The 'Everyday' in the Context of Japanese Cultural Anti-Modernism: A Case Study of Isao Takahata's Anime *My Neighbors the Yamadas*

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Introduction

The post-World War II years in the history of Modern Japan were vital in deciding the fate of the Japanese archipelago in terms of its ambitions of regaining what Emperor Hirohito of Japan in the 'Jewel Voice Broadcast' on 15 August 1945 called "the innate glory of the imperial state." While there is a note of surrender in Hirohito's speech, urging his subjects to march forward to a globalised and modern Japan by "enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable," attempts at modernising Japan, at an incredibly rapid pace, had already begun during the Meiji period in the nineteenth century. What Hirohito's speech critically points to is the final, official reassertion of, as well as yielding to, the temperament and paraphernalia of modernity, an issue that was vastly in contention in the first half of the twentieth century. The issue of incorporating Western modernisation within Japanese society, as the Japanese sought to construct an identity for themselves after their devastating defeat in the war, had divided the country. Japan had already gone through a period of almost two hundred years of self-isolation from the world to its West, albeit with limited trade relations with the Dutch. The Meiji government, which came to power in 1868, attempted to incorporate Western modernisation within the folds of the state of Japan and thereby fill in the gap that had been created between a 'traditional' Japan and an industrialised, modernised West as a result of such isolation. In the nineteenth century, the government took it upon itself to invite various scholarly and military experts from the West to boost the Japanese project of modernisation. As Dani Cavallaro writes: "grand edifices in the West's neoclassical style were erected, its vogues were superimposed onto traditional vestimentary codes, its cuisine was incorporated into the national diet, and its artistic techniques were taught in many schools, sometimes to the disadvantage of time-honoured indigenous methods" (7-8). Such an account of how the Meiji government attempted to modernise Japan by reorienting how the average Japanese built their homes, what clothes they wore or the food they ate, and how their children were being educated in schools alert us unambiguously to the condition of the 'everyday' that served as a platform for such transformations. Such transformations not only established themselves by altering the 'everyday', but also inscribed their legitimacy and normalcy upon it. As Henri Lefebvre states in his essay "The Everyday and Everydayness:" "A condition stipulated for the legibility of forms, ordained by means of functions, inscribed within structures, the everyday constitutes the platform upon which the bureaucratic society of controlled consumerism is erected" (9).

If the project of modernisation sought to attain its goals by asserting itself on the 'everyday' and maintaining a strong hold upon it, voices which were critical of such modernising processes also took recourse to the 'everyday' to elaborate upon their 'anti-modernist' concerns. Thus, we have the writer and the critic Taoka Reiun, who questioned rampant industrialisation in Japan in the late nineteenth century in his 1897 essay, "The Development of a Materialistic Civilization and Humanity." Ronald P. Loftus points out Reiun's concern in his essay about the 'Ashio Mine pollution' incident. Even when the Watarase River basin flooded, leading to the harmful pollutants from the mine spreading to local areas and destroying the homes and livelihood of the villagers, the government refused to cease operations as copper, vast amounts of which were extracted from the Ashio mine, was influential in their industrialist drive. Reiun identifies a concerning connection between industrialisation and Japan's bid to become 'modern': "Taoka Reiun could see as early as 1897 that the roots of the Ashio Mine pollution incident were lodged not just in Japan's determination to achieve an industrial revolution and generate an impressive record of economic growth and development, but also in its overarching commitment to become modern by following the Western model" (Loftus 42-43). Reiun's focus on this incident points to how the grand narratives of progress and economic growth and the institutions of modernisation

depend upon the functioning of the workers like clockwork every day; however, when the livelihoods and homes of the people are jeopardised, the abstract of the ideas of 'progress' take precedence over the reality of the 'everyday' of the people. If the state can go on pursuing 'progress' despite the disruption of the 'everyday' of the workers who sustain such progress on a daily basis, it does so by the 'alienation' of the everyday from itself. It is an 'everyday' (individual acts that bring 'modernisation' into being) in service of the 'non-everyday' (the modern state of Japan), and it leads to what Lefebvre calls 'the everyday' (*le quotidien*) attaining its 'everydayness' (*la quotidienneté*), which is "the homogenous, the repetitive [and] the fragmentary" form of the everyday within modernity ("Toward a Leftist" 87). On the other hand, *The Book of Tea* (1906) by Kakuzō Okakura, which may be highlighted as an example of scholarly opposition to the drive of modernisation, posits another interesting instance of anti-modernist resistance constructed around the 'everyday'. While Okakura attempts to contain the essence of traditional Japanese culture in the ritualised emblem of the tea ceremony, it is an emblem that is rooted in the mundane, the regular, and the 'everyday' — it is the simple yet elegant ritual of having tea. While any such claims to the metanarrative of the essence of a people fall within the category of the 'non-everyday', an invocation to traditional Zen aesthetic principles of Japan, by virtue of the very nature of such aesthetics, firmly places such a 'non-everyday' within the gambit of the simple and the regular. The opposition between the two forces of modernisation and traditionalism has led to a recurrent sense of contradiction in Japanese society and has left the country, according to Masaru Katsumi, "in a state of perpetual oscillation between the opposed phenomena of tradition and progress" (qtd. in Cavallaro 8).

This article seeks to focus on how the category of the 'everyday' in post-war Japan features as the platform of contestation between modernist drives and 'anti-modernist', tradition-centric reactions. It seeks to underline the political manoeuvres of the post-war Japanese government as well as the private sector in control over the employees' urbanised 'everyday' within the grand design of economic growth. However, if it is in the 'everyday' that Man is 'alienated', then within the everyday shall the 'authentic' Man be recovered. Michel Trebitsch, in his preface to Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume I*, argues that "his [Lefebvre's] critique of everyday life is a dual reading, at once a rejection of the inauthentic and the alienated, and an unearthing of the human which still lies buried therein" (xxiv). The article will critically focus on Isao Takahata's anime *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (1999) as an example of a cultural attempt to recover the 'authentic' human in the process of rehabilitation of the 'everyday'. The recourse to the grand narrative of traditional Japanese aesthetics, however, turns Lefebvre's definition of the 'everyday' as "'what is left over' after all distinct, superior, specialised, structured activities have been singled out by analysis" (Lefebvre, *Critique* 97) on its head. In a unique separation from a Cartesian distinction between the grand and the mundane, the lay and the specialised, the article seeks to highlight Takahata's 'anti-modernist' appeals to an 'everyday', the 'trivial' of which is situated within the 'grand', the 'poetic' and the 'beautiful' of traditional Japanese aesthetics, and vice versa.

The Japanese Middle Class and 'Everyday'

One of the primary measures of post-war Japan's bid for economic growth and affluence was the consolidation of an urban middle-class. A 'politics of accommodation' that sought to unite the opposing political forces by attempts to focus on popular welfare saw the idea of Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato's 'developmental state' in action. The plan was to achieve, by 1970, a doubling of the gross national product. Ikeda Hayato's government actively involved itself in driving even the private sector towards a shared and common goal of 'development' by setting forth "specific targets for investment in priority industries" and calling "for merges and cooperation among companies" (Gordon 279). Another significant tactic on the part of Ikeda was the reduction in taxes and interest rates. As a consequence of such measures, "[r]oughly three years ahead of schedule, the economy indeed doubled in size" (Gordon 279). Such plans of economic progress revolved around a steady commitment on the part of the middle-class 'employee', whose very identities were being oriented around work. Thus, in the

politically volatile decades of the 1950s and 1960s, "[i]n a characteristically pragmatic move" within the politics of accommodation, "the majority of the people threw themselves into industry to rebuild their nation, whatever it would turn out to be" (Goto-Jones 101). Even within the private corporate sectors, job security came to be offered to the employees, in what came to be known as 'permanent employment'. By the 1960s, employees began to be offered "cradle-to-grave benefits" in the form of health aid, accommodation, company-funded retreats, access to company-owned departmental stores, social clubs and gatherings for the entire family, sports teams, music festivals and many other amenities (Gordon 281).

Nevertheless, it is important to note here that beneath the surface of middle-class affluence lay the machinations of a process that entrenched the employees within a commodified 'everyday'; rather, it consolidated the very concept of the 'everyday'. Lefebvre states in his essay, "The Everyday and Everydayness:" "In order for it [the everyday] to have ever been engaged as a concept, the reality it designated had to have become dominant, and the old obsessions about shortages — 'Give us this day our daily bread…' — had to disappear" (9). With the disappearance of 'shortages', the post-war generation in Japan found itself being reduced to the idea of the "organization-oriented salaryman" (Gordon 268), and with it came, what the philosopher Yoshimoto Takaki called, the "continually increasing burden of a sensibility gripped with an amorphous sense of boredom, enjoying a bloated material life and a relatively improved standard of living, but an absolute impoverishment" (qtd. in Gordon 268). The middle-class 'salaryman' found his identity irrevocably attached to the corporate company that is his employer and his work. Even though the 'everyday' of the middle-class, in the service of the 'non-everyday', gravitates towards monotony and boredom, he also associates his identity with the 'benefits' that his company provides as an incentive. While these benefits may serve to break the monotony and routine of 'everydayness', they simply perform the role of 'festivals' that are designed to distract, and distinctly serve to mask the historicity of the 'everyday'. Once the benefits are 'consumed', the salaried employee must return to the 'everyday' to rake up more benefits that he shall use in the future — the middle-class finds itself entrenched further in the alienation of the commodity that is its every single day: "The days follow one after another and resemble one another, and yet — here lies the contradiction at the heart of everydayness — everything changes. But the change is programmed: obsolescence is planned. Production anticipates reproduction" (Lefebvre, "The Everyday" 10).

When the "artificially inflated and over-confident" (Goto-Jones 120) economy crashed in the 1990s, the middle-class Japanese who had all along built his consciousness around work, sank into what Trebitsch called the "anguish of 'unhappy consciousness' as he discovers the chasm which separates him from his self" (Lefebvre, *Critique* xvi). The natural reaction of the Japanese to the economic crisis, and by extension, an identity crisis, was the expression of anxiety. Florian Coulmas, speaking of the consequence of the depression of the 1990s, points to the rise of *hikikomori,* which refers to an extreme form of social withdrawal, as a grave social malady "that is indicative of a society with a less collectivist outlook than used to be the case." The political origins of such a concerning state of the masses are also clear: "the neo-liberal reforms of Japan's economy that were carried out in the name of the greatest happiness for the greatest number have lead [sic] to greater income disparities" (qtd. in Cavallaro 10). The loss of a 'collectivist' outlook in society, rising cases of isolation and clinical depression, all of which add to growing atomisation and alienation, prove to be the direct causes of the processes of modernisation, particularly in the post-war years. Such a causal relation with modernisation necessarily situates the Japanese social problem of alienation and anxiety within the paradigm of the 'everyday', for "the quotidian and the modern mark and mask, legitimate and counterbalance each other" (Lefebvre, *Critique* xxvi).

Anti-modernism and Japanese Aesthetics

In the wake of growing concerns about the nature of modernity and its impact on the people, important anti-modernist voices like that of Yasunari Kawabata and Kunio Yanagita sought to look for a Japaneseness in the idea of 'harmony' between Japanese society and the natural

environment, an outlook rooted in traditional Zen aesthetic principles. Here, it is important to speak of what made a move towards such principles relatively obvious in post-war Japan. An idea of what 'progress' meant for the Japanese cannot be reduced to the rather straightforward advances of a uniform Western Modernity from the nineteenth century leading up to the twenty-first century and a uniform understanding of what such modernity meant for the question of Japanese identity. An adequate distinction needs to be made between Japan's pre-war and post-war advances towards 'progress'. Such a discussion necessarily pivots around the post-war Japanese Constitution, written in 1946 and adopted in 1947. While the modernist drives undertaken by the Meiji government in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, or even the oppositions to such drives by the likes of Taoka Reiun, banked upon debates and resolutions that were primarily their 'own', the politico-socio-economic resolutions of post-war Japan operated under the shadow of a constitution that was 'forced' upon them by the occupying US forces, and, therefore, not 'theirs'. A key concern was regarding Article 9 of the Constitution, also referred to as the 'peace clause', which curbed Japan's military activity and, in effect, pushed the country towards an attitude of anti-militarism and pacifism. The need and desire to become democratic and atone for Japan's war crimes were complicated by the fact that such decisions and attitudes, after all, were not 'theirs' and were imposed upon them.

This issue was highlighted by a prominent intellectual of the 1990s, Norihiro Katō, who "'diagnosed' Japan's post-war 'illness' as that of schizophrenia, arguing powerfully that Japan's 'personality' really had been splintered into an inner and outer self" owing to the paradoxes inherent in post-war Japan's tendencies under the shadow of the US occupying forces (Goto-Jones 130). This issue posed itself as increasingly important in the context of a Japanese identity that was persistently in a state of crisis. The identity of post-war Japan, as Katō argued in his book *Nihon no mushisō* (*Japan's Thoughtlessness*) in 1999, was split into a 'public Japan' that lived under the US's wings and adopted the principles of pacifism and democracy and a 'private Japan' that "maintained a divergent and often contradictory nationalistic self-image with some elements of continuity with the imperial period" (Goto-Jones 131). While the 'public', and reformist side of Japan veered off towards a US-friendly, "politically correct personality" (132), the 'private' Japan had a major cultural knot to untie — what is the nature of this 'tradition' that they wanted to maintain a sense of continuity with? The contradictory 'traditional' stances may be highlighted in the politics and literature of Yasunari Kawabata on the one hand and Yukio Mishima on the other. Mishima's politics lay in his appeals to a return to the way of the *bushidō*, or the militaristic codes of the Samurai, in a society which he feared was being emasculated under Western influence. In the 1960s, he formed a secret right-wing militia group and "sought to define and defend 'traditional' Japanese aesthetic values," which he went on to link to "a militaristic veneration of the emperor and nation" (Gordon 269). His politics was crowned by his dramatic, public suicide after having invaded a Tokyo military tower and having delivered a long speech about restoring a pre-war, imperial political order. The irony was that his own troops "could barely hear him" (Goto-Jones 114) from such a distance, and the audience hardly paid any heed to his political appeals: "The Japanese public was shocked but not sympathetic to his theatrical call for a return to old values" (Gordon 269). However, when it came to Kawabata, the "old values" that he advanced were received eagerly and lapped up swiftly both within Japan and internationally: he was awarded the *Bunka kunshō* (medal of culture) by the Emperor of Japan in 1961, followed by the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968. Kawabata's novels are rich in traditional aesthetics and "serve as romantic re-imagings [sic] of Japan as a specific type of traditional beauty that is endangered, or at least sullied by the modern world" (Goto-Jones 111). The tradition that Kawabata wished to preserve was, quite contrary to the appeals of Mishima, Nature-centric, exotic, pacifist, and easily palatable for a Western audience.

It is easy to see why an insistence on traditional Zen aesthetic principles would become increasingly popular and desirable when it came to representing the 'Japanese' both to its people and internationally. It not only allowed for an identity that could be claimed as their

'own', as divorced from the impact of modernity and the political influence of the US but also subscribed to the 'public' image of Japan that was being projected to the world. The third element in the mix was the rediscovery of the Japanese countryside in response to the increasing onslaught of modernisation and urbanisation. There were attempts, even by different campaigns made by the government, to bring the people "back into contact with a side of Japanese life that they feared was vanishing under the unstoppable wave of urban capitalism" (Goto-Jones 149). These tendencies of taking recourse to traditional aesthetics have survived to the extent that the popular cultural domain of anime is replete with evidence of such principles at work, even in the twenty-first century. While the narratives of national identity and international politics necessarily provoke grandiose questions, Zen aesthetics adequately bring the focus back to the concern of the ordinary and the 'everyday'. Such principles posit the 'everyday' as the matrix on which an anti-modernist bid is made to reclaim the 'authentic human' on two significant counts — firstly, by the subversion of the 'everydayness' of modern life in the prosaic-as-poetic impulse of such principles, which rather than positing the poetic in opposition to the prosaic, underlines an aesthetic that appreciates both as the same; secondly, owing to the element within Zen aesthetics that insists on the concrete, the palpable and the sensory. As Dani Cavallaro notes, "in the context of Japanese aesthetics, the specifically sensory — and hence physical — dimension of both the object and the perceiver holds paramount importance … Japanese thinking has consistently underscored the fundamentally material and embodied character of life at all levels" (5). With the seamless assimilation of Zen Buddhism into local Shinto practices beginning in the sixth century (Cavallaro 127), Japanese culture found itself increasingly associated with a concern for practicality, the physical, and the ordinary. Within this worldview, the physical and the mundane are in themselves accorded with a sense of beauty. The ordinary, which is also sensory, takes precedence over the moral and the metaphysical. Helen J. Baroni highlights the centrality of the sensory within the regular, as she speaks of Zen monasteries as

> places that engage the senses. The smell of incense pervades many halls … Outside, one often encounters the scent of burning leaves as the novices clean the grounds in the afternoon. Colorful silk banners stream down pillars within graceful wooden structures with smooth polished floors and ornately carved rafters. One may glimpse the flashing eye of a painted dragon on the ceiling. (ix)

If within the 'everyday', which is caught up in the alienation of modernity, "[o]nly the 'return to the concrete' could reconcile thought and life" (Lefebvre, *Critique* xxi), a return to traditional Zen principles and aesthetics sets the stage for Japanese cultural artefacts to appeal to the poetry and the grandiosity of the ordinary, the regular, and the 'everyday'. György Lukács distinguishes between the *alltäglichkeit*, which is the 'trivial life' of "the dreary, mechanical and repetitive unfolding of the everyday," and what he understands as the 'authentic life', in which Man "accedes to himself through the work of art" (Lefebvre, *Critique* xvii). Such a well-defined distinction between the 'mechanical' and the 'artistic', however, stands on the wobbly ground within the worldview of Zen aesthetics.

The Socio-Cultural Shift within Anime

While anime within popular culture appears to be storehouses of traditional Japanese aesthetic elements, cultural or specifically pictorial, the anime industry has not always been in the service of the salvation of the 'everyday' from the clutches of modernity. As Japanese animation passed through the political space of Japan from the pre-war to the post-war era, through various mediums like the television and then the videotape, the domain of the 'everyday' serves as a critical space of inquiry to trace the changing modes and tendencies of anime. It is the 'everyday' that has shaped the very nature of the industry, as it first serves as cogs of the relentless, reckless, Modern Machine and then as artefacts devoted to the reclamation of the 'authentic' and a critique of its very roots. In the context of pre-war Japan, Daisuke Miyao is of the opinion that "cinema was constructed discursively between … two sites of knowledge" — production and regulation (202). What he points to is the environment

of censorship and governmental control of mass media in general and the 1939 Film Law in particular. This new law put into effect a "pre-production system of censorship" in order to "improve the level of national culture" (Standish 143). This meant that in order to protect animation studios from going bankrupt altogether or being supressed, all that the animators had to do was "meet the criteria of the militarist state" (Clements 55). The 'national culture' found itself deeply concerned with the impact of films and animation on children, as it was deemed that "'[m]ischief', in particular, was not something that should be encouraged, even among children" (Clements 24). With a concern about the everyday roles and activities of the children came a control over the content that was assumed to be directed at them: animation. Not only did anime find itself entangled in propaganda machinery with military-sponsored feature films like *Momotaro's Divine Sea Warriors* (1945), but it also became a party to the entrenching of the bourgeois 'everyday' in the post-war period as it was deemed to be a fit medium for television advertisement owing to its "eye-catching, distinctive and memorable images" (Clements 85). With Japan's defeat in World War II, military sponsorship dried up, restrictions on foreign films were lifted, and the anime studios found themselves caught up in a fierce battle for survival in a commodified, modernised 'everyday'. With television as the dominant medium, the anime industry became completely geared towards the manipulation of the stringent, middle-class 'everyday' of the Japanese. The manipulation of such an 'everyday' took place in the following ways: firstly, anime studios rushed to figure out the nature of the 'implied viewer' and 'potential viewer', the schedules of office-going adults and school-going children, when the 'salaryman' might be out drinking after office and be in front of a television at a pub, who really has control over the television remote at home (Clements 141-2), and which gender watches which anime (148); secondly, anime themselves became a means and an excuse to sell commodities, and squeeze out profits. While the anime, in the 1960s and 1970s, themselves were geared towards Science Fiction, with their fighter planes and armoured robots in 'placeless' locales, the intention behind it was only to sell toys to children. Keishi Yamazaki has the following to say about the anime *Qtarō the Ghost*:

> Even though *Obake no Qtarō* was popular, once the merchandise stopped selling, the animation served no purpose. It became more profitable to make a new programme, in order to sell new merchandise. After all, TV cartoons are nothing but advertising. There should not be a cultural value to protect as 'art'. (qtd. in Clements 152)

A series of changes in the early 1980s, both in technology and in temperament, altered the anime industry in remarkable ways. The advent of the commercial videotape in 1983 changed the dynamic of ownership altogether and ensured that anime producers and directors were no longer at the mercy of television broadcast time slots or distributors. The distaste for television anime was already growing among animators who wished to create authentic work. Miyazaki speaks of his disillusionment with television, as after "a year-long state of emergency," they completed the series *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*:

> We thought we could now return to a more tranquil everyday life. It was only then that we came to understand the danger of television …Television repeatedly demands the same thing. Its voraciousness makes everything banal. We realised that television required that our state of emergency become a normal condition. (137-8)

Such recognition of the banality of the 'everyday' that the anime industry found itself entrenched in coincided with a shift in demand for the 'Japanese' on a global platform. By the mid-1970s, there came evidence of foreign sales diminishing in anime "that were, or *were made to be* lacking any aesthetic identification as 'Japanese'" (Clements 181). This transformation of what Kōichi Iwabuchi calls 'cultural odour' into 'cultural fragrance' (57) meant the revitalised demand for and the surfacing of the 'Japanese' in Japanese animation, as opposed to 'placeless' locales and 'stateless' characters of the 1960s and '70s. It is this nexus among the desire for the 'Japanese' on international platforms, the need for the 'traditional' of a 'private' Japan, the disillusion of the 'everydayness' of anime, and the disillusion of the 'everyday' of a middle-class Japan in general, that makes an attempt at rehabilitation of the

'everyday' within traditional, Japanese aesthetics an obvious alternative. A close discussion of Isao Takahata's *My Neighbors the Yamadas* will serve to elaborate upon this distinct 'Japanese' approach within the popular form of anime.

Isao Takahata's *My Neighbors the Yamadas*

In Isao Takahata's anime *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, nothing really happens — no plots to pursue, no socio-personal tensions to negotiate, and no love interests to tickle our sensibilities. The family of Yamadas is just like any other family in the neighbourhood, complete with a husband and wife, two children, and a grandmother. The anime represents, in a disjointed, compartmentalised sequence of mundane events, the day-to-day activities of the family members. "The majority," complains the French Marxist theorist Guy Debord about Western Marxist academics, "recognize specialized activities everywhere and everyday life nowhere" (qtd. in Goonewardena 124); and in Takahata's anime, any representation of the 'specialised', the 'institutionalised' and the 'grand' are conspicuously absent. Rather, it is the regular and the quotidian that is magnified and insisted upon. Even marriage, which is a social institution, is represented at the level of companionship that plays out in the minutiae of the 'everyday'. The fragmentary stories of the characters revolve around the trivial of who gets to choose the television channel, or what should be cooked for dinner, or who is tricked into cooking for that particular day, or fights over taking out the laundry and the trash, or the difficulties of parenting and explaining the 'birds and the bees' to the children. On occasion, we encounter events which are not necessarily a part of day-to-day life, like the daughter getting lost in the supermarket or the father having to confront rowdy men disturbing the peace of the neighbourhood with their loud motorcycles at night. Nevertheless, the comical treatment of such events and the distinct lack of 'spectacle' places such instances safely within the premises of the 'everyday'.

Even though the issues that the anime engages with, or the events that it represents, are all that any family might have to deal with in the 'everyday', the visual depiction of such issues sometimes blows out into the domain of the 'grand' and the fantastical. Towards the beginning of *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, we have a sequence where an elderly woman gives advice to the newly-wed Yamadas and congratulates them on their marriage: "Now, your prospects are boundless, and you are embarking for the wide-open world, under billowing sails" (00:05:39-00:05:45). The corresponding visuals, however, convert her metaphorical words into the couple actually going out to sea. We are, thus, given visual images of the couple on a ship braving the tidal waves, which is, in turn, akin to the famous woodblock print by Hokusai, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (Fig. 1). Another notable instance of the use of the fantastical is when, towards the end, we find the entire family flying off into the sky ablaze with fireworks, holding on to their umbrellas as they float around, and singing along to "Que Sera, Sera, whatever will be, will be" (Fig. 2). This is further reinforced by the use of folktales, as we have visual representations of babies being recovered from cabbages in the farm and from within bamboo stalk in the hills. While we have such occasional, and yet seamless, voyages into fantastical visuals, the anime immediately, just as easily, shoots back to visuals of the concrete and the ordinary. Herein lies the mark of traditional aesthetics in Takahata's portrayal of the 'everyday': the seamless weaving of the ordinary and the fantastic, in terms of visual images, in talking of events which are otherwise a part of the 'everyday', dismisses the gap between the prosaic and the poetic, the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the 'everyday' and the 'non-everyday'.

Fig. 1. Still from Takahata, *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (00:05:45).

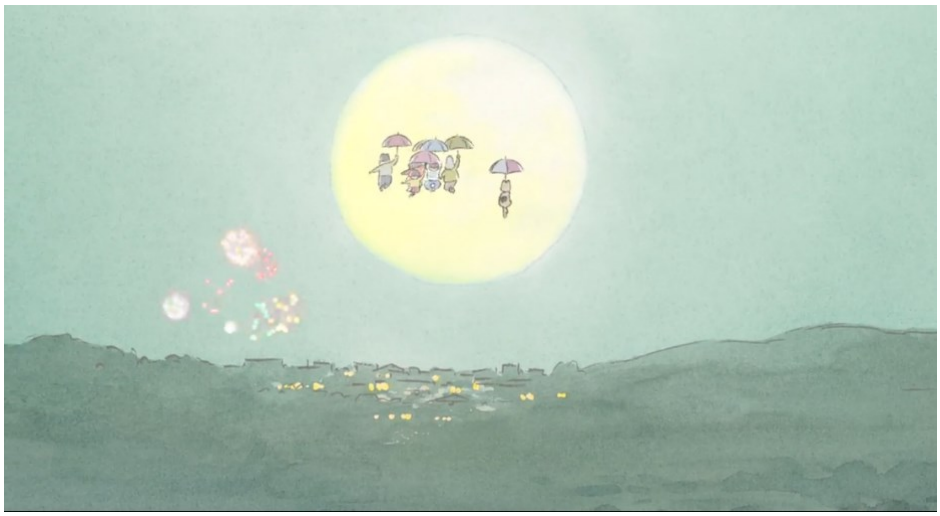

Fig. 2. Still from Takahata, *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (01:38:11).

An equally significant technique that Takahata employs in his anime is the use of Japanese *haiku* as a form of poetic commentary on otherwise trivial, and even prosaic, events of the 'everyday'. In Takahata's anime, we find a sequence of disjointed, ordinary events and regular interactions between the characters, separated by a *haiku*. A proper appreciation of what the *haiku* entails will serve to exemplify the significance of using *haiku* in this manner. The *Kodansha Encyclopaedia of Japan* refers to the *haiku* as a kind of verse that "was to be written, read, and understood as an independent poem, complete in itself, rather than part of a longer chain" ("Haiku" 78) and thereby presents Takahata's episodic display of the 'everyday' as no different from a *haiku*. If Takahata's disjointed episodes of the 'everyday' are to be understood as animated *haiku* — *haiku* in motion — the 'everyday' gets firmly established in the domain of poetry. Further, the *haiku* is understood to "concentrate on images, sounds, smells, and situations from everyday life, on simple experiences which the imagination can evoke with the aid of just a few verbal hints … when a haiku is successful, it endows our lives with freshness and new wonder and reveals the charm and profundity of all truly simple things" ("Haiku" 81). The employment of the *haiku* in depictions of the ordinary and regular encounters thus alerts us to the profundity that is to be discovered in the 'everyday' — the poetry that is to be discovered in the prosaic, the 'authentic' in the trivial. Takahata's anime captures the characters in their personal moments of joy, aspirations, frustrations and loneliness. Whatever may be the predominant emotion invoked in a particular segment, it is cushioned within the folds of a traditional *haiku*. One important instance is that of the father in the family returning

home after an exhausting day's work to find his wife emotionally disinterested and displaying only token gestures of acknowledgement. As the husband dozes off in exhaustion and reluctantly eats the banana, which he had previously scorned, out of hunger, we find the woman completely absorbed in a television program. We then get a view of the 'everydayness' of the moment from outside the window, and the little episode is rounded off with a *haiku* by Bashō that merges the loneliness at the moment with the nuanced beauty of autumn: "Turn towards me / I am lonely too / The autumn dusk" (01:09:32 – 01:09:39). Such instances bring into relief the modern artist's awareness of the 'everydayness' of modern existence and the alienation in which the bourgeois household finds itself pitted. Human relations and communication in the 'everyday' are at the crux of Takahata's anime, and he is fully aware of existence within modernity, in which "[e]veryday life is the measure of all things: of the (non)fulfilment of human relations" (Debord, "Perspectives" 92). It is a society, as Debord insists, that "tends to atomize people into isolated consumers and … prohibit communication. Everyday life is thus private life, the realm of separation" (93). As Takahata makes use of the *haiku* to envelop the otherwise grim sense of loneliness within an aesthetics of beauty, he does so by evoking a particular kind of practice in screen paintings of the Heian Period (794 — 1185 CE). Traditional Japanese *waka* poems, composed with particular screen paintings in mind, were often "written on a poetry sheet and pasted onto the screen painting" (Shirane 64). In imitating such a practice in his anime, and inscribing a corresponding *haiku* by Bashō on the very scene itself, something that Takahata does repeatedly, the anime is lent a postmodern self-reflexivity — the art that is aware that it is art, and, within Takahata's aesthetic anti-modernist bid to rehabilitate the modern 'everyday', the prosaic 'everyday' that is aware that it is poetic (Fig. 3).

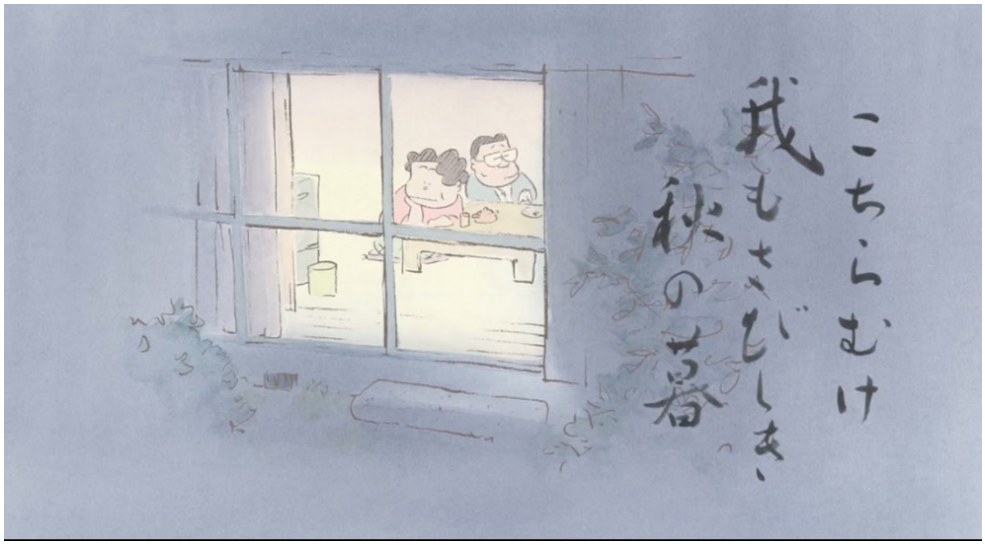

Fig. 3. Still from Takahata, *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (01:09:39).

In a return to traditional Zen aesthetics, Takahata introduces many artistic strategies in the construction of his anime that is reminiscent of traditional painting styles and tendencies. From beginning to end, Takahata engages in a minimalism of form and colour, apart from the minimalism of the disjointed stories themselves that, from the outset, places his dealings with the 'everyday' on a plane of simplicity and light-heartedness. Takahata presents in his panels only what is central and necessary and denies to his audience visuals of overflowing colours and extended cultural tapestries of Japaneseness — thus, he is all the more traditionally 'Japanese' in doing so. Dani Cavallaro highlights the dominance of simple forms in Japan's pictorial tradition. He refers to the 'one-corner' method of making use of limited strokes and lines in the creation of form, thereby allowing for a marriage between the principles of simplicity and compactness. Daisetz T. Suzuki points to the picture of "a simple fishing boat in the midst of the rippling waters" as a classic example of simplicity. The basic image of a boat "is enough to awaken in the mind of the beholder a sense of the vastness of the sea and at the same time

of peace and contentment — the Zen sense of the Alone" (Suzuki 22). Takahata's minimalism is a far cry from the drop in animation quality of television anime, whose "wild variations in anime hair colour, for example, have less to do with punk fashion and more with methods of finding an easy way to differentiate a large cast that has been cheaply drawn" (Clements 153). Takahata's subdued colour palette and economy of sketches are by design and not by financial compulsion. In *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, we find the father of the Yamada family, in one of the disjointed episodes, late in catching the morning train for a business trip. In a rush, not only does he miss the train, but also catches a fever and decides to stay back home. However, the moment he decides to let the stressful moment pass and stay at home for the weekend, he starts feeling better and finally decides to go to work after all. From then on, the entire mood shifts from one of stress to one of calm. He strolls to work and notices the flowers by the side of the road and the birds gathered on the electric wires above. He is still a part of a dense office-going crowd, boarding trains and crossing roads. However, Takahata's minimalistic style and the 'one-corner' method establish the poetry of the 'everyday' once the 'everyday' is no longer taken seriously. Instead of rushing out, he now walks past the blooming tree in his garden. The 'one-corner' method adequately places the tree on one corner as the wife watches the husband walking away calmly. The absence of practically any other detail in the frame ensures the simplicity and compactness of the moment — the 'everyday' has been rid of its rush and has now found its poetry in the pink blossoms (Fig. 4). This compactness is achieved not merely owing to the western concept of 'empty space' that "exists only in order to be filled" (Richie 76) but by the evocation of the Zen principle of *ma*, in which "emptiness … has its own weight, its own specific gravity, its own presence" (Richie 46). On his way to work now, Mr. Yamada is the only one recognisable amidst a crowd of roughly sketched people with minimalistic outlines. He is alone in the crowd of the banal, monotonous 'everyday', and yet his solitude is now inscribed with "the Zen sense of the Alone" of the small boat amidst rippling waters — he is alone, not lonely (Fig. 5).

Fig. 4. Still from Takahata, *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (01:30:47).

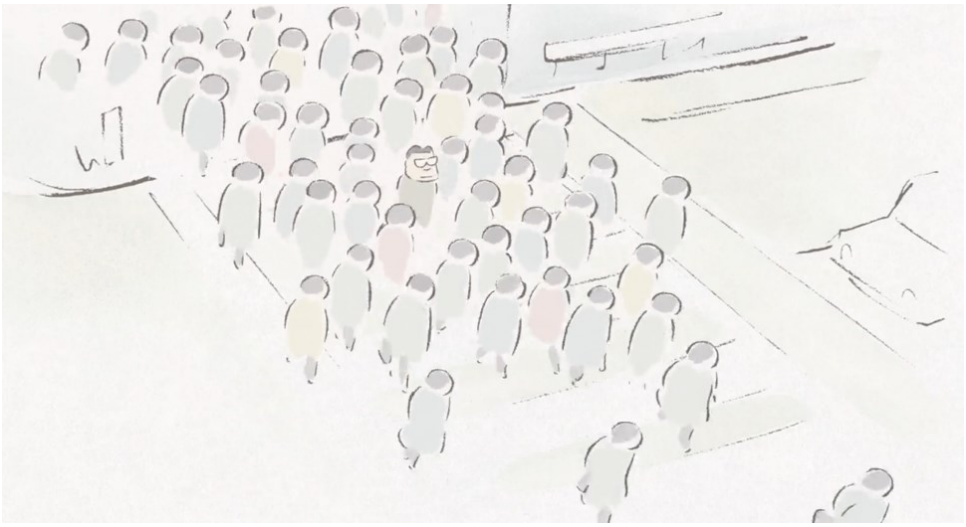

Fig. 5. Still from Takahata, *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (01:31:18).

My Neighbors the Yamadas offers a solution to the modern rigours of everyday life in the close-knit structure of the family. An 'acceptance' of even undesirable situations, as the husband of the family insists in his impromptu speech at a wedding, is understood to be essential to having a happy life. His insistence on 'acceptance' of the undesirable is an insistence on an acceptance of the 'everyday'. Takahata's argument of sticking to the family through thick and thin is, then, an insistence on a return to, as opposed to the modern 'everyday', the traditional 'everyday' which is "based on non-separation, on the absence of differentiation in the cosmic order which formerly bound man and nature together" (Lefebvre, *Critique* xxiii). In Takahata's anime, there is an absence of differentiation between the prosaic and the poetic, the trivial and the grand. Anti-modernism lies in the reorientation of the 'everyday' to the traditional absence of 'differentiation'. Towards the end of the anime, the young boy in the Yamada family says: "I know why we are so peaceful. Because all three of you are nuts! … If even one of you were normal, it'd throw off the balance" (01:36:19 – 01:36:33). The joviality with which the 'family' is presented situates the family as, what Lefebvre calls, a "non-place of desire, the place where desire dies of satisfaction" (*Everyday Life* 204), where the trivial-as-poetic is sufficient, and despite the fact that they must operate in a modern 'everyday' world of commodified reality, does not subject individuals to an endless desire for the commodity. "Don't overdo it," says the teacher to her students (01:37:14), and the end-credits of the anime play the song, *Hitoribochi wa Yameta* — quit being alone.

Conclusion

The association of aesthetic beauty, deep-seated within the simplicity of life, with a 'Japaneseness' is overtly prevalent in Japanese popular culture. What started off with appeals to nature-civilisation 'harmony' as nativist appeals against the onslaught of modernity in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries became dominant within the domain of popular culture on an international level since the 1980s. While anime played a significant role in the popularity of what Kōichi Iwabuchi calls a 'cultural fragrance' (57) of Japan, the Japanese government has been attempting to boost this 'cultural fragrance' through different measures in the twenty-first century, like the establishment of a separate 'Cool Japan Division' in 2011 within the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, among many other such initiatives (Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin 142-43). Nevertheless, what is significant is that with the popularity of 'all things Japanese' comes the desire for 'Japanese' commodities. The critique of the 'everyday' as an anti-modernist stance, expressed within popular cultural forms like anime, has a definite counter-productive catch. It runs the risk of commodifying any traces of 'revolution' or any possibilities of the subversion of the bourgeois 'everyday'. A useful example of such a commodification may be found in the 'kawaii' subculture that operates around "pastel-coloured fetish objects, reminiscent of childhood" (Pelliteri 177). While the subculture is involved with

miniature merchandise, soft toys, and roundish and plump objects, which stand in for the little things in life, the everyday, the mundane, and the docile, it is a subculture that is thoroughly commodified. A tradition that situates beauty within the ordinary and the everyday is now sold over the counter and delivered on doorsteps. An artistic endeavour that has the propensity of becoming popular, then, becomes invariably confined to the role of a 'festival' — that which soothes in order to sell and cajoles to consign the consumer into its commodified reality. "A break with the everyday," says Lefebvre, "by means of festival — violent or peaceful — cannot endure" ("The Everyday" 11). *My Neighbors the Yamadas* lays bare the fundamentals that would pave the way for an undifferentiated 'everyday', and yet is destined to become the commodity it attempts to negate.

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