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# VIDEO



SWEPT AWAY Kiki's broom takes her and Jiji on their voyage of discovery.

## Special Delivery

Kiki's Delivery Service brings the work of Hayao Miyazaki to America—in style

By Andrew Johnston

Most people in this country associate Japanese animation with slick cyberpunk imagery and lurid violence. But the most popular cartoons in Japan are those of Hayao Miyazaki, which are often gentle fantasies that couldn't be more different from the idea most Americans have of anime. An animator since the '60s, Miyazaki founded his company, Studio Ghibli, in 1985 to specialize in animated features at a time when most of Japan's animation houses were abandoning theatrical product in favor of TV shows and straight-to-video releases. The huge success of the ten films Studio Ghibli has released since then has made him a major cultural figure in Japan. Still, Miyazaki's films have only sporadically been available in the U.S., usually in editions of uneven quality. Now that's about to change: In 1996, Disney signed a deal with Ghibli for worldwide distribution rights for nine films, the first of which, *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), arrives on video this week. Newly dubbed by an all-star cast of voices (for purists, a subtitled version is coming this winter), *Kiki* isn't just a beautiful piece of animation but also a remarkable piece of storytelling—the kind of kids' movie people always say just isn't made anymore.

Kiki (voiced by Kirsten Dunst) is a young girl who, like her mother, has been raised to become a witch. Tradition dictates that when she turns 13, she has to leave home for a year and find a city without a resident witch, then settle there and help the locals with her magic. Accompanied by her cynical black cat Jiji (portrayed to perfection by the late Phil Hartman), Kiki settles in the oceanside city of Koriko, where she's befriended by a baker named Osono, who lets her move into a spare room. As Kiki uses her powers of flight to

launch a courier service, she has numerous colorful misadventures, while also finding herself bedeviled by the insecurity and loneliness everyone faces in adolescence (not to mention her anxiety over her first crush, on a boy named Tombo). With the help of a grandmotherly customer (Debbie Reynolds) and Ursula (Janeane Garofalo), a young artist who survived her own pubescent turmoil not so long ago, Kiki is eventually able to find happiness in her new home.

The film takes place in a fanciful version of Europe that Miyazaki has described as what he imagined the 1950s would have been like had World War II never happened. The bustling streets of Koriko are filled with bulbous, old-fashioned cars, while huge blimps and passenger biplanes float through the skies above. The city is as much a character in the film as Kiki or Tombo, and the scenes in which she floats high above the rooftops on her broom, then plunges down and zips

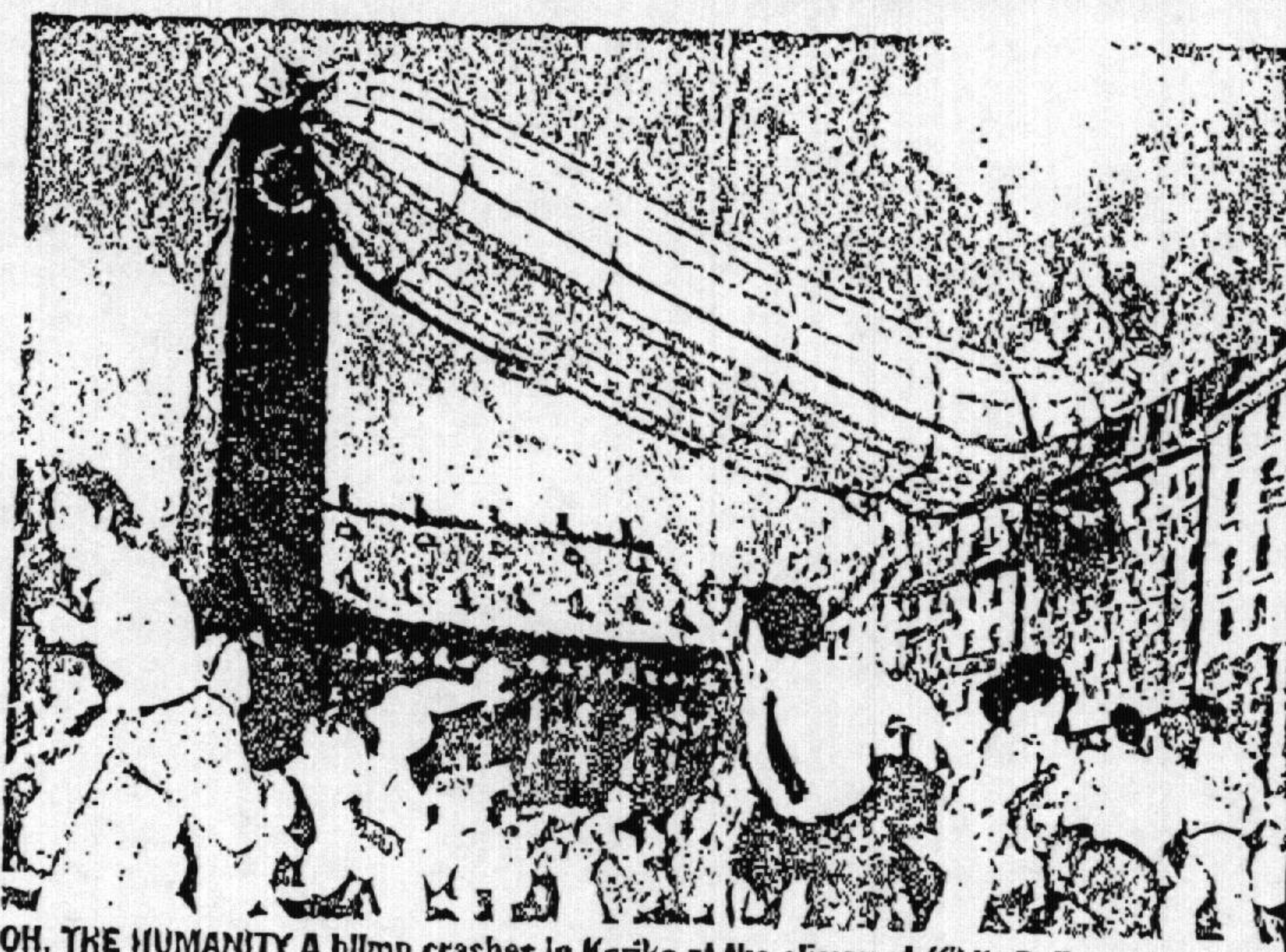
inches above the cobblestone streets, are truly stunning. The film's quiet moments are just as beautiful as the fancy set pieces, and the accumulated details result in a world that, like those in the best children's stories, is one you'll probably dearly wish you could visit.

Although the story has a clear moral about learning to develop self-confidence, *Kiki* is never preachy. The story is given time to unfold at a natural pace (the film is 103 minutes long, while most American animated features these days stay under

90 minutes and consequently seem rushed), which contributes greatly to the sense of depth it conveys. Dunst and Garofalo bring sensitivity and enthusiasm to their performances, but Hartman steals the show. His sarcastic inflection makes some awkwardly translated lines ("There are a lot of buildings, yes!") sound howlingly funny and proves again that he was one of the greatest voice-over artists of all time.

Disney has already scheduled another Miyazaki movie (1986's *Castle in the Sky*) for video release early next year and, through Miramax, will release his latest film, the 1997 medieval epic *Princess Mononoke* (which was briefly the all-time box-office champ in Japan, before *Titanic* came along) in theaters next March, with a voice cast that includes Gillian Anderson, Claire Danes and Minnie Driver. If Disney's first three Miyazaki releases do well, the other six films in the package (including 1988's *My Neighbor Totoro* and 1992's *Porco Rosso*, both considered classics in Japan) will follow on video at regular intervals. Anyone who really cares about animation has a lot to look forward to.

*Kiki's Delivery Service* is now available from Buena Vista Home Video for \$19.99.



OH, THE HUMANITY A blimp crashes in Koriko at the climax of *Kiki's Delivery Service*.