

AGI Studio 1_ wk9_related work research
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This week I rewatched some Studio Ghibli films. Triggered by the recent news, Studio Ghibli has officially released about 400 high-res (and counting) noncommercial-use illustrations from past works, I went through My neighbor Totoro for some inspirations.

My neighbor Totoro

My neighbor Totoro is a story about the life of the Kusakabe family moving and living in the countryside. The story starts with the Kusakabe family moving into an old house on the hill next to a forest. Mrs. Kusakabe is hospitalized and Mr. Kusakabe sometimes takes the daughters to visit their mother.

After they move in, the girls, Satsuki and Mei, start discovering some interesting creatures that live closely. Their first magical encounter is a group of tiny black fur balls, Susuwatari.

Susuwatari flee away when they gradually open each door in the house. According to the old lady next door, Susuwatari often inhabit abandoned buildings as their home.

One day, Mei is collecting small golden acorns and follows two small creatures into the bushes and discovers the giant tree hole, where the Totoros live, in the end of the bush tunnel. Mei tries to prove her encounter with Totoros after she gets back to her father and sister, but she is not able to find the giant tree. Totoros only reveal themselves in front of kids and when they are willing to.

Satsuki, the elder sister, soon gets her chance to see Totoro herself after. The sisters go to the bus stop to pick up their father on a rainy night. The giant Totoro comes to wait for his bus next to them with a leaf as his umbrella. The sisters get a bag of golden acorns from Totoro before he leaves with the bus-shape cat.

The girls get some bad news from the hospital and get worried. Mei insists that she wants to visit their mother and gets lost on the way by herself. Satsuki goes to seek the help from Totoro to find Mei. Totoro calls out to the cat bus for rescue. The cat bus takes Satsuki to Mei and then takes them to the hospital. The sisters sneak by the window outside of the hospital and find out that the mother is ok and will come home soon.

My neighbor Totoro was released in 1988. It was the first Ghibli film I watched. It makes a wonderful impression on me with its delightful theme song and approachable characters. Compared with other works from Ghibli studio, the narrative of My neighbor Totoro is relatively simple. However, the emotional responses triggered are much more pure and touching than the others.

Like the fresh and often quiet village the Kusakobes move to, the watercolor background scenery brings out a calming sense. We can follow the girls and immerse ourselves in the soothing environment easily. In the peaceful state of mind, it gradually leads the audience to focus on the triggered emotions with the narrative.

The film tells the story from the kid's angle. By presenting the little things the girls do daily, it draws out the vivid connections between the girls and the girls with the family. Mei, the youngest in the family, represents the child the viewer once was and as well as the youthful spirit that is hidden in the bottom of the heart in adulthood. Her reactions to things, people and events

around her are direct and bold. She's happy when her needs are met. She's sad when she cannot be with Satsuki when she goes to school. She's angry when she cannot visit the mother as promised.

On the other hand, Satsuki, the elder sister, has a slightly more complex behavior. She tries to take over the role of the mother, taking care of the family as best as she can. In the process, she learns to contain her emotions in order for things to run smoothly. She works hard on playing the role, assuming that by doing so, their mother will return sooner. However, as a ten-year-old-elementary-school-girl, she is technically still a kid herself. There are times, she lets out the child side of her, like when she wakes Mei up in the middle of the night and cheerfully dances around the little acorn garden with Totoro and especially the time she discovers Mei has gone missing and bursts out into tears when she turns to Totoro for help. The latter is the side of Satsuki that she would never show in front of her younger sister. Satsuki shows how people suppress their emotions while transforming into adulthood.

Weather Totoro is the imaginary friend of Satsuki and Mai or it is actually the guardian of the forest, it represents the friendly and warm support for the girls while they work through their obstacles in life. The character of Totoro is like the film itself, which tickles the inner child of the viewers and also brings along the warm and fuzzy comfort.

The thing that makes this film one of my favorite animations of all time is the fact that the characters are easily relatable. The relationships between the characters are vivid and the emotions within the relationships are well-stacked with the simple narrative structure. Hayao Miyazaki has his unique technique of building up the background stories and presenting layouts of the characters in a subtle calming style. In the process, the relationships and emotions of the characters reveal are very well crafted (realistic), the viewers are more likely to accept the fact that the fictional characters are also real within the conditions. While the viewers enjoy the delightful visual arts, they are also immersing in the wonder world with Totoro. I believe this research is helpful for not only for my character and background design but also building my character narratives.