THEORIZING THE GHIBLI EFFECT: A CRITIQUE OF AI, AESTHETIC THEFT AND THE CRISIS OF AUTHORSHIP IN THE CORRIDORS OF POWER

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Abstract: This article theorizes *The Ghibli Effect*, a techno-cultural phenomenon where generative AI simulates the visual style of Studio Ghibli while eroding its emotional, ethical and ontological depth. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Theodor Adorno, Donna Haraway and Michel Foucault, it conceptualizes AI's aesthetic theft that severs artistic authorship from lived experience, memory and intentional labour. Studio Ghibli's celebration of slow life, relational existence and patient creativity is contrasted with the mechanical reproduction and capitalization of artistic forms. Through the frameworks of aura, authorship and situated aesthetics, the authors argue that algorithmic reproduction destabilizes cultural memory and signals a crisis in contemporary art. *The Ghibli Effect* is not mere stylistic mimicry but an ethical rupture in creative labour displaced by extractive automation. It highlights paradoxes of slow existence, commodified sensibility, and the loss of memory in machine-made art. Ultimately, the phenomenon is situated within broader socio-religious and philosophical voyages of power, revealing

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how technological infiltration undermines cultural heritage and spiritual imagination, while placing artistic equity at risk as subaltern voices and human creativity are overshadowed by algorithmic authority.

Keywords: *Aesthetic Theft, Algorithmic Reproduction, Aura, Authorship, Ethics, Generative AI, Ghibli Effect.*

1. Introduction

It begins with an old memory of a quiet, beautiful afternoon, mellowed in the much-anticipated summer vacation at school. We sit comfortably on the couch, our mothers by our side, knitting sweaters in shapes and patterns, passed down through generations. The golden sunshine fills up the room, and a sleeping dog snores at our feet while we run crayons on a drawing book to show our favourite teacher after the school reopens. The pictures on the pages come alive, and give the memories a place in our heart for a lifetime. Growing up these scenes from childhood reminds us of that kitchen table set for dinner in *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), the domestic warmth of a left home. The glistening raindrops on Satsuki's umbrella, or the quiet rumble of a countryside bus feels more real than our reality itself. Nothing moves quickly, nor does it need to. It reminds us of a lingering wait for something that felt like an old habit. In *Spirited Away* (2001), we watch as the camera pauses while Chihiro puts on her shoes, takes a breath, and steadies herself before crossing a threshold. These are not essential narrative actions, yet they encapsulate the texture of lived experience, the subtle rituals that evade grandeur but continue to live on in memories, like old sepia-tinted photographs tucked into family albums. These moments, as Hayao Miyazaki describes, are intended to celebrate the little joys of being alive (Gossin, 2015). He brought these 'little joys' (Grajdian, 2021) to his audience through the most creative, sincere and unadulterated medium available to him, Studio Ghibli.

In 1985, amidst Japan's industrial boom and, paradoxically, a lack of support from existing production houses, the critical and commercial success of Nausicaä and the Valley of the Wind, two

of the nation's most celebrated animation filmmakers, Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, collaborated with producer Toshio Suzuki to establish Studio Ghibli (Denison, 2018; Le Blanc & Odell, 2009). Over the ensuing decades, the studio has come to be regarded as, in the words of Rayna Denison, "an artistic ideal, seeping into global consciousness and acting as a benchmark for animated fantasy" (Denison, 2018). The global appeal and sustained popularity of Studio Ghibli can be attributed to its ability to transcend cultural and national boundaries (Cavallaro, 2006), repositioning animation not merely as a medium for children but as a legitimate form of artistic and emotional expression (Napier, 2005). As Le Blanc and Odell (2009) observe, Studio Ghibli creates "films that touch the soul, that can enrapture and delight everyone from toddlers to pensioners."

What distinguishes Ghibli's work is not only its visual brilliance but also its philosophical depth. The studio's signature stillness and attention to seemingly mundane moments imbue its films with a profound sense of life's quiet richness (Napier, 2005; Cavallaro, 2006). In these contemplative spaces, life appears fuller and more meaningful. Here, power is not dramatized through domination but revealed in its subaltern forms through silence, patience and gentle assertion. Each frame resonates with the Japanese concept of purpose or a reason for being (García & Miralles, 2017), emerging from the screen and gently permeating the viewer's world, like afternoon light filtering through memory. Such cinematic practices open up corridors of power that decentralize authority, allowing ordinary lives, gestures and environments to become sites of meaning and resistance. It is this unique blend of aesthetic sensitivity, emotional resonance, and philosophical inquiry that has enabled Studio Ghibli to achieve widespread, cross-generational appeal and secure its status as the most successful animation studio in the world outside of Hollywood (Denison, 2018). Against the backdrop of AI-driven aesthetic theft, revisiting Ghibli's ethos thus becomes a philosophical act of reclaiming authorship, memory, and cultural agency from the very systems that threaten to hollow them out.

2. Circuits of Power and the Infiltration of AI into Ghibli Aesthetics

Infiltration into the domains of Ghibli's aesthetic world is not merely a matter of technology, it is an unfolding struggle over power, authorship, and cultural memory. The recent attempt of Gen-AI into the realm of Ghibli aesthetics largely has, flattened the emotional and cultural depth that defines Studio Ghibli's creative vision (Crawford, 2021; Raji et al., 2020). The AI-generated 'Ghibli-ish' images that have rapidly gone viral on social media reduce the studio's rich aesthetic sensibilities into decontextualised, endlessly reproducible representations (Robinson, 2025). Interestingly, even before Gen-AI popularised these visuals, platforms such as Midjourney, DALL·E, and Stable Diffusion had already attracted academic and critical scrutiny for their reductive outputs (Birhane & Prabbhu, 2021; Crawford, 2021). Their AI-generated outputs, which frequently rely on reductive, biased, and conservative assumptions about specific cultures, exemplifying what Crawford (2021) terms 'the extractive logic' of AI training datasets, have been a subject of substantial ethical concerns amongst scholars.

The AI visuals, ranging from apocalyptic Tokyo cityscapes to modern-day princesses rendered in the soft pastels of Ghibli-like signature aesthetics, have only intensified these concerns, contributing to a broader pattern of misrepresentation. These images circulate widely on social media, gaining traction through shares and likes, and often going viral (Whittaker, 2021). For most social media users, these representations offer a form of escapism imagined opportunity to exist within the serene, idealized world of a Ghibli film (McCurry, 2022). They serve as comforting counter-narratives to the chaos of daily life, allowing individuals to fantasize about a quieter, gentler existence than the one they face each morning in crowded traffic and fast-paced routines. Yet, this digital romanticization raises critical questions about authenticity, ownership, and the ethical responsibilities of creators and consumers in the age of generative AI (Smith & Hutson, 2024). The result is undoubtedly the rise of what we term in this study, as 'The Ghibli Effect'; a techno-cultural phenomenon

in which surface-level stylistic markers are extracted, repurposed, and automated, while the ethical, emotional, and ontological core of the original gets lost pixel by pixel.

What AI generates in seconds through latent diffusion models, Studio Ghibli's animators achieve through months and even years of painstaking labour, sketching, storyboarding, and refining each frame by hand (Denison, 2018; Napier, 2005). A single scene in *Princess Mononoke* (1997), for instance, may require hundreds of meticulously hand-inked cels to capture something as subtle as the swaying of grass in the wind (Pallant, 2015). Miyazaki once remarked, "I want to portray a world where people live, not one where things are explained" (McCarthy, 1999), which contradicts the very essence in these images. For example, the iconic food scenes in *Howl's Moving Castle (2004)* are not mere visual indulgence, but portrayal of food is itself a power move that shape and define a cultural representation of human connections (Brooks, 2020).

Studio Ghibli's quite cosmologies represent a subaltern corridor of power, privileging relationality and patience but with the Ghibli effect, emotional labour, cultural context, and narrative patience are reduced to extractive, capitalist logic of algorithmic simulation. To compress this into algorithmic shorthand is not an homage to that legendary discourse; it is aesthetic displacement. This study conceptualizes and critiques the 'anti-life' elements of AI-generated Ghibli-style images, which represent a rupture-not only of artistic lineage, but also of the ethics of the algorithm (Avnoon et al., 2023). These are hollow approximations created by models trained on scraped, uncredited archives because, as Crawford asserts, "These datasets shape the epistemic boundaries governing how AI operates and, in that sense, create the limits of how AI can 'see' the world" (Crawford 2021). Consequently, they simulate without sentiment, render without remembrance, and aestheticize without intention. This has been done before when AI imitated the music composition of Mozart and Skrillex (Hong et al, 2020). In doing so, they mark what Haraway (1991) might describe as the rise of the "god trick,' (2007), a disembodied, rootless, ahistorical view from nowhere, now operationalised

within the legendary Ghibli art form.

What emerges is a confrontation between two ontologies of image-making: one grounded in slowness, touch, and relational ethics; the other in statistical causality, immediacy, and cultural detachment. It is evident that, compared to human artists, AI is routinely regarded as lacking both agency and authentic experience (Messingschlager & Appel, 2023). Here, the arena of power shifts decisively, from artists who craft meaning through embodied labour, to algorithms that exert a new form of soft power by reshaping cultural imagination at scale. We propose to describe this sense of detachment as the "Ghibli Effect", when AI attempts to kill what it cannot feel. This cultural automation is the confrontation of power disparities, a political act that determines the voices that are heard, and the ones that are erased. This study offers a conceptual and theoretical interpretation of this effect; an anticipatory evaluation of how its implications reach far beyond they might seem on the surface. We follow five thematic positions using which we make our argument and pose the core question: Do we really need to hasten life through instant validation? Do all beautiful things have to be made scalable? Or are we just a filter away from losing all our realities to a skewed, data-driven machine that assures us otherwise? These questions are explored through theoretical frameworks from the academic traditions of literature, the humanities, and ethical inquiry.

3. Aura, Authorship and AI in Arenas of Power

Emerging from early 20th century debates on mechanical reproduction and mid-20th century currents of literary poststructuralism, these theories find renewed significance today in the viral trend of 'Ghiblifying' random images across social media platforms. In examining this phenomenon, we engage two seminal critical theories of art and authorship. Walter Benjamin's (1986) concept of the 'aura' of a work of art and Roland Barthes' (1977) announcement of the 'death of the author' serve as a theoretical lens for the analysis. In this context, we revisit their historical and philosophical foundations and address the phenomenon from an ethical, aesthetic and ontological

standpoint. We also draw selectively on Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault's assessment of power to reinforce our argument, while noting the implications of cultural power at play in this process.

Walter Benjamin's classic essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1968) introduced the concept of an artwork's aura, that is, its unique presence, authenticity, and singular existence in time and space. Benjamin argued that the mass reproduction of art fundamentally undermines this aura: "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (Benjamin, 1968). Reproduction detaches the object from the fabric of tradition and cultural memory, "substituting a plurality of copies for a unique existence" (Benjamin, 1968). The aura, bound to the artwork's singular here and now, cannot be replicated, as each reproduction diminishes the authority of the original. If an infinite number of Ghibli-esque scenes can be generated instantaneously by anyone with a text prompt, what becomes of the aura inherent in Miyazaki's hand-drawn animation cels, each bearing the unique imprint of the artist's hand? The AI-generated image has no origin in the traditional sense of artwork, no singular moment of artistic struggle, and thus lacks the aura of "presence in time and space" that Benjamin (1968) so urgently defended.

Studio Ghibli's acclaim rests on the singularity of its artistic process, framed meticulously by hand-drawn animators whose work is shaped by Japanese aesthetic traditions, Shinto philosophy, and the personal values of Hayao Miyazaki. AI-generated pastiches of this style, while visually convincing, are, in Benjamin's (1968) terms, "soulless" reproductions, technically sophisticated simulations that liquidate the unique presence of the original artwork. Adorno's critique of mass culture extends this point, warning that art's deeper meaning, or 'idea,' is eroded and replaced by surface spectacle. AI exemplifies this logic: it offers Ghibli's brush strokes and fantastical imagery, yet without the intention or lived experience that once animated them. As one critic observes, such AI content is "the model product of the modern culture industry" mass-producible, generated in seconds,

and lacking the "necessary DNA of human art" (Kull, 2025). While AI can replicate the formula of Ghibli's animation, it ultimately "kills" the ineffable aura it can neither feel nor comprehend.

Just as Benjamin (1986) illuminates the loss of presence, Barthes clarifies the collapse of intentionality. In his 1967 essay *The Death of the Author*, Barthes argued that readers must cease treating the author's intent as the definitive source of meaning. For him, to "give a text an author" and a single intended meaning is to impose a limitation; thus "the birth of the Reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author." This provocation finds a crisis in the context of generative AI. When we encounter an AI-generated Ghibli image, who can be considered the "author"? There is no singular artist comparable to Miyazaki, painting a scene from a personal vision. The author has dissolved into a diffuse network of agents. In AI-generated art, "the author becomes a distributed entity, encompassing the programmer, the user, the algorithm, and the audience" (Goodfellow, 2024). The programmer designs the model, countless uncredited artists supply training data, and a user enters a text prompt, yet none can claim authorship of the final image. The result is post-intentional art, born not of vision but of algorithmic recombination. In Barthes' terms, the author's "script" (Fraser, 2009) is replaced by an anonymous archive of data, endlessly re-synthesised. Thus, the AI-driven trend of Ghibli-style imagery exemplifies the "death of the author" in a literal sense.

This absence of guiding consciousness introduces an acute ethical problem. Michel Foucault's (1984) concept of the "author function" helps frame it. For Foucault, the author is a functional principle assigning discourse status and accountability. With AI-Ghibli, this function is disrupted, calling into question how we assign value, responsibility, and meaning. If a machine-produced image perpetuates stereotypes or distorts cultural memory, who is accountable? The lack of a clear author blurs responsibility, a deep concern when a tradition like Ghibli's, with cultural significance, is replicated without context. Barthes prepared us to see that meaning can be made without the Author, but generative AI forces this insight to an extreme where even the author

function is hard to apply. In this light, invoking Barthes is not only relevant but necessary. His theory anticipated a mode of art where reception would dominate creation. Now AI compels us to ask whether art devoid of a human creator can sustain meaningful discourse, or whether it collapses into mere pastiche for consumption on digital platforms. The Ghibli Effect thus represents not only aesthetic theft but also a crisis of authorship in arenas of power, where cultural memory is commodified and responsibility dissolved.

4. Beyond Aura and Author: Reclaiming Agency, Authenticity and Aesthesis

By applying Benjamin's (1968;1986) and Barthes'(1967) theories to AI-Ghibli images, our critical framework extends further, drawing in related thinkers to address the full scope of the ethical-political stakes in AI art. Adorno warned us that under late capitalism (Agger, 1990; Freyenhagen, 2012), cultural production becomes standardized and instrumentalized (Gray, 2007; Vann & Bowker, 2001), treating art as a fungible good rather than a unique vessel of human expression. AI-generated content takes this to a new level, it is art commodified as an endless supply, tailored on demand. This provokes important ethical questions: Does simulating Miyazaki's style without his involvement constitute a form of cultural and artistic theft? Is the audience tacitly being sold an *ersatz* experience (Hoch, 2002; Bachkirova & Kemp, 2025), a comforting imitation that lacks the critical or emotional substance of true art? Adorno would likely see AI's simulation of art as the culmination of the culture industry's tendency to the predominance of the effect over the work itself, leaving us with works that never moved beyond surface engagement. In our case, the effect is the enchanting Ghibli look, severed from the labour, intention and context that gave the original depth. The result is an aestheticization that risks promoting what Adorno called 'amusement' or distraction in place of genuine enlightenment on reflection, an observation carrying into our subsequent discussion of The New Age of Sense and Sensibility, where we examine whether AI art sensitizes or desensitizes the audience.

Equally critical is the perspective offered by the feminist theorist Donna Haraway on objectivity and vision. Haraway cautions against the 'God trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (Haraway, 1988), the illusion of an omniscient, disembodied viewpoint that masquerades as objective knowledge. Generative AI, which aggregates and outputs images from a position of no personal experience or body, exemplifies this 'views from nowhere.' We argue the basic point that an AI conjuring a pastoral Ghibli scene has seen thousands of images of meadows and forests, but it has never stood in a field, felt the wind or yearned like a human artist. Ot performs a 'god trick,' it produces an image of life while being alien to life's embodied reality. Haraway urges us to reclaim the situated, embodied vision against this false god's eye view (Glazier, 2018). Applying her insight, we recognize an ontological rupture in this AI art, the very fundamental lack, severing of the vision of any living seer. The ethical implication is that AI-Ghibli art can carry an unintended arrogance, as if human styles and cultural memories can be remixed from nowhere, with no situated accountability. By foregrounding Haraway's critique, we underscore the need to remember that every genuine artwork comes from somewhere, a person, a body, a culture. The AI's view-from-nowhere, lacking this rootedness, may produce competent pastiches but also runs the risk of staggering differences, appropriating cultures or misrepresenting realities because it cannot truly know what it depicts. This perspective reinforces why a seemingly harmless or whimsical act, generating a Ghibli-style image, opens profound questions about viewpoint and authenticity that theory must address.

Michael Foucault's analysis of authorship and power further consolidated our framework to understand how the collective societal knowledge is created through power narratives while defining the norms. In 'What is an Author?' (1969), he suggested that the author's name serves to classify and control discourses as an index of truth, originality and legal responsibility. AI-generated art often circulates anonymously and or under the name of a tool, perhaps as 'Made with Midjourney,'

rather than by a specific artist. This can destabilize how cultural memory is attributed and preserved. Will future archives credit the human developers, the AI system, or the original artist whose style was appropriated? Benjamin (1968) wrote that mechanical reproduction leads to a 'tremendous shattering of tradition' and with AI we might experience this shattering of our cultural memory, artistic lineage and aesthesis of life. Foucault would have us see that interrogating who (or what) counts as an author in AI art is not a mere technicality but essential to understanding how meaning and value are produced and regulated.

In our criticism, appealing to Foucault's power-relations lends strength to the claim that without reinstating some idea of authorship or creative agency, we end up with a situation in which art is severed from human history and responsibility altogether. The blend of Benjamin's aura and Barthes' death of the author, augmented with Adorno's skepticism towards cultural mass production, Haraway's situated knowing appeal, and Foucault's examination of the author function enables us to critically analyze and call it an 'effect.' This theoretical background lays the groundwork for the following analysis, situating our exploration and conceptualization of *problematiques* like, 'The Paradoxes of Slow Life,' 'The Age of New Sense and Sensibility,' and the very quotes from the original Ghibli Author himself condemning this event as 'An Insult to Life.' Each of these will follow on from these conclusions, demonstrating in depth how the 'Ghibli Effect' of AI art reflects the tensions that Benjamin and Barthes identified, and why restoring the human touch in art more important.

5. The Paradoxes of Slow Life

GenAI violates the primary notion of Ghibli aesthetic, the ability to see life in its comfortable pace, finding meaning in careful observation and the depth of waiting for something beautiful to happen. The essential paradox lies in the fact that accelerating the process of creating the art form is nothing but taking power over the artistic authority itself. The Ghibli films ask viewers to linger, not to chase the plot but to notice the weight of a breeze, the

awkwardness of a goodbye, the slow preparation of a hearty meal. For instance, in *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), the young witch Kiki spends long stretches simply riding her broom, looking out over the sea, silently grappling with self-doubt. The narratives pause repeatedly, not to advance the plot, but to allow the audience to breathe in between and experience existential being, and inhabit the notion of time differently. Scenes such as Chihiro pausing to tie her shoes before stepping into the spirit world in *Spirited Away* let us prepare and buckle up for a ride to the world unknown, however, it makes us feel like that slow train journey that she takes over the sea. In *My Neighbour Totoro (1988),* we embrace the stillness and decelerate in a quiet home just near the dense jungle, where mysteries unfold while Mei watches the clouds every day, lying on the grass. These are 'non-narrative' moments, acts of waiting, and sensory aesthesis that Miyazaki insisted on preserving, even against studio pressures for faster pacing.

This commitment to slowness of life is what the cultural theorist, Byung Chul Han, has called an ethic of 'time deepening', resisting modernity's pressure, productivity and acceleration (Quero, 2023). Ghibli's slowness enacts an ontological protest against late-capitalist time regimes, "...a spiritual relationship with the world through the calm and slow gaze on things and others" (Picchione, 2023), hyperactivity, and overachieving. AI attempts to simulate the surface of this slowness without participating in its laborious and ethical construction. There is no slow 'becoming' behind the images, no months of animation drawings, no lived connection to seasonal rhythms, no collaborative storytelling among artists. A machine never waits. It fundamentally questions the very basic ethics of Ghibli tradition, the resistance against capitalist acceleration, and an ode to the relational ontology where life unfolds at its own pace. The machine destroys the aura precisely that which once honoured the unrepeatable experiences, grounded in the slowness of lived time and the artist's intentional labour.

Miyazaki has often emphasized the importance of depicting difficulty and hesitation, as seen when Ashitaka, grievously wounded, struggles to move forward despite pain in

Princess Mononoke, or when the protagonists in *The Tale of Princess Kaguya (2013)* must painfully accept impermanence. Moreover, the spiritual sensibility at the heart of Ghibli's films, their almost Shintoist reverence for nature's rhythms, is commodified into easily consumable visual motifs. The reverent stillness of the Catbus halting in the rain in *Totoro,* or the slow undulating of Ashitaka's elk mount, Yakul, across empty landscapes (*Princess Mononoke, 1997),* becomes merely another promptable aesthetic for AI engines. In Ghibli, slowness is not an aesthetic ornamentation, but the existential truth of life itself. To live fully is to wait, to grieve, to falter and to endure. AI, being a machine, neither waits nor errs, nor hesitates to go against it all. It is more of a fast-food aesthetic, instantly available, shareable, and forgettable. Following Adorno's warnings about the cultural industry, we recognise that this sift commodifies the point of slowness itself, rendering even the resistance to speed into another consumable product. Thus, in Ghibli effect, the paradox becomes complete in the sense that, what Ghibli offers as the most beautiful element, the slowness of life, AI offers as a momentary stylization, what Ghibli celebrates as existential difficulty, AI effaces as visual availability, and what Ghibli constructs as care, AI replicates as code.

In Adorno's language, the culture industry consumes even the gestures of resistance, turning slow wisdoms of life into just another amusement commodity (Adorno, 1972; Cook, 1996; Boucher, 2013). Thus, the paradox of slow life is not only a loss of artistic patience but a commodification of existential temporality itself. The machine does not wait, and in losing waiting, it loses life; ironically, it never had one to begin with.

6. The New Age of Sense and Sensibility

The loss of aura and intentionality in artificial intelligence-created Ghibli pictures concerns itself with the advent of what we can call the New Age of Sense and Sensibility, an age in which sensory stimulation pervades cultures, whereas more profound forms of ethical and emotive sensibility atrophy with the prompts. The title itself is taken from Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility (1811). In

this novel. Elinor embodies sense, restraint, measured judgement, relational responsibility, while Marianne embodies sensibility, passion, aesthetic and impulsive. Yet crucially, Austen does not celebrate pure sensibility; rather, she critiques by proposing that true human flourishing lies in the tempered integration of both faculties, feeling rooted in ethical discernment. In our present techno-cultural moment, the balance Austen sought collapses. In the AI-Ghibli aesthetic, sensibility degenerates into surface sensation, a ready-made aesthetic pleasure unmoored from any ethical, temporal, and relational grounding, as we previously argued.

The lush fields, misty rivers, classic Ghibli golden dusks that once demanded attuned sensibility, a slow apprenticeship to lived beauty, are now delivered instantaneously, algorithmically and without patience or care. The viewer is overwhelmed by sense impressions, pastel skies, ethereal spirits, but these impressions demand nothing of them beyond passive consumption. Thus, what Austen feared, the triumph of shallow, ungrounded emotionalism, returns in algorithmic form. Where Austen's Marianne weeps passionately over romantic disappointment, at least she feels, suffers, risks ruin, and in contrast, AI-Ghibli viewers feel without the suffering, wonder without the waiting and long without loving. It is the new age of AI where the very essence of sense and sensibility is destroyed, as not only is intentionality absent, not also the aura is destroyed, and emotional engagement itself is commodified into repeatable, scalable modules and detached from the slow cultivation of meaning that sensibility demands.

In *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind (1984),* viewers are asked to see polluted landscapes not as monstrous but as suffering, to attend to the sacredness even in the poisoned soil, the poisoned jungle is drawn with horrifying beauty, not to titillate, but to provoke an affective unsettlement that demands moral reflection. Similarly, in *Whispers of the Heart (1995)*, much of the film unfolds in small textured moments, a teenager struggling with her dreams, riding crowded trains, visiting libraries, falling into doubt and wonder. These everyday sensory experiences,

crammed bookstores, quiet streets are tendered with love, asking viewers not simply to look but to feel the hidden sacredness of the ordinary, the simple things in life. In Benjamin's terms, these films cultivate an experience, 'Erfahrung', the cumulative, totalizing accretion of transmittable wisdom, of epic truth as opposed to "…the immediate, passive, fragmented, isolated, and unintegrated inner experience of 'Erlebnis" (Davey, 2015), the shallow momentary impressions. Scenes like the slow cooking of breakfast in *Ponyo (2008),* where a simple bowl of ramen becomes a celebration of domestic affection, or the quiet, painstaking repair of an old aeroplane in *Porco Rosso (1992)*, exemplify how visual pleasure in Ghibli's work is inseparable from moral and affective atonements. The audience is drawn not only to what is shown but how it is shown, slowly, attentively and relationally. Benjamin describes these sequences as threshold experiences (Paetzoldt & Westphal, 1977), moments where the viewer crosses from mere observation to existential reflection, the moment when a mundane action is illuminated with existential weight. By contrast, AI-generated Ghibli imagery does not challenge its audience to think, feel, or wait. It offers an endless buffet of hyper-palatable, emotionally saturated images, which Adorno might call the "vivid distractions" of mass culture that lack the existential weight that Ghibli's original works demand.

7. 'An Insult to Life Itself': Memories, Mourning and Meanings

When Hayao Miyazaki called this entire fiasco 'an insult to life itself,' he was not just mourning his own life, but the collective life and breath of a culture. He must have grieved something more profound, edged in memory of not only one human, but a community itself. The slow erasure of ownership, the shifting of the power corridors come on the surface, the moment the artistic dignity is nullified. In his world, every frame means something, every sketch bears a moment of life's deep philosophies. In the *Wind Rises (2013),* Jiro's dream of flight, elegant yet tragic, is no mere metaphor, but Miyazaki's reckoning with creation under the shadow of war, mirroring his father's work, making aeroplane parts during a war that shattered millions of lives, including his

childhood. In *The Boy and the Heron (2023),* Mahito's lonely walk through a burning Tokyo landscape is not imagination, it is a burning memory, his memory of wartime dislocation, of a childhood evacuated from safety and innocence, a mother bedridden with tuberculosis while the world collapsed outside.

Every small gesture in Ghibli's films carries the fingerprint of a life lived in anguish and wonder. Chihiro, clutching her mother's hand tightly as she steps into the unknown in *Spirited Away*, a child's primary fear of losing parents, is rooted in Miyazaki's anxieties of familial fragility. Ashitaka's wound and pain show a mirror to the artist's belief that life demands endurance beyond explanation. Kiki, lost and doubting her purpose shows nothing but the reflection of young Miyazaki, overwhelmed by doubt about the course of becoming in his life. Art for Miyazaki is not just creation but a means of survival, being and existing. It is the slow steeping of memory into meaning, much like the tea leaves unfurling their essence only with time, patience and warmth. The artist poured his days, nights, years, his griefs, joys and tears into each stroke of his art.

Benjamin (1986) could foresee that it would destroy the aura, but only if he could know that AI in future would do something graver. It separates art from the suffering and struggle that grant it meaning. When Miyazaki says, it is an 'insult to life itself,' he names the obliteration of everything that gave this meaning through art, the slow endurance of grief and joy, the labour of drawing a thousand frames for a single movement of a hand, the patience of letting a character breathe before she crosses a threshold. AI neither knows patience nor pain. It generates pixels, not presences. It produces shadows, not the characters. In *Grave of the Fireflies (1988),* Seita watches fireflies glow and die in the dark, a fleeting, unbearable beauty born out of wartime ruin. No AI can feel Seita's hunger, his shame, his futile tenderness. It can render the glow, but never the ache behind it. Mei falls asleep under a tree in *My Neighbour Totoro,* believing her mother will heal. That child's faith is not aesthetic, it is an existential plea, a means to hold onto the most precious thing in her life, the kind of faith Miyazaki himself clung to as a boy, visiting his ailing mother

in hospital rooms while the world outside smoked with bomb dust. These moments are stitched from an artist's body, memory, grief, and fragile hope. To render them through a 'Ghibli filter' is indeed an insult beyond any artistic ethics. The pastel forests, wide-eyed spirits, and blue skies with jet smoke are stripped of their living marrow. The pain, the waiting and the joys are flattened into pixels and emptied of colours that are truly of the artist himself.

Foucault's assessment of power shifting shows how the artistic power is stolen from Miyazaki and put into a machine, that lacks the sensibility to fathom its cultural depth. The point of resistance, that he built his entire career to revolt against, is the primary move, taken by the GenAI, the rookie mistake that was not meant to happen at the very first place. His life, lived through drawing, through acting, through waiting, is being turned into commodity wallpaper for scrolling mindlessly on an Instagram feed. It is the cry of an artist watching his meaning, mourning for those tender memories of life, being unthreaded, pixel by pixel, by a machine that will never know what it has destroyed. Life itself, he reminds us, is not a style to be generated. It is a wound to be tended, a slowness to be endured, a presence to be remembered, and a machine, however powerful, can neither suffer nor remember with realization. It can only forget those meanings beyond codes, forgetting each pixel rapidly, carelessly and endlessly.

8. Conclusion

Generative AI has emerged as a powerful force capable of reshaping power narratives across the corridors of socioeconomic, spiritual, and cultural authenticity. The Ghibli Effect reveals that the theft of Miyazaki's artistry is more than an appropriation of individual talent; it represents a deeper theft of a community's intellectual and cultural power. At stake are questions of cultural respect, creative labor, and the fragile bond between art and artist. When technology advances without ethical safeguards, sense, sensibility, and responsibility risk being eclipsed by determinism. The challenge, therefore, lies not in halting generative AI but in

defining how it is used. Policies must consider the scope of access, and regulatory bodies should be empowered to assess the repercussions of seemingly benign innovations. The Ghibli trend ultimately reminds us that technology has never been neutral. From its inception, it has functioned as a medium of power, a contested space where ideologies collide, shaping who commands authority and who remains silenced in the unfolding human story.

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