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Humanities Core Seminar

9 June 2017

Seeking its Hidden Identity Within Contemporary Japan

Hayao Miyazaki's *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*) is an animated film about a girl named Chihiro who goes on a journey into the Spirit World; a journey of what many like to say is her "rite of passage", as with many of Hayao Miyazaki's films. The word *Kamikakushi* is the "sudden and mysterious disappearance of individuals due to their abduction by some supernatural being" (Staemmler 343); in this case, rather than an abduction, "Chihiro and her parents simply get lost" (Staemmler 345) wandering around the abandoned town and suddenly find themselves within the Spirit World. The Spirit World is world within the boundaries of reality that only Chihiro is able to see, and that in order to escape and rescue her parents who were transformed into pigs, she is forced to change her name to Sen and work in a bathhouse. Chihiro works along many spirits to serve the gods who come to the bathhouse to cleanse their impurities from the outside, or real world. Hayao Miyazaki's film *Spirited Away* addresses Japan's cultural identity as it is influenced by westernization through the characters, setting, and architecture of the film. Through the main character's development and interaction with other characters in the film, even though westernization challenges elements of Japanese culture, the film emphasizes the growth of the Japanese cultural identity as it encompasses Western influences, but acknowledges Japan's cultural individuality and adaptation into a

contemporary society.

Hayao Miyazaki was born in Tokyo on January 5, 1941. It was a turbulent time for Japan as it was in the midst of World War II, and U.S.-Japan relations were still very fragile. He had much love for animation as a student and after graduating college at Gakushuin University, decided to pursue animation and started work at an animation studio called Toei Doga which produced TV series and feature films (Odell and Le Blanc 35). Miyazaki worked with Isao Takahata to create and later direct a few of their own animations both at Toei Doga and Nippon Animation. Miyazaki's early animated work at Toei Doga consisted of some of his contributions in "*Puss 'n Boots* (1969), *The Flying Ghost Ship* (1969), and other films that paved the way to directing his first animated film *The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979)" (Odell and Le Blanc 36); these experiences led to his later work at Nippon Animation with *Heidi, a Girl of the Alps* (*Arupusu no Shojo Haiji*, 1974) and his most notable work that led to "the real genesis of Miyazaki's style as a director", *Conan, the Boy in Future* (1978), which was adapted from Alexander Key's *The Incredible Tide* (Odell and Le Blanc 38-39).

After resigning from Nippon Animation, Hayao Miyazaki "returned to directing his second-feature film *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* as its unprecedented success led to the creation of Studio Ghibli, and highlights the most important theme that dominates his future works: "environmentalism and humankind's relationship with the Earth" (Odell and Le Blanc 59). Miyazaki's other films that we know today include *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Porco Rosso* (1992), *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke Hime*) (1997), *Spirited Away* (2001), and many more. Hayao Miyazaki is an animator, director, and artist in his work, creating films that include the different themes and

issues that are associated with today's society, such as "environmentalism, anthropomorphism, the use of children, idea of flight, Shinto mythology", etc. (Odell and Le Blanc 20-22, 27), and that touch the hearts of many people regardless of their age in its simplicity and depth.

In the first few scenes of *Spirited Away*, the film starts by opening up with a modern setting and highlighting certain elements of westernization. This is first seen through the Audi car, the dependency on credit cards, and the abandoned amusement park. The abandoned theme park, as explained by Chihiro's father, was the result of Japan's economic collapse in the early 90s (06:10-06:25). While these many seem like a small detail, the addition of these features echo the result of the collapse of Japan's economy in the late 1990s. Before that, in the mid 1980s, Japan was in the midst of a bubble economy in which the yen to the dollar was at its all-time low after Japan and five other nations signed the Plaza Accord in New York; this was a call for the "depreciation of the dollar against the yen and was supposed to increase the U.S exports by making them cheaper" (Johnston, "Lessons from the Bubble Burst"). As a result, many Japanese corporations and banks spent money on overseas assets and Japanese people spent money on everything from high fashion brands to trips to other countries. However, beginning in 1990, Japan's "stock market began a downward spiral" that lost "more than \$2 trillion dollars by December 1990, effectively ending the bubble era" (Johnston, "Lessons from the Bubble Burst"). This event made a huge impact on Japan's economy and people, showing that their desire for material goods and overspending led to dire consequences that hurt Japan economically, and led to the criticism of the people's moral and ethical values. In this way, the abandoned amusement park is a representation of those consequences and Japan's post-industrial struggle of recovering their own identity from western economic and social influences.

At the same time, another feature can be “negative aspects of consumption [in industrialized societies] ” (290) as said by Susan J. Napier, a professor of the Japanese program at Tufts University and an anime and manga critic who’s written books and articles about modern Japanese literature, popular culture, gender, etc. Her article, *Matter Out of Place: Carnival, Containment, and Cultural Recovery in Miyazaki’s Spirited Away*, addresses this characteristic as it is linked to the consequences of the bubble economy, and also to Chihiro’s parents’ dependency on their credit cards and their consumption of the magical food that turns them into pigs. Chihiro’s parents indulge themselves in the food that appeared before them, saying that they will pay with a credit card (09:05-9:30), but eventually turn into pigs (12:00-12:10) once the Spirit World comes ‘alive’. This type of transformation is used to illustrate the negative consequences of industrialization and westernization especially in Napier’s argument. She states that, “It is appropriate that the orgy of consumption should turn them into pigs, who have lost all memory of their human existence” (“Matter Out of Place” 299), meaning, that pigs are an appropriate symbolism of consumption as a consequence of westernization within the film. Their only role is to continue eating, or consuming food mindlessly without regards to its self or surroundings. In this case, because of her parents’ nonstop consumption of food and their reliance on the use of credit cards, unlike Chihiro, goes to show that the Japanese people were influenced by the bubble economy’s effects as their desire for materialistic goods and its consumption transformed themselves into mindless pigs.

Moreover, the film’s use of liminality properly analyzes specific scenes that allow Chihiro’s identity to be put into question as Japanese identity, especially during the 1990s, was also placed into a gray area of its own. The term liminality is the “betwixt and between” (Bigger

209) during a rite of passage, or more specifically, “is viewed as an in-between state of mind, in-between fact and fiction, and in-between statuses” (Bigger 212). Within Chihiro’s entrance to the Spirit World, the idea of liminality is introduced through her sudden disappearance of her body and her fear of that sudden change. In this scene, as her hand swipes right through Haku’s face, Chihiro expresses fear and discomfort of her physical body in the midst of disappearing (13:45-13:50). This scene signals her disconnection from the human world and begins to place her into a state of non-existence for that short period of time. Once Chihiro eats food given to her from the Spirit World, she regains her physical body once more (15:10-15:15), but finally becomes an entity that is a part of the Spirit World. In conversation with Japanese myths and folklore in Japanese contemporary society, a journal article, *Spirited Away: Film of the Fantastic and Evolving Japanese Folk Symbols* written by Dr. Noriko Tsunoda Reider, a Japanese professor at the University of Miami, says that:

the theme of consuming food from the other world in order to stay alive in that realm may remind the audience of a famous Japanese mythological story of Izanagi and Izanami. Izanami, the female creator of Japan, dies while giving birth to a fiery spirit. Izanagi, her brother and husband as well as male counterpart, misses her so much that he goes to the nether land to retrieve her. But Izanami says that she has already eaten the food from that realm, implying that it would be difficult for her to return easily to this one (5-6).

Reider states that “the food produced in the other world has the power to make one stay in that world” (6) and that Chihiro is unable to leave until she finds work and brings her parents back with her. As an addition, liminality extends itself to the idea of Chihiro’s name change. Yubaba,

the master of the bath house, strips Chihiro of her name, one of the most important reminders of her identity, and is put to work in the bathhouse; she is labeled 'Sen' from then on as Yubaba's property (40:17-40:30). When Chihiro starts to cry (43:20-43:23), her own circumstances put her into despair as she is suddenly overwhelmed by this new transition in a new world along with spirits and gods. In any case, through these small scenes, liminality showcases Chihiro's own reaction to the beginning of this period in which she is forced to adapt to her new surroundings and forget about her previous self and identity. This counts toward a renewal of Chihiro's identity and a proper evaluation of her roots, reintroducing her towards a more traditional Japan and educating her with its basic conventions.

As Chihiro begins to integrate herself into the bathhouse to work as a member of the Spirit World, the idea of the working class and conforming to their rules of conduct, within her liminal existence, highlights the traditional Japanese conventions of the culture itself. These conventions are subtly used as a mode of resistance against westernization since they highlight important Japanese customs that contribute to the culture especially in Japan's modern society. Chihiro relinquishing her own name and conforming to the rules of the bathhouse, as Napier states, "subordinate[s] herself to the group, another value connected with indigenous Japanese social structures such as the prewar *ie*, or extended family" ("Matter Out of Place" 301). She becomes a part of the workforce and "the jobs she is given evoke the teachings of the native Shinto religion, one of whose central tenets is the cleansing of pollution" ("Matter Out of Place 301), which fits the idea of purity as one of the main Japanese elements stated by Napier. It also includes respecting those whom she works under and also possessing proper manners for addressing everyone around her. For example, before she meets Yubaba, Chihiro comes across

Kamaji, who resembles that of a spider, and Lin in the boiler room. Lin and Kamaji are both spirit workers in the bathhouse, however, Lin scolds Chihiro in the boiler room for not thanking her for lending her assistance to take her to Yubaba (29:50-29:56), and also for not thanking Kamaji for protecting Chihiro and telling her about obtaining a job in the bathhouse (30:13-30:22). Being thankful for someone's help is a common courtesy, however, for Chihiro, it was difficult for her to grasp since she was not brought up with these manners. This can represent a lack of insight that people during this time may have forgotten about and disregarded as being an important aspect of Japanese culture. As Napier points out in the first few pages of her article, Chihiro's "search involves a quest to rediscover and reincorporate elements of purity, self-sacrifice, endurance, and team spirit, all of which have been historically regarded as quintessentially Japanese" ("Matter Out of Place" 289), even though her quest in the former half of the film challenges her identity by bringing her back to her roots. Even so, a glimmer of hope is shown when Kamaji strictly says, "finish what you started, human!" (27:05-27:09) and allows Chihiro to finish the work of picking up the coal and throwing it into the fire. Despite her lack of experience in work or labor, her determined expression (27:12) signifies her will to do the work she was given and complete it to its end. From this particular scene, one can see a glimpse of her determination from her character and the potential she possess to change herself within the bathhouse.

Furthermore, looking closely at the animation, the architecture and the gods and spirits that Chihiro encounters echo old Japanese symbols of old folktales and myths, but still include Western influences that create tension, but also portray its attempt to cohabit with one another in the film. Looking at the architecture and settings, the bathhouse is a sure symbol of traditional

Japanese architecture, along with the town that surrounds the bathhouse. “The bathhouse organization privileges traditionally sanctioned virtues such as endurance and hard work” (“Matter Out of Place” 301), while the town’s symbolism is as follows:

a significant proportion of the town into which Chihiro and her parents unwittingly wander is based on the Edo-Tokyo Architectural Park near Studio Ghibli. This is an open-air exhibition of a range of buildings from the Tokyo area, relocated or reconstructed to preserve the material vestiges of various architectural styles that would have been erased by wars, urban development or natural catastrophes such as earthquakes and *tsunami*. Most of the edifices date back to the Meiji period (1868-1912) and constitute both a historical document and a source of inspiration for current generations to reflect upon the past and its legacy (Cavallaro 137-138).

In this way, although this town has turned into a park in present-day Japan, it remains as a reminder of “the life, the buildings, and the streets we used to have not so long ago” (Cavallaro 138) as said by Miyazaki himself. In modern day, these buildings are still preserved to provide substantial evidence of Japan’s past through its architecture and to portray elements of its culture. While the bathhouse and the town in the film itself seem abandoned as a result of the economy’s collapse, it is still there to remind many Japanese people of the past that they long for, but is not completely lost.

In addition to the architecture and settings, the spirits and gods, derived from Japanese mythology and folklore, “to the Japanese viewer”, evokes a “sense of having seen them somewhere before” (“Matter Out of Place” 292-293) and are “rich, multi-faceted entities replete

with cultural memories and histories” as stated by Reider (11). For instance, Yubaba, the witch of the bathhouse, resembles that of a *yamauba*, a Japanese mountain witch who “conjures up the image of a mountain-dwelling hag who devours unsuspecting humans who happen upon her path”, and who possesses supernatural powers (Reider 11). Rather than inputting this type of character into the film, Yubaba’s character “controls her employees through the power of language and magic”, and “can freely transform humans into animals and eat them, which is entirely reminiscent of *yamauba*’s cannibalism” (Reider 12). While Yubaba represents a strict character who is also greedy for her gold, and can manipulate magic and people to her every whim, her mother-like nature towards her son Boh represents a decent side to her character. Her doting and soft nature with her son portrays more depth to her character as with other spirits in the film. No-Face, for example, while he was “born entirely from Miyazaki’s imagination”, is a calm, expressionless but lost spirit, however, once he swallows the bathhouse workers, is able to acquire their voice, personality, and his reasoning ability to make him more human and surround himself with other spirits like him (Reider 19). Even though he manifests himself into the greed and consumption that lived within the spirits and the bathhouse, No-Face was able to revert back to his old self after vomiting out the food and the spirits he ate; this being another consequence of greed and excess consumption. Rather than conforming to the norm’s ways, he was able to regain his calm self and find a new life with Zubaba, Yubaba’s nicer twin sister. Nevertheless, even if the spirits and the gods within the bathhouse are all influenced by the outside world’s post-industrial consequences, their background and character portray them to appear as human as we are. Their attitudes and personalities reflect those of being human, besides the magic and cannibalism aspect, but even so, represent a combination of both their Japanese roots and

western influences from the outside, or human world.

In brief, *Spirited Away* encapsulates many elements of Japanese identity and its tensions within, but also its cohabitation with westernization within the film. As said by Cavallaro, “Miyazaki’s animation style likewise bridges two worlds and two traditions” (11) and “is eager to recapture a sense of tradition and belonging in a culture that is increasingly shaped by the imperative of homogenization and simultaneous atrophy of the imagination” (138). Besides its history, Japan’s social, political, religious, and economic aspects were all influenced both positively and negatively by westernization, including the integration and advancement of technology within Japan’s society. Without it, Miyazaki states that “it is a poor idea to push all the traditional things into a small folk-culture world. Surrounded by high technology and its flimsy devices, children are more and more losing their roots. We must inform them of the richness of our traditions” (Reider 21). Accordingly, instead of conforming to its Western counterparts, Japanese culture is able to adapt and integrate those western influences within its society. What’s more, Japan still stays true to its culture localness, possessing many different elements of its culture, and creating a unique culture identity that distinguishes their place in the world.

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