

City and Mobility Representation in the Films of Studio Ghibli

Priya Singh, Indian Institute for Human Settlements, India

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Abstract

The paper looks at the representation of cities in films, particularly animated films by Studio Ghibli, and the role of mobility in these representations. Highlighting the historical significance of city representation in cinema and its influence on urban discourse, the paper explores how the films by Studio Ghibli depict cities and urban mobility. The films *Whisper of the Heart*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and *Only Yesterday* are chosen for analysis. The selected films are analysed for their urban landscapes, cultures, and the ways in which different modes of mobility are presented. The study aims to understand how images of mobility are constructed in these movies, the underlying messages conveyed through the portrayal of mobility, and the meanings attached to different modes of transportation. By examining the films' depiction of sustainable and efficient transportation options and pedestrian-friendly urban spaces, the study seeks to provide possible insights for improving urban planning and design. The methodology involves both quantitative analyses of explicit mobility scenes and qualitative analyses of the role of mobility in the narrative. The study aims to shed light on the representation of mobility in urban settings and its implications for public attitudes and urban design.

Keywords: City in Films, Urban Mobility, Urban Geographies, Studio Ghibli, City Representation

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Introduction to city representation in Films

The history of representing the city in cinemas is long and robust. City representation in visual media has helped shape the discourse around urbanism in no short part, which gave birth to a unique relationship between city, spaces and media. Cities have been a muse in various forms of literature, be it books, movies or songs — fiction or nonfiction, live-action or animated. The cityscape and the screenscape have long been interconnected. Films have developed into an archive of sorts of the changes the urban landscape has undergone (Hallam, 2010). The transformation of cities throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be traced by studying the different tropes and narrative conventions that shape films about urban settings. As early production of films emerged in the urban areas, since its inception, films have shown life in the city (Bruno, 2007). Even films set in the near or distant future, mostly science fiction, comment on the existing urban structure by imagining the future layout of urban living (Long, 2019). There is an intrinsic urbanism to cinemas and they serve to produce the city, both literally and imaginatively. (Wojcik, 2017) While mostly in live-action films, animated films too have a distinct ability to articulate unanswered conundrums in public attitudes towards cities, by making use of realistic aesthetics and anthropomorphism in their animation. (Tang, 2019) This paper focuses on city representation and the depiction of mobility in animation. And more specifically in the animated films of Studio Ghibli.

What is Studio Ghibli?

Studio Ghibli is a Japanese animation/anime studio founded in 1985 by Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata, and Toshio Suzuki. Since its inception, it has grown to become one of the most well-known and respected animation studios not just in Japan but internationally. And ever since 1985, Studio Ghibli has been portraying the evolution of Japanese society through its stories. *Oneness with nature* is long-considered a part of Japanese culture, and the stories by the Studio often tell tales that deal with environmental issues and the relationship between humans and nature. The studio's films also depict a deep respect for nature and a reverence for traditional Japanese culture.

Anime is the Japanese counterpart of animated media. It is a particular form of animation, having a distinctive Japanese disseminated technique often distinguished by rich illustrations, characters with inflated representations, and creative themes. The roots of anime and *manga* (the comic counterpart) can be traced back to woodblock printing in the Edo period (the 17-19th century), which was used to portray everyday observations in life. Over the years, anime has changed and progressed over the years, from its origins in cutout animation and silent short films to its current use of CGI and online streaming. (Lindwasser, 2018) Portraying multiple characteristics and themes such as realism, fantasy, humour, violence, sexuality, and social commentary, manga and anime are unique forms of expression that reflect Japanese culture and society (Topinio, 2014).

The history of anime thus is one that not only attracts many people but is also rooted in portraying the daily life of Japanese people. A product that was consumed to escape the everyday pressures and anxieties of living.

Why were the films by Studio Ghibli selected?

Over the course of the late 20th century, around 80% of Japan's population became urban, which by the late 2000s grew to 90%. While the rapid and sustained economic growth in the

post-war era did greatly increase the standards of living for virtually all Japanese people, this growth came at a considerable social and environmental cost. And these films to an extent have been able to capture the impacts of different urban planning and development strategies adopted. Additionally, the films by the Studio have long been analysed by different scholars for understanding different themes like nature and spirituality (Kirkpatrick, 2017) growing up (Singh, 2021) environmentalism (Pan, 2022), and motivations (Singh, 2021), among others. This allows for building further into this literature.

Why were the cities in these films selected?

Studio Ghibli films were chosen for analysis because while most films of the studio feature young adult protagonists, who are based in a magical/supernatural realm, the settings are inspired by real-life locations. And these locations are not limited to one nation or region, but rather throughout the globe, making the cities in these films truly global, celebrating multiculturalism. Since planning as a discipline and practice is also a highly interdisciplinary and diverse one, the city's depiction in its films has the potential to provide some form of insight for planning professionals.

Residing, working, and recreating are spatially separated activities. To be able to perform each, the residents of the space indulge in travelling. To be able to travel on foot, between these spots, mixed-used neighbourhoods need to be near high-density areas. When taking a walk in most cities of the world, one cannot help but be hit by the dysfunction of the city. But when planned per the needs of its residents, it can become a welcome part of daily routine, and the same is the experience of some Ghibli protagonists.

Why was mobility representation in these films focused on?

Studies have examined the representation of cities in cinema, including the work of urban geographers such as Edward Soja and David Harvey. However, limited research has been conducted on portraying mobility in cities through the lens of films, especially animation. Literature shows that the representation of mobility in contemporary urban cinema impacts public perceptions and attitudes toward cities and urban mobility (Friedberg, 2002; Kronenburg, 2010) and how animation particularly can furnish an effective tool for conveying and challenging chief narratives about urban space and identity (Chang, 2013; Hosea, 2015).

There is also a wide scholarship available that looks at the reciprocal relationship between films and social issues like alcohol abuse (Dalton et al. 2002) violence (Anderson & Bushman 2002), and gender inequality (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2008). The depiction of mobility in films - live-action or animated - thus has the power to shape public attitudes towards issues around urban mobility. The literature on the decline in exploratory mobility (Gilbert and O'Brien, 2005) and the role of design, urban form and transport to curb that (Saelens & Handy, 2008; Wood et al., 2010) is also continually pouring in.

Transportation is a key element in their films and is often used to explore themes such as environmentalism, modernisation, and social change. From becoming symbols of freedom and defiance against authority to reflecting the everyday realities of life to using different modes of transport to reflect the protagonist's journey through different stages of maturity, transport and mobility mean much more than merely moving and a means of moving, from one point to another.

Since engaging with and exploring the city through mobility - especially by active transport (walking, cycling, and public transport) - is a frequently demonstrated part of most films by the studio, looking at this form of mobility in these films can help us to understand what are these spaces where this form of mobility gets supported and enhanced - what these spaces look like - and how they can be replicated in real-world scenarios. Their films' depictions of cities can be seen as an extension of their emphasis on the interaction between humans and the environment and can provide unique insights into the representation of mobility in urban settings.

Studying the depiction of mobility in Studio Ghibli films can provide insights into how urban planning and design can be improved to accommodate and enhance the movement of people. For example, the films emphasise the importance of sustainable and efficient transportation options, such as walking paths, public transit and cycling infrastructure. At the same time, many Studio Ghibli films also depict the importance of pedestrian-friendly urban spaces, such as the winding streets of the witch's town in "*Kiki's Delivery Service*" or the lively marketplaces in "*Spirited Away*", spaces which prioritise the needs of people over cars and encourage walking and cycling as viable modes of transportation.

Research Questions

This study aims to look at mobility as a cinematic, a visual experience, in the films by Studio Ghibli. Mobility and travel are often motifs in most of their films. The goal of the study is to understand and answer questions about:

- How images of mobility are constructed and strengthened in these movies, in relation to the narrative?
- What underlying messages can be derived from the portrayal of mobility in cities in these films?
- How do Studio Ghibli films depict different modes of mobility (e.g. walking, cycling, flying) and what meanings are attached to each?

Methodology

To capture the nuances of mobility portrayed in the films and to see how much it plays a role in each movie, the study counts the relative amount of film time depicting mobility, a process adopted in other studies to look at the portrayal of smoking, and obesity among others (Escamilla et al. 2000; Himes and Thompson 2007). This includes looking at, for each film, the number of times mobility is shown and its duration as a percentage of the total movie time. The main mode (car, bicycle, foot etc.) of transport, in each film, will also be noted.

While implicit mobility exists in most films, for ease, the study would only look at explicit mobility and focus on how it is portrayed when shown explicitly. Explicit mobility furnishes its audience with particulars of the trip, thus constructing a certain mobility culture: what modes of transport are used by the protagonist and the antagonist? What is the experience of using a certain type of mode (pleasant, exhausting)? What are the purposes of using a vehicle? What do these choices express about the characters?

Additionally, to qualitatively understand the above collected quantitative data, the study will also analyse the role of mobility in the narrative.

While as the study progresses, more films would be analysed, for now, the paper looks at three selected films for content analysis, which are:

1. *Whisper of the Heart*
2. *Kiki's Delivery Service*
3. *Only Yesterday*

To look at how the city is presented in each film and the role of mobility in the narrative, the paper looks at three elements in each film - the urban landscape it portrays, the urban culture it shows and the way urban mobility is put forth. This understanding is derived from both an analysis of the plot and the quantitative data on mobility presented by the films.

Plot analysis

Whisper of the Heart is a 1995 Japanese animated romantic drama film by Yoshifumi Kondō and Hayao Miyazaki, based on Aoi Hiiragi's manga. It tells the love story of Shizuku, a book-loving girl, and Seiji, a violin-making boy who checked out her library books to get her attention. The film also explores creativity, dreams, and growing up. Shizuku meets Seiji at his grandfather's antique shop, where she is drawn to a cat statuette called The Baron. Seiji leaves for Italy to study violin-making. Shizuku decides to write a fantasy story about The Baron to test her writing skills. She finishes her story and gives it to Seiji's grandfather, who gives her feedback. Shizuku reunites with Seiji on a hilltop. He tells her that he loves her and wants to marry her someday. She realises that she loves him too and wants to be a writer. They promise to support each other's dreams.

Transport and mobility symbolise the characters' journeys of self-discovery and growth. Shizuku travels by train or bike, following her curiosity and imagination. She finds the antique shop and learns about Seiji's passion by following a cat on a train and riding a bike with him. Seiji travels by plane to Italy, where he follows his dream. His departure inspires Shizuku to work on her own dream. Transport and mobility connect the characters across distances and enable them to explore their identities, interests, and goals.

Kiki's Delivery Service is a 1989 Japanese animated fantasy film by Hayao Miyazaki, based on the 1985 novel by Eiko Kadono. It tells the story of Kiki, a 13-year-old witch who leaves home with her cat Jiji to train and come of age in a new town. She starts a delivery business using her broom and makes friends, but also faces challenges and loses the power to fly. Kiki arrives at the port city of Koriko and finds a place to stay at a bakery owned by Osono, a pregnant woman. She offers to deliver goods by broomstick as a way of earning her keep. She meets Tombo, a boy who loves aviation and is fascinated by her flying ability. She also meets Ursula, a painter who lives in the woods. Kiki's delivery service becomes popular, but she also encounters difficulties, such as losing a black cat toy that she has to deliver, getting caught in a storm, and having trouble with a spoiled customer. She also feels lonely and out of place among Tombo's friends. She becomes ill and loses her confidence and her magic. Kiki visits Ursula, who advises her to find her inspiration and passion again. Kiki realises that she loves flying and that she has made many friends in the town. She regains her magic when she has to rescue Tombo from a runaway airship. She flies with him and is cheered by the townspeople.

Transport and mobility are central to the film, as they represent Kiki's freedom, identity, and connection. Kiki uses her broom as a means of transport and work, but also as a way of expressing herself and having fun. She enjoys flying with Tombo and his flying machine,

which shows their mutual interest and attraction. She also travels by train and bike, exploring the town and its surroundings. Transport and mobility allow Kiki to experience new things, meet new people, and find her place in the world.

By focusing on public facilities, the films of Studio Ghibli not only romanticise them but also answers the question of how to better design our public spaces to make them more utilitarian for residents. Making the characters use public spaces like a bench in the park, a seat in the public library, or on public transport, to further the plot than placing it in a cafe or pay-to-use spaces, they present a counterculture which opposes the existing methods of enjoyment that are given to us in the forms of advertisement spectacle and consumption. It shows us a communal city. One reclaimed by its residents. These cities are designed around the human foot. They are places that are socially, environmentally and economically vibrant.

Only Yesterday is a 1991 Japanese animated drama film by Isao Takahata, based on the 1982 manga of the same name by Hotaru Okamoto and Yuko Tone. It tells the story of Taeko, a 27-year-old unmarried woman who works in Tokyo and decides to take a trip to the countryside to help with the safflower harvest. She recalls memories of her childhood in 1966, when she was a fifth-grader dealing with family, school, and love issues. She also meets Toshio, a farmer who makes her question her life choices. Taeko remembers various episodes from her past, such as her first crush, her struggle with maths, her rebellion against her father, her first menstruation, and her dream of becoming an actress. She also reflects on how she has changed and how she has stayed the same. She compares her urban lifestyle with the rural one and learns about farming and nature. She develops a friendship with Toshio, who shares her interest in organic farming and music. He also encourages her to follow her heart and pursue her happiness. Taeko faces a dilemma when she has to choose between returning to Tokyo or staying in the countryside with Toshio. She realises that she loves him and that she wants a different life than the one she has been living. She decides to stay and start a new chapter of her life.

Transport and mobility are important in the film, as they represent Taeko's journey of self-discovery and transformation. Taeko travels by train, car, bike, and foot, experiencing different modes of transport and different landscapes. She also travels between the past and the present, revisiting her childhood memories and reevaluating them from an adult perspective. She travels from the city to the country, exploring a different culture and environment. Transport and mobility allow Taeko to connect with herself, with others, and with nature.

By depicting the gap between rural and urban living, the film shows the monotony and loneliness urban life brings. Through repetitive and condensed building structures, it showcases the over-urbanised city, which aces at being impersonal. Their citizens are nondescript. As more people come into these vehicle-centric cities, they experience more solitude, loneliness, and loss of public life, which Taeko does. A product less of cold human behaviour and more of an urban design that encourages the privatisation of space.

Table 1: Table discussing the urban landscape the films portray, the urban culture they show and the way urban mobility is put forth

	Urban Landscape	Urban Culture	Urban Mobility
Whisper of the Heart	<p>a mixture of modern and traditional elements</p> <p>contrast between the crowded and noisy streets and the quiet and serene parks, hills and forests</p>	<p>shows the characters interact with different people, places and media in the city, such as librarians, shopkeepers, teachers, classmates, books, music and films</p>	<p>the city as a network of transportation modes that enable the characters to move across different places and space</p> <p>each mode of mobility has different meanings and implications for the characters' experiences and relationships in the city</p>
Kiki's Delivery Service	<p>uses various cinematic techniques, such as long shots, pans, zooms and tracking shots, to convey the sense of space and movement in the city</p>	<p>the city as a diverse and dynamic place that offers various opportunities for learning, creativity and entertainment</p> <p>the characters express their individuality and identity through their hobbies, interests and styles in the city</p>	
Only Yesterday	<p>uses various cinematic techniques, such as flashbacks, cuts, fades and dissolves, to convey the sense of time and change in the city</p>	<p>the challenges of the city, such as peer pressure, social norms, gender roles and expectations</p> <p>uses various narrative devices, such as voice-over, dialogue, songs and radio broadcasts, to convey the sense of culture and identity in the city</p>	<p>the city as a network of transportation modes that enable Taeko to move across different places and spaces in her childhood and adulthood</p>

Findings

Table 2: Table depicting the quantitative elements of mobility in the three films

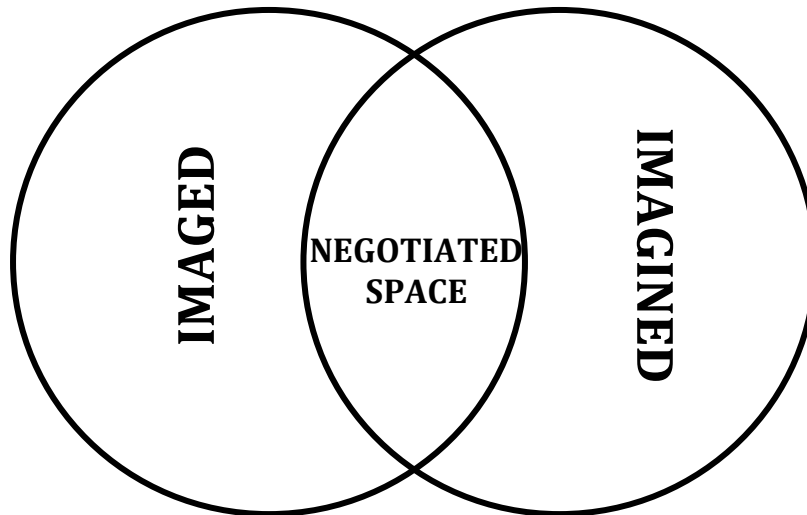
Films	Film Duration (minutes)	Mobility Representation (minutes)	Mobility Representation (% of movie time)	No. of times mobility is shown	Different means of transportation shown
Whisper of the Heart	111	19.5	17.6	25	Bicycle, train, bus, car, plane
Kiki's Delivery Service	103	28.5	27.7	32	Broomstick, bicycle, train, bus, car, airship
Only Yesterday	118	15.5	13.1	18	Train, bus, car, tractor
<i>Average</i>	<i>110.67</i>	<i>21.16</i>	<i>19.53</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Trains, buses, cars</i>

Table 2 shows a quantitative analysis of the three films. They include different variables for explicit mobility shown in the films. On average, around 20 percent of the movie's duration was spent on showcasing some form of explicit mobility. Additionally, in all these three films, there is a common theme in the story that explores the protagonists' experiences with their cities. One common essence of all three films is that they have a strong bond with the spaces around them. They frequently indulge in walking, admiring the city as a work of art, and taking their audience along. As two of the three protagonists are adolescents, too young to own a personal vehicle and too old to be accompanied by family, we see them on solo adventures. When they walk from one place to another, we walk with them, taking the city in from the pace of a walk. They also heavily use public spaces and amenities in their everyday lives. This focus on the public facilities of a city, in addition to the active mobility of its character, creates an almost romantic vision of walkable cities in our minds.

Discussion

The commonality between looking at the city and mobility depiction in these films is the negotiations that happen in the work of the Studio (the image) and its different types of imaginations. In other words, there is a connection between the imaged and the imagined. For instance, the depiction of cities in their work (imaged) is contrasted with different (and often) negotiated imaginations of the city.

Image 1: Image depicting the negotiated spaces created by films when the ‘imagined’ city meets the ‘imaged’ city on screen



These imaginations have embedded values in them. The importance of walkability is a value-laden imagination of an ideal city. The studio's work negotiates (in particular ways) with these imaginations when depicting (or rather imaging) their city. This tension also plays out in the environment, climate and technology conversation in these films too, but those are separate analyses.

Conclusion

Storytelling is a powerful tool. It allows us to make sense of our present and reimagine our future. Watching stories in the form of films has long been a form of entertainment. Though primarily storytelling mediums, they have also proven to be an important way of learning. The spiritus mundi surrounding animations is that they are a rather callow form of art, which hold little to no value beyond the realm of entertainment. It is often dismissed as being rather facile, a product for kids.

But the films of Studio Ghibli have successfully challenged this conception. Viewed, liked and discussed by adults as much as by kids. With their captivating characters and delightful animation, they are a work of art. Generally, when ‘art’ and ‘cinema’ are used in conjunction, the product is assumed to be detached from the masses and made to be understood by only a few. But these films have defied this understanding as well. They are fine examples of entertainment with integrity. They not only captivate their audiences, leaving them with many thinking points on how to well plan and design a city, how to become more climate-conscious and how to ensure overuse of technology does not degrade the environment.

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Contact email: priyas@iihs.ac.in