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Kari-guashi no Arietti [The Secret World of Arrietty]. Dir. Hiromasa Yonebayashi. Perf. Moises Arias, Will Arnett, Bridgit Mendler. Studio Ghibli / Buena Vista Home Entertainment / Dentsu, 2010. Film.

Mary Norton's 1953 children's novel *The Borrowers,* including its four sequels published between 1955 and 1982, appear the ideal source material for Japan's foremost animation film studio and purveyor of celebrated feature-length cartoons, Studio Ghibli. Indeed, the burgeoning field of Anglophone anime scholarship has lifted the veil on the cultural, narrative and thematic facets structuring the studio's films that seemingly assure the candidacy of Norton's fiction as suitable for the Ghibli treatment. The narrative of *The Borrowers,* adapted for Ghibli animator Hiromasa Yonebayashi's directorial debut Kari-gurashi no *Arietti/Arrietty* (2010), certainly revives many of the studio's hallmarks honed across its seventeen films. With echoes of Ghibli's earlier *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), Arrietty begins with the relocation of an ailing young boy, Shō (voiced by Tom Holland), from modern day Koganei (the western suburb of Tokyo where Studio Ghibli is situated) to an idyllic farmhouse retreat inhabited by his great aunt Sadako (Phyllida Law) and eccentric housemaid Hars (Carol Burnett). It is here that Shō glimpses the Clock family of Borrowers; tiny people who secretly populate a miniature world buried beneath the floorboards and nestled within the house's dusty corners. Ghibli's thematic pre-occupation with environmentalism and nature, the maintenance of a Pacifist ethic, cultural fragility and the lack of a clearly-defined antagonist inscribe the film's typicality. In *Arrietty,* however, human encroachment is divorced from the studio's ecological consciousness and humanist bent: recurring Ghibli motifs that recall the human / nature harmony of feudal Japan, rather than the economic progress and industrialization of the subsequent Shōwa era. Here, human invasion is couched in the illicit relationship between Sho and the youngest Borrower, the eponymous Arrietty (Bridgit Mendler). Their clandestine courtship threatens the relative utopia of the Borrowers' existence. It also allows the film to plead for certain ideological readings, given the terms of their tender union (class divides of wealth / poverty, traditional gender roles) otherwise swept under the carpet (and, indeed, under the floorboards). The clash of civilizations underpinning Arrietty also shrouds the film in the reality / fantasy separation that founding Ghibli

film-makers Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata typically hold in delicate balance.

The Borrowers also provides Ghibli with its latest shöjo heroine. Translated as "little female," such cultural figures represent a liminal identity within the child's ascension to adulthood. Yonebayashi's interpretation of 14-year-old Arrietty follows Norton's source-text successfully. To the concern of her parents Pod (Will Arnett) and Homily (Amy Poehler), Arrietty is adventurous and active, independent and intelligent, congenial and compassionate. But the film allies her with the shöjo archetype, closely identified with images of flight that key the figure's commitment to change and escape. The film delights in the spectacle and fascination of the miniature: themes that place Norton's original text within the literary sub-genre of low fantasy. Value is relative to viewpoint: *Arrietty*'s is a familiar world seen from a new perspective and with fresh eyes; its magical realism playfully revives feelings of childlike exploration and by manipulating scale, finds the epic in the everyday.

Just as the onset of Sho's ill health marks the character's stillness and tranquil immobility (often shot horizontally in his bed or reclining in the long grass), *Arrietty* adopts a style of languid contemplation that extends the intrigue of its animated world. Several characters from Norton's novel are omitted, and dialogue is kept at a minimum, especially in the film's early scenes. Screenwriters Miyazaki and Keiko Niwa choose instead to match the Borrowers' stealthy behavior with a formal style and pace that is no less furtive. Such a minimalist approach at times labors, but this unhurried approach provides a neat counterpoint to the cluttered world of the Borrowers' underground haven. A film mostly of interiors, these secluded spaces in Arrietty are steeped in intimacy and industriousness: decorative excess animates the Borrowers' productivity. Counter to the digital dominance across Western moving image culture and the hyperbole of simulative CGI in mainstream Hollywood animation, *Arrietty* effectively advances the Ghibli style that remains resolutely hand-drawn. Here, the flowing animated line is particularly conducive to the Borrowers' exploratory adventures, while the film's multiple allusions to 'craft' (cooking, painting, stitching and weaving) boomerang back onto the dexterity of animators who are no less skilled in the products they create. *Arrietty* climaxes with the uncertain (and separate) futures of Shö and the

Clock family. Arrietty is comforted by a new Borrower, Spiller (Moises Arias), taking solace in her discovery of another who is "more like us." Such a sentiment does not extend to Studio Ghibli, whose standout artistic achievements demonstrated in Arrietty continue to find little by way of animated companionship.

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