have and always will be a conscious effort by those involved to make a piece of art that dared to question.

We live in a world where we are told that to get what we want we must be strong. We are told that we must be ruthless, that we must be dominant, that we must put ourselves first and foremost, and that we must trample all others who are in our way without mercy. We are told that this is the way things are. Rules of nature, the strong eat the weak, predators and prey, simply how things are. We are told that we must be the same as this, that kindness is weakness, that it's just not that simple. And time and time again this idea of strength is reflected in the art we consume, the films we watch, the things that mould us. They affirm this view through the protagonists they portray, through the battles they fight, through the worlds they live in. They serve to justify the violence that the ruling powers commit all over the world every day. They serve to make us think that war can ever be something that we should cheer for, or that violence can sometimes be something noble.

And then there is Nausicaa. Both the film and the protagonist stand as something and someone that sees the world: Sees the way things are, what people believe is and always will be, what is right and wrong. That see all of this, and in spite of it, because of it, plant their feet in the way of it all, and refuse to budge. That demand that the world change before they do. Nausicaa isn't a brilliant protagonist because she must undergo a journey of self-discovery and change. Nausicaa is a brilliant protagonist because she is introduced to us fully formed: Exactly as she needs to be, from the moment she is introduced to the moment it ends, the film only continues to assert this. It is not Nausicaa who needs to change to accommodate a cruel world, it is a cruel world that needs to change to be a better place for all who live in it. And she knows this, and never for a second doubts that she can make a difference. Her greatest strength isn't that she can kick ass, she can, but the film never attempts to glorify this. Nausicaa's lowest point in the film is in fact when she gives in to rage, when she chooses violence over empathy, over compassion. Her greatest strength is her empathy, her understanding, her compassion. It takes strength to live the way she does, it takes a willingness to be vulnerable, to accept that you could be hurt, to do so anyway. Continually throughout the film Nausicaa opens herself to others, to Teto the fox squirrel, to the Ohms in the forest of decay, to

the gunman who fires at her as she soars through the air towards him, arms open and outstretched, unafraid.

At the beginning of the film, when she befriends Teto, Nausicaa says something that stuck with me throughout the rest of the film, that echoes in every confrontation she and the others in her village encounter, that is reflected in just about every act of violence or aggression throughout the film: 'You're not scared'. Although Nausicaa is a film that has an antagonist, it would be hard to say that there is a true villain to the story. At its heart, there are those that can work through their fear and their pain, to choose to live with compassion, and those that cannot. Anyone can change, just as all it takes is love and trust to change the aggressive fox squirrel into Nausicaa's friend Teto, so too can it help transform those who are angry and scared, show them that they don't need to be, that there is a better way forward. Miyazaki's films are often not so concerned with plot as they are with presenting us with fascinating worlds and engaging characters, and in doing so say something poignant to the viewer. The themes and ideas of these films come to us as we observe, as we take our time to really see things, to not rush, to stand still. This has and always will be reflected in the style the director uses: Time is given to really introduce us to the world, to see how these characters live, to breathe in their lives. The camera often lingers on shots, as though we were passersby stopping and admiring the view. I try to reflect this in my own life myself: To stop and stand still, to take my time, to admire the view.

Miyazaki has denied in the past that the film carries anti-war and pro-feminist themes. And in a way I could believe him, I do think that his primary focus when making the film was to provide something entertaining first and foremost. However, it is no coincidence that these ideas come through regardless. Miyazaki puts his soul into his films, he takes what makes him human and bares it to the world, he takes his wonder, his positivity, his hope, and he uses it to create art that touches these aspects of ourselves that we carry within us. Even the angriest, most scared people have these parts within them. I believe it, I have to. Miyazaki himself is not without fault, the man is notoriously grim, and he has an abrasiveness to him that I have no doubt has caused hurt to those close to him, his son Goro Miyazaki especially. And yet within his own works lies that longing, that longing to change, to face the worst parts of yourself and become better as a result, to face the anger at the injustice of the world, and to choose to be kind regardless. In that moment, in that store,

surrounded by people, I remember briefly feeling more alone than I had in a long time. And in that moment, I saw that book, and I remembered. I remembered to hope, I remembered to nurture and care for the best parts of myself. I remembered to slow down, to stop and admire the view, to enjoy life as it comes, to cherish those moments of happiness. I hope that many more people can continue to do so, inspired by a filmmaker that we won't soon forget.