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Caught Between Two Worlds: Resolving Japan's Modern Identity in Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away (2001)

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#### **Author**

Jaich, Ljubica Juve

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CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:  
RESOLVING JAPAN'S MODERN IDENTITY IN HAYAO MIYAZAKI'S *SPIRITED  
AWAY* (2001)

By

Ljubica Juve Jaich

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APPROVED

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Dr. Laura Harris  
Department of Media and Cultural Studies

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Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair and Faculty Director, University  
Honors Interim Vice Provost, Undergraduate Education



## Abstract

I will be analyzing the film *Spirited Away*, by Hayao Miyazaki, as a post-imperialist artwork that attempts to resolve the liminality of Japan's cultural identity within an international context. I contend that Miyazaki is concerned with reimagining the cultural state of Japan in the wake of westernization, industrialization, and capitalism. The utilization of the animated form is important as a method of making physical such abstract concepts as culture, internationalism, and religion. In this way, I also argue that Miyazaki's use of animation is a visual interpretation of the magical realist genre. Magical realism has been most notably used in Latin American literature as a way to rethink their national culture and history outside of a eurocentric scope. In comparison, I would describe Japan as a post-imperialist nation for its substantial cultural influence by the west. My theory is that Miyazaki is utilizing this same approach to reclaim a traditional Japanese identity - heavily influenced by beliefs derived from Shintoism and Buddhism - while also resolving Japan's coexistence with a western, capitalist identity. Much of these identity crises are worked out through the young female protagonist, who acts as a point of entry for a modern audience, as she explores a space inhabited by *shintō* spirits combating the effects of industrialization and westernization. The film also uses a variety of Japanese-centered motifs, symbols, and spaces to discuss these concepts, centering around a traditional Japanese bath house. Miyazaki's use of Japanese-centered symbols and attention to issues of identity illustrates the film's reimagining of a modern Japanese identity from an introspective angle. I will be utilizing the work of Japanese animation scholar Susan J. Napier as well as Wendy B. Faris, a scholar who focuses on magical realist literature. I contend that the film is attempting to resolve cultural liminality in Japan through a symbolic critique of industrialization and westernization.

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## Introduction

Director Hayao Miyazaki is a key artistic and cultural figure in modern Japan. His use of animation and magical realism - two styles that can transcend reality while still being a part of it - helps create his own discourse about the real world. In *Spirited Away*, the issue of Japanese cultural identity caught between their native traditions and modern western influence is a major question. I contend that Miyazaki is trying to resolve cultural liminality in Japan between these two often conflicting systems. Miyazaki doesn't deliberately condemn everything western and he appears interested in western culture as well. The films of Hayao Miyazaki are always more than they appear, rather than being simply animated entertainment for children, they are often in serious dialogue with real-world processes and the push-pull between the environmental security and modernism within Japanese stability. The film *Spirited Away* (2001) is generally considered to be his greatest achievement, being his most successful film on many levels. It became the most lucrative film in Japanese cinematic history, even compared to live action cinema, ironically despite the film's harsh critique of modern capitalism. The film's foreign success, such as in winning an Academy Award, is somewhat surprising because of the film's heavy emphasis on Japanese culture and that much of the film is impossible to understand for a foreign audience. Miyazaki's interest in discussing modern issues and cultural identity within a fantastical setting is reminiscent of other magical realist literature.

Magical realism reimagines social processes and cultural histories to work as a decolonizing agent and reclaim a cultural identity (Faris). Miyazaki is attempting to do the same thing by imagining modern economic systems through the lens of Japanese folklore, *Spirited Away* works to resolve the conflict intrinsic in abandoning the past. Miyazaki's animation can work as a new space for discussing complex processes or abstract concepts in the same way magical realist writing can, so in this way, Miyazaki's film can be read as a complex intellectual text rather than just an entertaining cartoon.

The film is highly critical of the capitalistic economy that seems to define both the human and spirit world. *Spirited Away* presents almost immediately a tale of failed capitalist enterprise as the space in which the film will proceed, establishing the film's overarching interest in greed. The film begins with a family of three in the process of moving. The daughter, and protagonist, Chihiro, is unhappy and complaining about moving away from her old life, introducing a key theme regarding routine or traditional ways that are interrupted. As they get lost along the way through a wood, there is a sense of transition and shift as they walk down a mysterious tunnel, reminiscent of Alice falling down the rabbit hole. However, before the protagonist finds out she's in Wonderland, there is an interesting moment where the father explains the mysterious town they've discovered: "It's an abandoned theme park. They built these things everywhere in the '90s, but then the economy went bad and they all went bankrupt," (Miyazaki). The film is presenting the audience with the, at least on a material level, setting for the actions of the film: a site of failed modernity. The space has been taken over, or perhaps reclaimed, by shinto spirits. Jennifer Robertson in her article "It Takes A Village" points to Japan's post-industrial economy and western influence as reasons for a certain interest in pastoral

imagery and shintō, traditional Japanese belief system. Miyazaki considers both these nostalgic elements in the film as he negotiates the coexistence of western modernization and traditional Japanese culture. This is spatially evident by the way the capitalist system taking place within the film and images of early industrialism seem to be in conflict with the edo era, or classical, architecture. Certain theorists as Timothy J. Craig have pointed towards the economic development that occurred after World War II as a particularly important period that contributes to the issues we see Miyazaki addressing: “[e]conomic development’ has produced ‘new social conditions’, including ‘urbanization, consumer cultures, changing family structures and gender roles, and lifestyles and values that are less purely traditional and more influenced by outside information and trends,’ (2000: 16). What Craig is pointing out is that Japan has had a history of major external influence over its culture, as a result of the American military occupation after World War II and the subsequent influx of imported western media. Japan gained major economic footing as a result of their investment in manufacturing with some aid by the United States and his period of capitalist growth lead Japan to what is known as the Economic Miracle, accelerating Japan to the second largest economy in the world (Nakamura 56). However, capitalism does not guarantee stability and is full of fluctuations, and so Japan’s “miracle” bubble popped in the 1990s, leading to a major economic recession. This period is known as the Lost Decade. By framing his narrative within the “national soul-searching” era following an economic disaster, Miyazaki confronts the influences of a modern capitalist industrial economy and subjectivity within such a system (Napier).

The audience’s introduction to the protagonist would not peg her as a typical heroic figure, as Miyazaki depicts the girl as lethargic and whiney. He has described in

interviews that a little girl just like this inspired him to come out of retirement to make this film: “It was necessary to have a heroine who was an ordinary girl... Just a girl you can encounter anywhere in Japan,” (Miyazaki). In this way, the protagonist’s ordinary status can serve a variety of purposes. It serves to make the magic and mayhem of the spirit world far more distinctive and extraordinary. She also can stand-in as the symbolic figure for the Japanese subject, as she negotiates the shinto spirit world with her highly industrial reality. Finally, and will be discussed further later on, more than just a subject, the protagonist has a certain amount of liminality that enables her to traverse between the two worlds. Her status as a blank slate makes her personal growth and search for subjectivity more vital to the narrative.

The film begins by posing questions in regards to space, social existence, and capitalism. Our heroine is introduced as a whining child named Chihiro who is unhappy about her family’s move to a new town. We see she has been given a bouquet as a goodbye present from her friend, this up-close angle of the card reveals Chihiro’s name and how it is written in kanji. Despite this meaning little to non-Japanese viewers, it sets up the importance of names for the rest of the film, in particular Chihiro’s name and how it is appropriated and dismembered. The card will later act as a reminder of her identity further illustrating the importance of social connection. When the witch dismembers Chihiro’s identity, she quite literally strips the kanji away, the symbols float into the witch’s hand, and as she clutches them she states, “These are mine now.” Here Miyazaki offers a poignant illustration of appropriation that is only possible in an animated film. The witch steals her given name and then gives her a new one in an attempt to sever her connection to the outside world in a method of social death. This social death places her

makes her an uncanny figure, as illustrated by how her body begins to actually fade once it crossed the threshold. This speaks to Miyazaki's interest in the larger concept of Japanese cultural identity. Actually, it is worth considering the possibility that Chihiro does not just experience a social death but a literal death as well, seeing as she is inhabiting the spirit world.

Both the protagonist and her family are established initially as modern individuals who take part in their capitalist society. The heroine complains, "I finally get a bouquet and it's a goodbye present, that's depressing," and when her mother points out that her father gave her a rose, she dismisses it, "Yeah, 'one.' Just one rose isn't bouquet." Revealed here is an example of spoiled, greedy children Miyazaki seems so interested in combating. He has revealed in interviews that Chihiro was inspired by one of his granddaughter's friends. Essentially, Chihiro is demanding an excess of a naturally occurring resource. She is playing into the practices of a capitalist economic system that takes advantage of the natural, a process seen later on being carried out by spirits themselves. To quote Karl Marx, appropriate considering Miyazaki is a self-declared socialist: "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society." It is seen throughout the film that Miyazaki is interested in the excessive tendencies of capitalist industrialism to overdevelop, overproduce, and overly exploit. Chihiro's family is also seen driving a foreign car, specifically an Audi A4 1.8T. While not a major focal point, for an animator to make the effort to so specifically design this vehicle, it needs to be assumed that there is a purpose. The choice in a foreign car illustrates Chihiro's wealth but also Japan's part in transnational trade and a

commitment to western capitalism. In that sense, the characters, particularly Chihiro's parents, are performing wealth with western signifiers. Her father uses fiscal language to reassure his daughter of security: "Don't worry, you've got daddy here. He's got credit cards and cash." Ironically, soon after he makes this statement, he transforms into a pig, likely a nod to the gluttonous nature of consumer capitalism. Additionally, the main antagonist of the film, a witch who runs a bathhouse, is the other major capitalist figure of the film. She dresses in Victorian-style garb and her office is elaborately decorated in European style, in direct contrast with the quintessentially Japanese setting of the onsen, or bathhouse. So while it is clear that both the human world and the spirit world are active participants in the capitalist system, the leading capitalist figures are designed with greater ties to western culture. This detail may reveal Miyazaki's critique of capitalist practices as a western import.

As Susan J. Napier once wrote, the film marks a turning away from the west for Miyazaki, and a "turn towards Japan." Miyazaki appears interested in discussing what defines traditional Japanese culture in the modern world, in relation to capitalism, industrialism, and traditional shinto practices. He utilizes the animated medium to approach these complex processes by making them visual to better illustrate how they interact and coexist. The film seems to be attempting to resolve Japan's status as a post-imperialist - both as the imperialist and imperialized - and highly industrial nation entering the 21st century with their central traditional cultural belief system. Miyazaki is making a commentary on Japanese reality by reimagining it in the microcosm setting of an onsen, or bathhouse. Miyazaki utilizes the animation space to critique these subtle concepts. This becomes evident in such visuals as his interest in comparing both western

and eastern myths or cultural signifiers. In many ways, animation can be considered in the tradition of magical realism. While, magical realism is a genre of literature rather than in the realm of television or film, they can be created with similar goals and can create unique planes of existence outside the chains of reality. Magical realism exists paradoxically, as well as its power as a genre to allow an author, as well as the audience, to step back from reality while critiquing it: "...reality's outrageousness is often underscored because ordinary people react to magical events in recognizable [ways]...a circumstance that normalizes the magical event but also defamiliarizes it, underlines, or critiques extraordinary aspects of the real" (Faris 13). The beauty of magical realism is the ability to have a foot in reality while abstract concepts or reimagined histories are all a possibility. *Spirited Away* utilizes the techniques of magical realism to seamlessly weave together both the spiritual and real as the protagonist navigates a global Japanese cultural identity. The medium of animation can create a new plane for discussing complex processes or abstract concepts, in the same way magical realist writing can, such as a critique of capitalism as well. *Spirited Away* is the most successful film in Japanese cinematic history because it is a complicated film revolving around a young girl's experience with traditional Japanese identity and the side effects of cultural transition and global capitalism.

These images of contamination - in spaces that should symbolize purity - may illustrate, at a certain level, a critique of westernization but more likely a critique of modern industrialism. In addition to hints at the beginning of the film of Japan's capitalist history, the film also presents a Japanese-style bath house as the main setting for the film. A bath house is a place that traditionally serves for both physical and spiritual

purification. Contrasted with this are images of blood, excrement, and waste. One key example of this is the “Stink Spirit” who demands to be cleaned at the bathhouse; once washed, it is apparent that it was actually a great River Spirit who had been polluted. In *shintō*, a physical river also has a spirit, and so we see that this spirit in the film is an embodiment of an actually polluted river [Napier]. Miyazaki is particularly concerned with environmentalism, evident in several of his other films. Susan J. Napier, an expert in the field of Japanese culture, makes similar observations in “Matter Out of Place”, her own analysis of *Spirited Away*. The use of these images of waste in a bathhouse, a place of cleanliness, functions as a metaphor for the way Japanese culture has been polluted by western ideas such as excess and industrialization.

A vital notion to understanding Miyazaki’s style is that his use of the real integrated with the fantastic is not his alone, but part of a whole genre of writing fiction with underlying political aims. Magical realism is a postmodern genre that works magical, as the name describes, or surreal elements and events into the real world. The ironic, as well as paradoxical, aspect of this presentation is that it is displayed as perfectly ordinary, or not beyond acceptance. The unique space that magical realism can reach into the contradictions between reality and fantasy is the perfect forum for political discourse, as is the case with some of the most influential texts of magical realism written. Magical realism became popular in South America in the early 20th century with such novelists as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, however has been a part of early Spanish literature since the classic work *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. It would be interesting to make a comparison between the texts and societal contexts of Latin American magical realist fiction and those of Japanese magical realist fiction. While these nations have their differences,

Japan does share a certain colonial history that relates to Miyazaki's interest in defining Japanese national culture through the techniques of magical realism. Japan's isolationist edo period was abruptly ended by the United States government in the late nineteenth century who coerced them into opening up trade, marking the first influx of westernization to Japan. However, it is the period just after the downfall of the Empire after World War II, the United States' occupation of Japan, and political upheaval that initiated Japan's status as colonial nation (Pile, Kenneth. *The Making of Modern Japan*, 2nd ed. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1996.).

The United States imported their political and economic structure in an effort to build up a new Japanese society in their own image. This manifested itself primarily in Douglas MacArthur, an army general who is credited with directing the reorganization of the Japanese economy, emphasizing the corporate structure and an industrial development very much rooted in capitalist agenda (Schaller, Michael (1985), *The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia*, New York: Oxford University Press). While this led to a long period of economic prosperity, certain scholars point to this as destructive against Japanese traditional social structures. Pyle describes how subjecthood became based around one's place in the new western corporate structure: "Nationalism and the desire to catch up with the West persisted after WWII, but now the efforts were focused on economic and industrial goals," (Pyle, p.242). *Spirited Away* takes the opportunity of an economic recession to make the audience aware of how capitalism is crushing them culturally and subjectivity outside of this system is at risk. In a society where one's subjectivity is defined by economic means, Miyazaki's protagonist in *Spirited Away* attempts to transcend this reasoning. Souma

Chakraborty, in her research on Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, explores how magical realist texts are often used by non-western, often colonized cultures to rewrite or critique their history with powerlessness and their present experience with it. Miyazaki too appears to be, as Susan J. Napier describes, presenting a "shift from the West and a turn towards Japanese culture." Japan's transition into western modernism, both at the beginning and end of the twentieth century, was rushed and violent, necessitating a certain reimagining of this history. Typically, as described in much of the literature on magical realism, this choice is an act towards re-obtaining one's lost culture. I assert that Miyazaki, as well as other Japanese authors of the twentieth century, are attempting to do just this.

A final theme seen in Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, as well as much Japanese film and literature, is the concept of lost cultural identity. One major struggle the protagonist Chihiro must overcome is not only saving her parents from being trapped in the spirit world, but also to remember her own and her friend Haku's real names. When Chihiro arrives in the spirit world, she is told that in order to stay she must get a job at the bathhouse. Reluctantly, the witch who runs the business, Yubaba, gives her the job, but on the condition that she signs over her name: "What a pretty name! And it's mine now" (Miyazaki). As Haku explains, as he too has had his real name stolen, Yubaba uses this method as a way to control people. This is Miyazaki's way of simplifying the issue of flux identity within Japanese culture to understand the issue better, and perhaps even resolve it. Interestingly, both of the heroine's names mean approximately the same thing: one thousand. Michael Lucken explores the concepts of horizontal and vertical space in *Spirited Away*. He explores the meaning of Miyazaki's utilization of space in both

directions, namely the contrast of “the artificial verticality of Western bourgeois modernity and a natural and regenerative horizontally...” concluding that “The Japan in the throes of this verticality is not the real Japan but rather a false version (like a derelict amusement park,” (Lucken 191). The concepts of vertical and horizontal space are not simply physical, they also exist in Chihiro herself. The name “Chihiro” means “one thousand fathoms” and the name “Sen” - the name forced on her at the bathhouse - means “one thousand” and “span.” It is worth pointing out that nothing in this movie is a coincidence, especially the names of the characters. For instance, the characters of the bathhouse’s names are representative of their personalities or jobs. The woman who runs the bathhouse is named “Yubaba” which literally translates to “bath witch.” In this way, the spirits derive their subjectivity from their position of labor within the bathhouse economy. Meanwhile, Chihiro/Sen’s names are contingent upon her space, alluding to her quality of liminality that allows her to walk as a transcending subject and not become trapped in the microcosm of the bathhouse. We see that the heroine can occupy both spaces without being dependent on the socioeconomics of the bathhouse, such as how only she and the other protagonist is able to traverse the entire height of the bathhouse from boiler room to penthouse, unlike all of the other characters, she can transcend the bathhouse, a space of verticality, and explore the world of horizontality as illustrated by her names. The horizontal world is embodied in the train that passes under the bathhouse and on to the horizon. It is clear that the employees of the bathhouse are bound to the vertical space but yearn to leave: “I’d give anything to ride that train.” The bathhouse’s verticality is symbolic of the strict class system that comes along with unfettered

capitalism. If the bathhouse represents capitalism, industrialism, and artificiality, then the train represents nature, independence, and a welcome solitude from the hectic bathhouse.

This is clearest in the space in which the majority of the film takes place: the bathhouse. Bathhouses have a centuries old history in Japan as spaces for both physical and spiritual cleansing and renewal. Bathhouses were originally produced thanks to naturally occurring hot springs, a miracle of nature that is considered important if not sacred in shintoism. However, as in a capitalist system, once all needs are met, new wants are demanded in order for the system to function (Lacan). The witch of the bathhouse has taken a naturally occurring resource that technically belongs to no one and created a profitable business out of it. This is no different from the bottling of natural spring water or excessive allotment of lumber. Yubaba - the bath witch - is taking what is an otherwise natural process and industrializing it. We see many images that further support Miyazaki's perspective of the dubious merits of capitalist-born industrialization. This is evident in simply the construction of the bathhouse physically. It is an unnecessarily tall building, actually far taller than any other building nearby, reminiscent of skyscrapers - pinnacles of capitalist success and often example's of humanity's unquenchable desire for excessive wealth. The building operates on a vertical angle, meaning it is a system that categorizes and compartmentalizes the people, the work, and the wealth. The building's class structure runs from the boiler room through the kitchens and baths reserved only for guests to staff housing and finally the penthouse suite where the witch lives. The employees all live in the bathhouse where they work, revealing both that they are without subjectivity outside of their work but also that the bathhouse exists as a realm of its own.

The boiler room is the heroine's first experience of the bathhouse. She has to find it by essentially crawling down extremely precarious stairs on the outside of the bathhouse so no one inside will see her. This alone is reminiscent of servant entrances that made sure workers never believed they were a part of the actual house and kept the classes completely separate. The danger involved with getting to the boiler room and the stoking of the fire inside said room illustrate the danger and dehumanizing work of early capitalist industrial labor that was unchecked and lacked any care for the safety of workers. The boiler man's workers are actually anthropomorphized soot. This is interesting because the work is obviously too difficult for humans, or in this case spirits, to conduct and also soot does not need to be paid. Additionally, the boiler man who is in charge of these spirits constantly threatens his workers, "C'mon! You little runts! You wanna turn back into soot? And you! Back off. If they don't work, the magic wears off and they turn back into soot." The magic soot are representative of the manual labor force of the early industrial age, who were often characterized by being covered head-to-toe in black soot. They are emblematic of the larger phenomenon of the way profit from labor is privileged over the quality of life for the actual laborers. The soot spirits are characterized by their shared appearances, cheap social value, and that they are easily replaced, similar to the way employees in reality are often thought of. The film provides a critique of the industrial labor system and the way it blends individual employees into a single indistinguishable body. This method, as Marx and other critics of capitalism described, separates individuals from their craft and from each other. The intimacy of an employer-employee relationship is challenged in a capitalist system in order to create an oppressed working class that can be easily abused and easily replaced. Additionally, the

boiler man reveals that the magic spell on them wears off if they stop their work. This is an example of the ways the magical realist genre can utilize abstract or otherworldly imagery to subtly comment on contemporary social issues. This comment is indicative of the way a being cannot exist or operate within a capitalist system unless they are working or contributing to the accumulation of wealth. This wealth is also rarely their own as other employees in the film comment on their economic dependence and poverty. Despite being a spider, ironically he is also ensnared in the economy of the bathhouse and the bath witch's demands. If the bathhouse by-and-large operates as a representation of a larger sociological system, then the boiler room represents the suppressed labor force in an industrial society. Miyazaki utilizes the unhindered possibilities that animation allows to illustrate these very real systems and experiences. When it comes to the boiler room, Miyazaki is effectively revealing the underbelly of capitalist industrial systems that invisibly run the rest of society, as Kamaji essentially remains a hidden figure outside of a few scenes. In a historical sense - of which magical realist theory most often works within this framework - the film brings attention to and recreates the early industrial condition of the edo period, making visible both the idyllic and unattractive parts. The animation medium allows this reimagining to seamlessly merge with modern imagery, illustrating the way these practices still affect the present. The film blends folkloric, historic, and modern imagery to create a unique illustration of an entire culture.

Two interesting events that reveal quite a bit about our hero as well as her relationship to the macroeconomy within the bathhouse. On a larger scale, as the bathhouse is representative of Japanese society as a whole, Chihiro's lack of interest in wealth may reveal a perspective on capitalism that challenges its method of creating

subjects. This is evident in Chihiro's outsider status. Chihiro manages to cross the threshold between the spirit world and reality through her social death, for this reason she can separate herself somewhat from the processes regardless of the similarities between the society of the Bathhouse and of Japan. Her social death occurs when her kinships are cut off - parents turning into pigs - and when she enters the space of the bathhouse as an alien essentially. Furthermore, her youth and naïveté is protective against influence, and perhaps this is why Miyazaki is so interested in youth-oriented films. Back to Chihiro's relationship within the economics of the Bathhouse, she is an actor within the system because she has a job cleaning and preparing baths. However, she is working not for some kind of currency but in order to free her parents. This separates her from the foundational concept of capitalism, that employees work towards making money vis-a-vis their employers. In a sense, Chihiro is not working towards wealth in any sort, but just enough to survive with familial piety in mind. She works to fulfill a need, never a want. This is evident in her lack of interest in excess wealth in the form of currency. There is a mysterious spirit who appears to have an interest in Chihiro, though it is not clear why. He attempts to purchase her good opinion with bath tokens and even gold. When Chihiro is attempting to make a bath for a spirit, she is denied a token that is the method of payment for hot water simply because the token master doesn't like her. This is another example in itself how she exists outside this convoluted economy of exchange. This mysterious spirit sneaks her a token, which she is thankful for, and then attempts to further purchase her affection by giving her a pile of tokens. She politely declines saying, "No thanks, I don't need any more." Her use of the word need is unique in this film as all

the other subjects inside the bathhouse tend to use the word “want” more often. The heroine is able to transcend the illusions of excess.

Additionally, some scholars have noted that *Spirited Away* places an emphasis on perception. There are clues spread throughout the film, often in the corner of the frame, such as images of eyes or puns in Japanese kanji (Lucken). Chihiro however is the heroine because she can see past these illusions. When the mysterious spirit with the bath tokens later tries to give her a mountain of gold, the other bathhouse workers watch enviously and then are shocked when Chihiro denies the gift stating once again, “I don’t need any but thanks.” Immediately after she says this, the gold disintegrates into dirt, revealing that the gold was a ruse and worthless. She almost instinctively and without realizing recognizes that the gift is an illusion, meanwhile the whole bathhouse believed it to be true. For this reason, she manages to escape the confines of capitalism and rethink the concept of subjectivity within a capitalistic society.

The film takes what appears to be an average setting and then fills it with magic, illusion, and mystery. The scene where the landscape transitions like this feels very reminiscent of carnival settings, wherein reality is “subvert[ed]” or “liberat[ed].” This shift is marked by the sun setting, a common method in drama to signify the changing of social dynamics wherein the rules that govern that universe have shifted. In this instance, an otherwise familiar human space becomes threatening and strange, full of odd ghostly figures. The uncanny effect of carnival, or in this case matsuri - meaning carnival in Japanese, makes the audience’s understanding of the world on display and their own world uncertain. By decentering reality, Miyazaki can eliminate certain limitations of reality but also provides a forum for discussing reality as well. For instance, while the

audience may enjoy the indulgent moment of the protagonist's parents consuming inordinate amounts of detailedly drawn food, it suddenly becomes horrific when the humans transition into grotesque pigs. Carnival is often used in magical realist literature to provide a space in which society can be turned on its head, and by which impossible things suddenly become possible. The impossible being everything from women in dominant romantic roles to people being able to fly, both revealing certain societal desires that are very much real even if the stories are fictitious. For *Spirited Away*, the truth that is revealed underneath the magic is a young girl's personal growth into a confident and hard-working young lady despite the temptations of greed within a modern capitalist apparatus.

The choice in female protagonists is apparent in Miyazaki's work and is greatly connected to the real status of women within Japanese society and the economy. Susan J. Napier attributes the powerful heroines of Miyazaki's early works to the burgeoning female labor population in Japan in the latter half of the 20th century, that brought about a sense of greater "[female] independence and empowerment" (216). However, as she describes, *Spirited Away* is set at the collapse of this empowering economy: "... the 1990s... endless recession, which has shown the developments and values of the boom years to be empty shams. Most significantly, the vaunted structures of Japanese authority... Japan's successes in the seventies and eighties, were shown to be corrupt, inefficient, and brutally unmindful of the general citizenry," (Napier). As previously mentioned, *Spirited Away* is in response to the devastating economic recession of the 1990s. Miyazaki takes this moment to approach the issue of capitalist structure, but also to consider that structure from the perspective of a young woman. By making reality

uncanny and reimagining it as a bathhouse for spirits, the issue of the modern economy and industrial excess becomes more approachable and understandable especially for a young audience. Additionally, Miyazaki may be pointing out that, if carnival flips society upside-down in many ways, the inclusion of a young woman would also be impossible in reality. Essentially, it can be inferred that Miyazaki is making a comment on how women, especially young women, are barred from otherwise participating and certainly changing these systems. He subverts the patriarchal system of the bathhouse further by making the head of the operation and antagonist a woman. While it was common for women to run these brothel style institutions - understanding that the brothel status of the bathhouse in *Spirited Away* is mere theory - it is worth noting that Miyazaki makes the protagonist and antagonist in this struggle both women. The bath witch may be participating in a problematic system that exploits young women, widens economic disparities, and industrializes an otherwise spiritual natural process. However despite this, the film places both sides of the issue in the hands of women, pointing to the ways the film is both critiquing and subverting modern economic systems.

While children are especially important in this film for their social liminality, Miyazaki also subtly invokes the vulnerability of these bodies within this economy. Owain Jones writes on the violence against children that Miyazaki confronts by providing a prospective from children, who are an othered group: “[Childhood agency is] snuffed out by the degree of adult-orchestrated violence and disruption that frames their lives.” Chihiro’s body in this microcosm of capitalist practices is a commodity, furthering her goal to reclaim subjectivity. While explicitly her body is only purchased - via contract - by the bath witch to clean the bathhouse, many suspect that there is a more sinister

economy taking place. Some theorize that the bathhouse in the film emulates traditional brothels (Lucken). The women who ran these brothels were also known as yubaba or bath witch, and this also explains the abundance of female laborers. Additionally, one spirit shows a mysterious interest in the protagonist, constantly following her and offering her money with no explanation, eventually demanding: “Where is Sen? I want Sen!” Having the historical knowledge that these bathhouses also served as brothels suddenly makes much of the film appear much more sinister. While none of the characters are sexualized or even have sexualities - a common theme in Miyazaki films - the underlying suggestion does point to the capitalist exploitation of vulnerable bodies - namely young and female ones. Furthermore, taking the film’s possible critical view of western imperialism, the Victorian-clad mistress’ exploitative practices in a Japanese bathhouse may also point towards a certain amount of racism felt by Japan in the sight of early european colonizers.

In the same fashion as South American magical realist writers who are reassessing and criticizing their cultural histories as post-colonial drift, Miyazaki is utilizing animation to reassess Japan’s traditional history, as the film even includes references to pre-industrial scroll art (Lucken). Further than a resistance to capitalism and industrialism, as I stated earlier, Miyazaki is in resistance to the effects of American imperialism, capitalism being one of such, as described by Jay McRoy, “...contemporary Japanese culture is the varying degrees to which US ideologies and popular aesthetics... have had a deeply rooted and curiously expansive impact upon Japanese social formations,” (78). *Spirited Away* illustrates these cultural imports most evidently in the witch’s penthouse, where she is dressed in Victorian garb and her apartment is decorated in a noticeably western fashion. Additionally she sports a comically large nose, which

may be somewhat of a caricature of the western figure. As the prime example of capitalism in the film, it is not surprising that she also appears the most western in appearance. Miyazaki is arguably then giving the villainous sovereign of the bathhouse a racial identity. This is interesting considering the lack of racial identity in Japanese animation. The Japanese traditionally understand animation as “*mikokuseki*”, which translates roughly to stateless, without context, or nationless. Japan makes use of this understanding of the animation medium to work through often difficult moments of the past for the sake of better understanding their changing culture: “...incorporate fantasy or even science fiction elements to create imaginative visions of Japanese history, indicating that national identity is no longer a fixed construction,” (Napier 157). This understanding of time and history sets up the film for a looser conception of identity on a personal and global level. This reconception of history is evident in the combinations of varying architecture, the witch’s unmistakable Victorian design, and a train that is able to transcend the “sea” - an important symbol for the island nation of Japan. Not only is the setting of the film uncanny, but even the characters that inhabit it have indefinite identities. The identities of Sen, Haku, and the Stink Spirit are all more than they appear. Regarding the spirits, both Haku and the Stink Spirit’s Considering this, Miyazaki then is giving his characters a historical and racial context in an effort to rethink the global The Japanese names of the characters have a great significance to their identity and Miyazaki leaves clues within the film in kanji. This is an example of the way Miyazaki is not just making a movie for a Japanese audience, as he has been an international success before and understands westerners will see his films. He is actually denying knowledge from his

western audience, perhaps in his effort to resist western influence. This is where animation becomes an important tool for social criticism.

In addition to the economic transition to a modern western society, Miyazaki is concerned with westernization with Japanese values. He utilizes Japanese myths and folktales to illustrate the kinds of traditions and belief systems that children especially would be introduced to. Interestingly, he utilizes both western and eastern folklore. Miyazaki has always shown a fascination with western culture, especially considering rest of his filmography. In this case, he is more likely making a cynical and ironic view of western acculturation of Japan. *Spirited Away* addresses the often overwhelming western imagery, especially in animation, or as Susan J. Napier describes, Miyazaki is making “a shift from the West and a turn towards Japanese culture.” The film plays with western and Japanese imagery, both modern and historical. Often these images are in direct competition, such as Chihiro’s imported family car smashing its way through tree branches past shinto statues. It is also evident in Michael Lucken’s *Imitation and Creativity in Japanese Arts* who points out the scenes that appear to be inspired by Japanese scroll art as well as western folklore that includes Hansel and Gretel. This reveals the film’s interest in western and eastern influence over culture, particularly in acculturation of children - an issue that led Miyazaki to making *Spirited Away* in the first place. By repositioning reality in folktales, Miyazaki can comment on reality of “progress” in Japan while also touching on the histories and myths that shape how we perceive reality. Dr. Hae-ri Kim describes the importance of folktales above typical fiction, “folktales reflect society’s attempt to give form and shape to its hopes and fears, and answers to its questions. Folktales provide order to seemingly random experiences, as

well as express the culture's belief system," (Kim 2). In many ways, then, Miyazaki is creating new myths to address modern challenges.

These challenges come as a result of forced western homogeny over Japanese culture for much of the last century. Modern Japan is defined by western terms within western processes, and thereby to negotiate how ethnic traditions can coexist. Japan is in particular because of its most recent status as a twice-colonized nation - once by the west voluntarily and once reluctantly - giving it unique cultural status, while still maintaining their own identity. An early description of the country by a westerner speaks well on the subject:

Japan strikes us as an extraordinary creature that has fed by turns off the Eastern and then Western cultures without, for all that, losing its own native culture - which is precisely the crux of Japan's genius: to assimilate completely what it has drawn in from the outside and render all foreign importations its own. (Revon, Michel. "Histoire de la civilisation japonaise." Paris: Colin, 1900.)

Miyazaki is attempting to define a distinct Japanese culture despite the nation's global status and as well as its traditions, evident in *Spirited Away's* inclusion of both western and eastern signifiers. The results of Miyazaki's reimagining of the modern culture of Japan appears inconclusive, as the film dissolves into discussion of kinship, perhaps providing a message of defining identity by relationships rather than one's place in the economy. By critiquing western capitalism, he's attempting to remind his Japanese audience that their culture is distinct and resistant to complete homogenization. By critiquing western capitalism while defending the integrity of Japanese culture, the film walks the fine line between worlds in a space on the edge, utilizing his artistry and the

freedom of animation to make the underlying pervasive and ubiquitous nature of western-influenced Japanese culture visible for us to ponder.

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