Shinto and Miyazaki: Spirituality in *Studio Ghibli* Films

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Stage and Screen: Character Makeup Design. It is entirely the author's own work except where it is noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

Hayao Miyazaki's films are world renowned for his captivating narratives, his magnificent characters, and his stunning portrayal of Japanese culture and landscapes. Miyazaki's global audience is profoundly impacted by the films he creates with Studio Ghibli, and he is professionally recognized in the world of film as a master of animation, achieving numerous nominations and awards for his work.

This thesis examines the overt spiritual characteristics of the Shinto religion exemplified throughout Miyazaki's films, focusing on the three epics: *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001). Shinto is so prominently placed in his films that, in viewing his work an audience can be said to be witness to Shinto. While Miyazaki is consistently reserved on the question that his films could be religious in genre, as an audience we are witness to deeply spiritual content and specifically the influence of Shinto. This thesis aims to comprehensively show strategies of spirituality at work in his films. The word "religion throughout will be reserved to the notion of formalised religion and religious activity while "spirituality" will be used for an individual's interpretation of broader spiritual and religious ideologies.

The themes of Miyazaki's work, namely environmentalism, community between humans and spirits and self-growth, are universally accessible but with Shinto at the root. By using filmic elements, such as landscape, nostalgia, and music, while acknowledging Japanese religious ideologies and culture, Miyazaki guides an audience to reflect on their own spiritual journey. This thesis aims to identify how Miyazaki creates universally accessible films, how he uses Shinto to aid in his narratives and how Shinto influences his characters to conclude that Shinto has an active role in Miyazaki's work.

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Introduction

Studio Ghibli has garnered a reputation for producing iconic films that have become cult classics in the genre of animation, reaching a global audience of all ages. Studio Ghibli is a powerhouse animation studio in Japan that was founded in 1985 by directors Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata and producer Toshio Suzuki. Since their early film, *My Neighbour Totoro*, questions on how Miyazaki has represented the Shinto religion has been a subject of debate, especially as he has publicly stated he is not inspired to recreate religion in his films. This thesis identifies the significance of spirituality in Miyazaki's films through an examination of symbols, beliefs, and practices of the Shinto religion, alongside a discussion on Miyazaki's own views and the spiritual power his films have on his audience. The aim of this examination is to determine that Miyazaki's films are not religious with respect to the religious genre of film but that through Miyazaki's abilities to portray Shinto and Japanese culture his work can evoke a spiritual response among his audience.

Religion and Spirituality

The most important aspects of Shinto that are essential to this discussion include the concept of *Kami*, the connections between humans and nature and the ritual practices of purification and participation in Shrine worship (Rowland, 42). The Shinto religion pays great respect to the natural world. It is rooted in the belief that everything in the universe has a spirit or *Kami*. This belief is also referred to as Animism, which is the belief that "all plants, animals and objects are spirits." (Okuyama, 125-126). *Kami* means "god" or "deity" but in a greater sense means "the living essence of thing," (Rowland, 43).

Spirituality has been deemed by western scholars as an individual's projected beliefs without affiliation to a particular religion while Japanese scholars have described spiritual people as having "loose commitments to vaguely religious content and practices." Jolyon Baraka Thomas. states spirituality has become a "politically correct" term for religion so as not to suggest commitment to one ideology. Thus, he uses "religion" in his book to describe both spirituality and the formalities of traditional religions, in such as Christianity or Shinto. He also suggests how

spirituality is individualised but also how existing traits of traditional religion are fundamentally the base of ones spirituality (Thomas, 12 – 13). For this thesis, the term "religion" will be used for formalised religions and religious activity while "spirituality" will be reserved as a term for the concept of religion and the audiences' interpretation of religious ideologies.

Miyazaki's Films

Hayao Miyazaki's films have created an enormous impact on the world of animation, and he has won numerous awards and critical praise for his creative visionary. With stunning visuals and engaging narratives, his work with Studio Ghibli has evoked a powerful response from audiences around the world. *Princess Mononoke* is seen as the Studio's introduction to international film and paved the way for *Spirited Away*, upon its release, to blow "the door off its hinges," establishing the studio's global success. *Spirited Away* won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film and, to this day, maintains its title as the only non-English, hand drawn animation film to ever do so. *Spirited Away*, as well *Princess Mononoke*, won Japan Academy Prize for Picture of the Year Awards during the years of their release (Tiernan, "Studio Ghibli: The Japanese Animation Powerhouse That Conquered the World").

Princess Mononoke was Japan's highest grossing animation film until the release of *Spirited Away*. The Studio Ghibli now holds the position of producing 5 of the top 25 highest grossing Japanese films worldwide with *Spirited Away* dropping to second place as of 2020. *My Neighbour Totoro* is seen as a Studio Ghibli cult classic but at the box office it was not a successful film. However, with marketing and merchandising, this film is one of the most recognisable of Hayao Miyazaki's, even having the character "Totoro" as the Studio Ghibli's logo (Tiernan, "Studio Ghibli: The Japanese Animation Powerhouse That Conquered the World"). For this examination I will be closely examining these three films; *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke,* and *Spirited Away*.

My Neighbour Totoro is a wholesome film that follows the relationship between two sisters as they move to a new house in countryside while their mother is unwell in hospital. On Satsuki's first day at a new school, Mei, the youngest sister, playfully investigates around the new house and garden. She encounters two small forest

spirits and follows them into the forest into their home stumbling upon Totoro, a large cuddly creature. (Garza, 21). The young girls are guided by the spirits in their journey to embrace their new home, handle their mother's illness and grow in their sisterly relationship. Totoro is represented as a lovable character and protector to the girls and has become a fan favourite to many Studio Ghibli admirers.

Princess Mononoke is a masterpiece filled with uniquely recognisable characters from San (Princess Mononoke) to the Great Forest Spirit. *Princess Mononoke* portrays the destruction of the natural environment by humans and is one of three Miyazaki's films to be rated PG13. This is largely because of the depiction of a cruel adult world and violent human behaviour to the natural environment. The story follows Ashitaka, a young man from a diminishing Tribe. After being cursed by Nago, a boar god that we learn is himself cursed due to the human's war against the Gods, Ashitaka must leave his hometown, banished to travel, and find a cure for his curse. On his travels Ashitaka discovers how humans are destroying the natural world and the Forest around Irontown. He becomes the meditator between the natural world of spirits and the humans. The film portrays the destructive power humans can have on the environment elevated by the power of nature and the spirits within (Thomas, 116) (Rowland, 52).

Spirited Away tells the story of a young girl Chihiro and her journey in the spirit world. We are first introduced to Chihiro as she is sulking in the back of a car with her parents, holding a bunch of flowers. They are driving to their new home and take a wrong turn driving up to a tunnel entrance that is blocked by a statue. They get out of their car to investigate and decide to walk through the tunnel. When they arrive in a seemly deserted town and find a stall with a monstrous amount of food. Chihiro's parents sit and start eating while Chihiro stands nervously begging them to stop and leave. Chihiro walks away to look around and arrives at a bridge to the bathhouse called Aburaya this is when we first meet Haku. Haku warns her to leave but when she returns to her parents, she discovers them transformed into pigs. The story now follows Chihiro on her journey to save her parents and free them from the spirit world while becoming more self-assured (Iles, 209).

There are many more of Miyazaki's films that could be explored in this thesis on the topic of spirituality in his films. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) or *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986) are Miyazaki films that have appeared multiple times while researching. I decided to choose a film from each decade and ones highly regarded by Studio Ghibli fans. In doing so, I anticipate that elements exemplified here can be related to Miyazaki's other films in explaining the role of spiritual in his other films. In recent years, Miyazaki has come out of retirement for the third time to direct his last film *The Boy and The Heron* (2023). The film is a beautiful, semi-autobiographical story of Miyazaki's life and understood as possibly the last from Miyazaki. The film is quintessentially Miyazaki, containing all the components to creating another masterpiece of storytelling through animation. Notably, *The Boy and The Heron* won the Studios first Golden Globe Award this year, 2024, for Best Animated Feature and is the first animation not in the English language to do so (Giardina, "Hayao Miyazaki Wins First Golden Globe for 'The Boy and the Heron'"). The film is also nominated for an Oscar at the 96th Academy Awards for Best Animated Feature. These awards and nominations have re-established the global success and appreciation for Studio Ghibli and Miyazaki.

Miyazaki's previous film to *The Boy and The Heron* is *The Wind Rises* (2013). *The Wind Rises* will not be included in this examination as it is a romance drama set during War World II. However, *The Wind Rises* highlights how Miyazaki does make significant choices with the films he creates as there is little Shinto reference or mention of spiritual realms in this film. In contrast, when considering his most recent work, *The Boy and The Heron* contains numerous references to Shinto and the spiritual quality of Miyazaki's work is still palpable throughout the film. These Shinto references will be discussed in the conclusion of this thesis.

Animation and Religion

Animation is the technical skill of creating moving images through a highly structured layering of still images. Japan has produced a high volume of animated work that is exclusively Japanese, thus establishing skills and techniques in the animation industry which have elevated the art of animation. The fan base of Studio Ghibli is dedicated and enthralled by the studio's creations. The character Totoro is one of the most beloved characters and this is seen in Japan when mechanise is

everywhere even from the moment one arrives at a Japanese airport (Barkman, 323). Some fans of Miyazaki have become so involved in the spiritual aspects of his films that they believe aspects to be real, even to state they have seen characters like the Kodama in real life (Thomas, 117).

According to S. Brent, "films are not religious simply because of their content but become religious due to their form and reception" (Thomas, 106). Audience interpretation is an important factor to be considered for deeming Miyazaki's work as spiritual, as aforementioned, the concept of spirituality is understood as individualised. The holding power of a film relies on the viewer response and what kind of impact a film has on an audience. Thomas argues that while manga and anime often present religious and spiritual ideas in a simplified or superficial way, they still have the power to influence the beliefs and values of their audiences. Fans to Miyazaki's work have carried out ritual practices from his films, proclaiming that places alleged to be inspiration for designs are sacred and have even participated in ritualised practices attached to the existence of the certain characters/spirits in his film. This highlights why film watching, for Thomas, is deemed as an extension to religious activity (Thomas, 103-108).

Animation is a clear creative product of the human mind and the "ideal space," as discussed in Animation and Identity, is created through this skill as there is the ability to fabricate a "better" world. The term "ideal" as proposed by Timothy Iles is activating the "human imagination of desire" for an object or concept through an artistic presentation to inspire awe in an audience (Iles, 188). In the case of Miyazaki's films, this ideal has been established through "space" and characters growth and can support the ideal of human activity and version of ideal self. Self-growth is aided in Miyazaki's films by the continuous interactions between human and with spirits, whereby spirits help and protect human characters in their journeys (Iles, 186 – 187). The "space" Miyazaki creates in his films is one of selflessness, kindness, and the belief that human behaviour is inertly good. His spaces are packaged with an essence of fantasy in worlds of "pristine nature and much beauty" as in *Princess Mononoke* and *My Neighbour Totoro*.

Miyazaki illustrates environments with a sense of the "good old days" of Japan to create a sense of desire for the past evoking nostalgia. The combination of the fairy tale or fantasy like quality with aspects of modern everyday life alongside a desire to look at the past emphasises a universal understanding to his films even when they are quintessentially Japanese (Iles, 188-189). By using the idea of "ideal space" and his character developments throughout the films, Miyazaki creates a familiarity that is substantial enough for his audiences to envision their own personal ideals and allows for interpretations of the spiritual material presented.

The aim of this thesis is to identify and examine the visual aspects of Miyazaki's films that are connected to Shinto and Japanese folklore, and how these aspects are presenting the spiritual quality of Miyazaki's work. The spiritual overtones in Miyazaki's films contrast to his personal views but the perception of spirituality in his work has been discovered and celebrated by his global audience. The first Chapter discusses this by looking at how audience interpretation can be influenced by components in film including landscape, music, and nostalgia. These components allow for a global audience to be receptive of the overall world and content represented before a narrative, themes or specific elements are inserted into the film. The second Chapter of this thesis is dedicated to exploring the statues, shrines, and religious activity that are continuously integrated throughout Miyazaki's work and how they are directly related to the Shinto religion and folklore. Exemplifying these aspects, I aim to identify how spirituality is an active role in Miyazaki's films, highlighting how a spiritual response to his work has been achieved. Chapter Three examines how the characters Miyazaki has designed are influenced by Shinto and Japanese folklore and how his characters support the themes prompted throughout his films. These themes include environmentalism, community, and self-growth, all of which are fundamentals to Shinto. In conclusion, the thesis argues that the use of universally recognised themes allowing for a global audience to experience Japanese spirituality alongside the overtly Shinto characteristics of Miyazaki's work that are so prominently placed in the films that an audience can do nothing but be witness to Shinto.

Chapter One: Interpretation of Miyazaki's films

Audience interpretation is integral to any conversation of spirituality in Miyazaki's films. Numerous scholars have discussed Miyazaki work under the guise of religion and spirituality and, stating his films are religious examining the religious motifs in his work to justify their claims. Miyazaki himself has stated that "all he wants to do is to entertain," and this he has indeed accomplished. The power of his films has been identified around the world and therefore interpretation and the power of his work on an audience will equally be considered in this discussion.

The spiritual value of Miyazaki's films has been received by his global audience and can be considered as an interpretation of his films rather than a categorical fact of his work. In the following two chapters we can see the Japanese cultural, religious, and folk motifs throughout Miyazaki's films. It is obvious that Shinto and Japanese culture permeates throughout his work but in the context of Miyazaki's life these references are not surprising. I believe his work can be considered as spiritual using the definition of spirituality as an individual's personal beliefs stemming from ideologies of formalised religions (Thomas, 12 -13).

While there is enough evidence to say his films are religious in content, Miyazaki's own spirituality in his work is equally as important. When he states that he did not intend on creating religious films proclaiming his work as such solely on the content is problematic. It is important to acknowledge the influence and power his films have on an audience and thus, how audience interpretation can induce a religious experience (Thomas, 106). In this chapter, we will be looking at how audience interpretation of his films has been guided to achieve a spiritual response through his use of landscape, nostalgia, and music. We will see how these elements support a universality to Miyazaki's work and how even with deeply personal inspiration through the mechanism of film an audience can experience Miyazaki's spirituality to reproduce their own.

Miyazaki's Landscapes

Miyazaki's use of nature is awe-inspiring and has captivated his global audience since his early films such as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984).* Miyazaki is a

traditional animation artist meaning immense detail and care mis put into his films and the world building. There are many elements to his films that make them so well received. Miyazaki's skilled use of Shinto references, symphonic music and character designs help build his surreal worlds however his illustrated idealised landscapes truly captivate an audience to experience the beauty of nature (Carbullido, 69).

Miyazaki's landscapes are so essential to his films they can be considered characters themselves and the majestic power of nature is accelerated through his portrayal of spiritual characters. In *My Neighbour Totoro* the power of nature is exemplified by Totoro and the other nature spirits living in the massive tree that is also a Shinto shrine at the centre of the forest. In *Princess Mononoke*, the spiritual power of the forest is manifested through the Shishigami, The Great Forest Spirit, and the other creatures and gods that inhabit the Forest (Yoshioka, 262). In *Spirited Away*, the Stink Spirit/Noble River Spirit and Haku both representatives of River spirits, simultaneously highlighting the powerful entities and the destruction humans are having on nature and environment (Yamanaka, 242).

McCarthy proposes that religion is a human construct therefore religion has nothing to do with nature. Yet she suggests how the title of *My Neighbour Totoro* advocates that "humans and nature are neighbours: we should strive to be good ones or the relationship between us will breakdown." This however is the quintessential aspect of Shinto. Shinto is a nature-based religion so the suggestion that humans and nature must coexist represents Shinto beliefs. While McCarthy may say his films are not religious and at a live streamed presentation on "The Art of History of Studio Ghibli" she said Miyazaki is fine with interpretations of his work if it is known these are not his messages or true beliefs (McCarthy, 2023). These beliefs of Shinto will be explored further in the thesis in the analysis of the films of Miyazaki but first it is important to examine Miyazaki life and the influence his background has had on his work.

Miyazaki's Life

Miyazaki was born in 1941 in Tokyo and grew up in post-World War 2 Japan. Having lived through the experience of Japan's shifting to 20th century modernity, he

turned to the Japanese landscape as inspiration for his settings. As mentioned previously, the use of imagery that is familiar to an audience adds to the dispelling of fantasy and places fantastical situations in a real-world environment. Miyazaki uses the idea of ideal space in his portrayal of Japan. The ideal space as mentioned previously is a space that promotes a "better" or idealise world that can be effectively done using the skill of animation. His illustrations of his idealise places of lush, forested Japan instilled nostalgia in an audience for a time past before modernity (Iles, 186-194).

Miyazaki has often stated that nature, traditional Japan, and his childhood have always been inspirations for his work, yet he said he does not see his work as nostalgic (Yoshioka, 268) (Rowland, 46). Miyazaki has used a multitude of places from his early life as visuals for his films. In *My Neighbour Totoro,* the areas around the Kanda River in Tokyo, where Miyazaki grew up, are seen throughout, as well as elements of the Tokorozawa area where he lived during the production of the film (Yoshioka, 264). He reimagines the Japanese countryside of 1950s and the visualises the childlike spirit of children with a fantasy tale of spirits in the countryside of Japan with a superabundant forest evoking nostalgia for a time when humans, nature and spirits coexisted (Carbullido, 72). *My Neighbour Totoro* beautifully pairs everyday life with elements of fantasy. These elements are blended with reality in such a way that they appear as an extension of our own reality creating a universal understanding to his work. *Princess Mononoke,* in the same vein as *Totoro* has created nostalgia for a time of coexistence with nature due to the portrayal of ancient Japanese landscape. The dense forestry and abundance of spirits juxtaposed to our lived reality of a western, industrialised modern world has created a desire for a simpler time (Yamanaka, 251).

While the earlier films our set in a time past, *Spirited Away* is the most modern of Miyazaki's work. Created in 2000, *Spirited Away* is set in 1990s Japan where characters are transported to a spiritual realm representative of the Meiji era (1868 to 1912), when Japan began to step into the western world. The bathhouse and Yubaba's office are the representative of the corruption of capitalism, a concept familiar to a modern-day audience, but also fashioned with elements of western and eastern costume and architecture. Inside the bathhouse Chihiro must work to free her parents

while dreaming of the world surrounding, she is the embodiment of Miyazaki's audience living in a capitalist society wanting to experience the beauty of a world beyond the industrialised working life. (Kim, "Revisiting 'Spirited Away': A Timeless Tale of Capitalism")

Nostalgia and Music

Many people have stated that Miyazaki portrays nostalgia this is due to his portrayals of Japan's landscape and the effects of modernity, expressing his own desire for simpler time of the past. Nostalgia is an important contributor to how Studio Ghibli has achieved its global audience as it aids in universal understanding and interpretation of his work. Miyazaki creates beautiful scenes of nature and fantasy paired with harmonious musical compositions leading the audience to be encapsulated with a sense of awe (Renae, "Ecofeminism and Spirituality in the Realm of Miyazaki"). On the surface, Miyazaki creates beautiful work and by enticing the audience into his world he can subjects them to the complex themes, symbolism, and characters that makes his films so unique. The familiarity of these elements to the audience allows connection to the storytelling of Miyazaki's films. The fantasy elements alongside the "real" aspects of his films deepen that audience connection. Fantasy detaches the setting from the reality of Japan and gives audiences opportunity to set the fantasy in comparison to their own lives (Yoshioka, 269).

Notably the impact of Miyazaki's worlds would not be so powerful without the composed scoring of Joe Hisashi. Almost all of Miyazaki's films are composed by the renowned Hisashi and the pair have worked together since 1984. Hisashi's whimsical and intense melodies brilliantly amplify the emotions of characters and adds to the atmosphere of Miyazaki worlds. Hisashi's work has been considered impressionistic due to the open-ended wandering of his compositions. After World War 2, the impact of Western culture influenced Japanese music alongside Chinese influences and Hisashi's work holds both of those eastern and western influence. His scoring is a harmonious blend of traditional Japanese music and western harmony's which, in turn adds to the universal comprehension of Miyazaki's films (Wong, 2021).

Taking away visuals, the scoring of his films evokes “common emotions” and mood that provides union of the fantasy and “real” events in his films. The blend of receptive western orchestral sound fused with a traditional Japanese sound provides familiarity in both cultures. The unfinished quality to his soundtracks “leaves room for the listener to insert themselves and their own emotions and experiences” further adding to an individual’s opportunity to make their own interpretation of the films in question. The amplified emotions of characters through music allows an emotive response and paired with beautiful imagery, such as the landscape and nature Miyazaki illustrates, allows for a nostalgic response as the films components give audiences the opportunity to tap into their personal emotions and memories (Wong, 2021).

Audience Interpretation

Miyazaki’s has attested that he did not intend for his films to be interpretated as religious which some individuals have deemed his work as. Audience interpretation is not formalised by a directors opinion after production, but the content presented to an audience. Miyazaki presents worlds with immense religious references from objects to themes, all in respect to Shinto. His statement of not intending a religious response is lessened when the content presented suggests otherwise. Spirituality, as suggested in this thesis, is an individual’s accumulation of different beliefs usually from formalised religions into a personalised creation of spiritual values (Yamanaka, 12-13). Miyazaki’s own spirituality is what he contributes to his work. He has confessed that he does not use religion as a basis in his films, his beliefs are “a desire to keep certain places and my own self (Miyazaki) as pure and holy as possible” that he agrees would “manifest itself” in his films (Thomas, 110). His own view stems from Shinto which are connected to his Japanese identity and cultural up bringing.

As J.B Thomas has discussed in an interview on Spirituality in Miyazaki’s films, approaching a film seeking religious interpretation one will find religious material (Tangles, “Spirituality in Miyazaki’s Films: An Interview with Jolyon Thomas.”). However, as highlighted throughout this thesis, will highlighting the evidence of Shinto in Miyazaki’s work is profound, and it would be a difficult challenge to not perceive the spiritual quality to his work. If Miyazaki did not want overt imagery of Shinto, he would not have used them, and as Carbullido says the use of “explicit

Shinto symbolism" referring to *My Neighbour Totoro*, is enough to rekindle thoughts of Japanese spirituality. Therefore, as Carbullido rightly proclaims, everything in a film serves a purpose in the audience interpretation and finding the meaning of a film. Whether it was Miyazaki's intention, his simple use of Shinto elements would incite a religious response to a viewer which is apparent to the Studio Ghibli's global audience (Carbullido, 79-80).

In his book, *Drawing on Traditions*, Thomas debates how Miyazaki uses a term coined by Thomas himself as "Skūkyō Asobi" or "playful religion." While Miyazaki's intentions are not to create religious films he certainly plays with religious mythologies and illustrates Shinto motifs. This playful use of religion is important as it makes Shinto more palatable to an audience unfamiliar to the religion. The power that this has on an audience is clear in reception of Miyazaki's work regarding his beloved fan base and commitment of fans to Studio Ghibli's content. The impact of Miyazaki's use of "playful religion" is indicative to how audiences actively particate in Miyazaki's spirituality after a films completion (Thomas, 104).

The shared space Miyazaki creates between religion and entrainment makes the content more accessible and results in new religious ideologies and ritual practice and belief in the existence of the creatures he creates. This is what Thomas has stated is overlooked in discussion of Miyazaki, and which this thesis also wishes to redress. Thomas, through means of survey and online fan pages, spotlights the real impact that Miyazaki's films have on their audiences. He professed how some fans have created "ritualised actions" regarding the existence of spirits portrayed in the films. Some fans have reenacted performance rituals that are portrayed in the films, for example, the dance around the seeds in *My Neighbour Totoro.* Some Ghibli fans have also practiced ritualise pilgrimages to the sites of alleged inspiration for sacred sites illustrated in the films, one location being Yakushima Forest allegedly inspiring the forest in *Princess Mononoke* (Thomas, 104). This intense response to his films is felt around the world and pointed out comically by McCarthy at her presentation in London when highlighting Miyazaki's global audience, she addresses the attendants that are on the live stream that they are listening to her in London talk about an animator in Japan (McCarthy, 2023).

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how Miyazaki's work can induce a spiritual response through his use of beautiful imagery of landscape and nature, ability to evoke nostalgia, and the paired composition of music to entice an audience into a fantasy world. These fantastical worlds are removed enough from reality but with aspects of modern day, allowing an audience to insert themselves in the place of characters. Miyazaki's use of "playful religion" packages religious elements in a more appealing way that is receptive to a global audience. Miyazaki's films are able create an extremely reactive response, desire for a life with tradition, and need to improve community and the environment (Thomas, 104).

Miyazaki's has attested that he did not intend for his films to be interpretated as religious. As established in this discussion, audience interpretated is not formalised by a directors opinion after the production but by the content presented to an audience. Shinto is at the root of Miyazaki's films and is extremely efficient throughout his work. The idea that Miyazaki's work would not induce a spiritual response would be difficult to claim considering the volume of Shinto references present throughout his films. His films are not religious by any means, but the use of Shinto ideologies allows an audience to create their own interpretation of the content that is being portrayed, creating a unique spirituality surrounding Miyazaki's work. Miyazaki's own contradictions and "vague characterisation of his personal brand of spirituality" further allows an audience to fabricate their own spiritual and nostalgic interpretation of his films (Thomas, 110). His films can be deemed as inciting a deeply spiritual response and highlights the important distinctions between directors intent and audience interpretation. Miyazaki has skilfully mastered an ability to make quintessential Japanese culture, religion, and landscapes powerfully universal and in the following chapters we will see the overt use of Shinto ideologies throughout his films by means of statues, rituals and characters interactions with themes profoundly set in Shinto beliefs.

Chapter Two: Symbols of Shinto and Japanese Folklore in Miyazaki's Films

Hayao Miyazaki's films are filled with symbolism of the Shinto religion. His films may not be religious by his intention, but the influence of Shinto can be seen throughout Miyazaki's work. His use of Shinto as a vehicle for portraying his narratives allows for a wider reception and interpretation of his films as they are universally respective concepts. In this chapter, I will be discussing the notable symbols of Shinto in his work, the meaning behind the statues that appear throughout the films and the significance of Japanese folklore in the world of Studio Ghibli. For noting, *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbour Totoro* contain more symbols of Shinto and religion dispersed throughout Japan as these films depict a more modern-day Japan. *Princess Mononoke* is deeply spiritual due to its depiction of Japan's ancient landscape and the spirits and gods of the forest so it will be referenced to more in the following chapter on Miyazaki's characters.

Miyazaki creates worlds with action-packed adventures containing spirits and monsters, while his films are evidently Japanese and fantasy, they not completely removed from reality. He incorporates spiritual realms, filtering through elements of Shinto and everyday life so the universality of his films can be received by a global audience (Garza, 19). Shinto and Buddhism are the two major religious belief systems in Japan. Shinto dominates as the practices and beliefs have blended with the influence of Buddhism over the centuries. The Shinto religion is embedded into the Japanese culture with Shinto practices seen all over Japan, from roadside worship to Shrine compounds. Miyazaki uses this throughout his work which allows his Japanese audience more understanding to his films (Yoshioka, 256). Arguably, Miyazaki's use of Shinto references could not be understood by a western audience without education on the religion or Japanese culture (Garza, 19). However, as we will see in this chapter a western audience can gather the significance of Shinto through his characters attitudes and interactions with Shinto signifiers (Rowland, 55).

Symbols of Shinto

Miyazaki's films are dense with religious symbols relating to Shinto. These symbols can be seen as physical objects for foreshadowing events to shrines. The term shrine is exclusively used with reference to the Shinto religion while Buddhist sites are typically referred to as temples. The difference between them can be difficult to see, even to religious practitioners. In the case of Miyazaki's work, he has been most affected by Shinto throughout his life. Talking about grandparents he has said that they believed, "that spirits existed everywhere, trees, rivers, insects, and wells anything. My generation does not believe this, but I like the idea that we should all treasure everything," which is a key message of Shinto (Boyd and Nishimura, 7). There is, in this statement, an appreciation from Miyazaki for the religion which has visually impacted his films and the most prominent elements, such as *Torii* gates, are key in symbolise the spiritual realms of his films.

Fig. 1: An example of roadside worship in *My Neighbour Totoro (1987)* as the Kusakabe family drive to their new home. This is a shrine to the Kami Inari – san, symbolized by the fox statue and the *Torii* gates around the site marking it as sacred (Sheid, 81).

Torii are a necessary part of the Shinto religion, there is no Shinto shrine without one. They are a simple gate structure consisting of two pillars and two beams across the top. *Torii* are used as a symbolic entrance way into a sacred space (Schied, 78). They are used throughout Miyazaki's films to visually indicate that characters are entering a spiritual space.

In *Spirited Away*, we see a *Torii* gate in the opening scene when the family is driving to their new home. The father, Akio Ogino, takes a wrong turn towards a very rural-looking road insisting that it's a short cut. They proceed ahead and as the movie unfolds, we learn this was indeed a wrong turn, leading them to the spirit world (Boyd and Nishimura, 6). The use of the *Torii* here, could be interpreted as the fall of religion in Japan, due to the way it leans against an old tree in an unkept state, while it simultaneously foreshadows that the road ahead is sacred with significance to the Shinto religion.

Fig. 2: *Torii* gate and *Hokora* on the side of the road as Chihiro's father takes a wrong turn leading them to the entrance to the spirit world (*Spirited Away* 2001)

Under the *Torii* surrounding the tree are *Hokora*, these are "small house like shrines" for spirits that believers can leave offerings in. The *Hokora* are addressed by the main character, Chihiro, when she asks her mom, Yūko Ogino, what are those houses and she replies, "They're shrines, People pray to them." Interestingly in the English dubbed version, Yūko says "some people believe little spirits live there." While both explanations can be true, this is an important highlight in how an audience can interrupt spiritually from the film even through dialogue. While the Japanese explanation uses Shinto terms like shrine and pray the English dubbed highlights the idea of spirits (Boyd and Nishimura, 6).

Bridges are also representative of *Torii,* and we see this in *Spirited Away* with the bridge Chihiro must cross to the bathhouse. The bridge connects spirits from the outside world to the cleansing world of the Bathhouse (Garza, 22). It is also a place

where crucial characters are first met, Haku and No-Face, and the final face-off between Yubaba and Chihiro takes place making it a significant location in *Spirted Away*.

Statues

While *Torii* are used to signify a sacred space, decoration and statues are also visualised throughout Miyazaki's work. In *Spirited Away*, continuing the family drive to the new family home, we see Chihiro noticing a *Dosojin* statue in amongst the tree of the forest. Akio, Chihiro's father, speeds up the dirt road putting on the breaks sharply when faced with another *Dosojin* Statue in the middle of the road blocking a dark passage way. *Dosojin* statues are typically seen along roadsides as they are protecters for travellers on their journeys. They can appear with one or two faces and are usually feminine in nature. In the case of *Spirited Away*, the *Dosojin* statue, as illustrated below, has been placed in front of the tunnel, which we learn to be the entrance to the spirit world. The statue signfies a spiritual place aswell as indicating that Chihiro and her parents are being looked after by spirits as they travel onward (Bensal, "A Full-Blown Interpretation of Miyazaki's Spirited Away: Symbolism").

Fig. 3: *Dosojin* statue at entrance to the tunnel in *Spirited Away* (2001)

Another use of statues as protectors in Miyazaki's films can be seen in *My Neighbour Totoro* with *Jizo* statues appearing at multiple points of the film. The first time we are presented with the statue is when the girls run out of the rain underneath the shelter of a roadside shrine, as seen below. *Jizo* statues are representative of the *Bodhisattva*, the Japanese Buddha. Corresponding to *Dosojin* statue, *Jizo* is responsible for traveller but

specifically for the protection of children and with a further function in guiding children through to the afterlife (Jiang, 32).

Fig. 4: Jizo roadside shrine the girls take shelter in (*My Neighbour Totoro,* 1988)

The second time we see the *Jizo* statues is when Mei has gone missing and takes rest at the side of the road as in the image below. Six *Jizo* statues stand while she appears sad and exhausted. The sun is setting behind her suggesting that night will fall, while she is still lost with no way home. The statues behind her symbolise that she is protected and soon in the film she is rediscovered by Satsuki. The presence of these religious figures looking over the young girl exemplifies the narrative of spirituality in *My Neighbour Totoro* that the young girls are constantly protected by spirits and that Shinto is an integral part of their lives (Jiang, 32).

Fig. 5: Mei sitting by *Jizo* statues lost (*My Neighbour Totoro* 1988)

Shimenawa are ropes of rice straw that are used to mark the present of a Kami(spirit) and signify the divinity of an object. Kami means spirit and in Shinto it is believed everything has a Kami. *Shimenawa* can be used on any object or space of sacred significance. They are usually decorated with zigzag shaped streamers called *Shide*. These are white paper decorations only used in a Shinto context for ritual purposes (Schied, 79). *Shimenawa*, like *Torii*, are symbols of sacred sites and in the case of *My Neighbour Totoro*, mark the divine camphor tree, the home of Totoro and the other forest spirits. When Mei first discovers Totoro, she follows the tree spirits into his home. While she is with the spirits, Satsuki and her father believe she is missing. They go looking for her only for her to be found peacefully asleep on the forest floor. After being reunited, she tells them of a huge spirit she met. Mei and Satsuki's father, Tatsuo Kusakabe, brings the girls into the forest to thank the camphor tree and the spirit attached to it for looking after Mei while she was gone, and they bow in respect (Rowland, 50). This is when the audience learns that the camphor tree is the home of Totoro and the significance of the *Shimenawa* and *Shide* around the trees trunk as seen below.

Fig. 6: *Shimenawa* and *Shide* around the camphor tree in forest and home of Totoro in *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988)

Japanese Folklore

Miyazaki uses Shinto to prompt both narrative and visuals throughout his films. While considering Shinto, we can also examine some aspects of Japanese folklore as these two go hand in hand for the portrayal of Japanese culture. A folklore belief that helped Miyazaki create *Spirited Away* is *Kami Kakushi*. *Kami Kakushi* means

“hidden by kami” referring to a folklore belief for when people would mysteriously go missing. It was also believed that people, mainly young women, and children, were taken away from the human realm by spirits (Reider, 4).

Miyazaki has used this concept for *Spirited Away* and is in the name of its Japanese title, *Sen to Chihiro Kami Kakushi*. Chihiro is the perfect example of *Kami Kakushi* as she is taken to the spirit world where she must overcome great change to return to her world. On her journey she encounters many spirits and creatures and experiences great personal change and when she returns to the human world after saving her parents, we this in action. At the start of the film, Chihiro is a grumpy immature young girl that is worried and unhappy about moving from her old school and to her new home. At the end of the film her father asks her “A new home and a new school, it is a bit scary?” with her response being “I think I can handle it.” This highlights her fears and worries from the start being overcome and how the spirit world helped Chihiro grow into a stronger individual.

Fig. 7: Chihiro and her parents arriving to car returning from the spirit world (*Spirited Away*, 2001)

When Chihiro and her parents arrive at the car, there is overgrown grass and old leaves over the car window. This shows that while they were in the spirit world, time in the human world has passed at the similar rate. We also see Chihiro still has the bracelet that Zeniba made for her suggesting that what has happened in the spirit realm is real. This contrasts with western films like *Wizard of Oz* or *Alice in Wonderland* as those “other worlds” were perceived as dreams to the character

affected (Reider, 6-7). However, suggesting to an audience that the events in the spirit world have an impacted on the human world furthers the immense power of a spirit realm and potential reality of that space (Quirk, 23).

Tasogare means twilight, this is the time believed to be most active with spirits and typically believed when *Kami Kakushi* is most likely to happen to someone. In both *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke* we see this folklore concept come to play. In *Spirited Away* we first meet Haku on the bridge to the Bathhouse when he warns Chihiro "leave before it gets dark." After this line, the Bathhouse begins to light up and the town comes alive with dark, mysterious spirits. The Bathhouse itself only operates during nighttime hours throughout the film, fulfilling even more the idea of nighttime and twilight being the time for spirits (Okuyama, 101-102). This is similarly portrayed in *Princess Mononoke* with the Great Forest Spirit. The Great Forest spirit transforms into a giant creature at night and in the morning transforms back to his deer like form. We see how his deer like form is docile while his night form is his most powerful and destructive state, having the ability to take away life.

Fig. 8: Totoro and tree spirits and Satsuki and Mei performing dance to magically grow the seeds planted in the garden (*My Neighbour Totoro* 1988).

In *My Neighbour Totoro*, we see the spiritual power associated with nighttime in a scene where Totoro and the other forest spirits perform a dance over newly planted seed. The girls see this dance taking place from their bedroom and go out to join the spirits in a ritual like dance to allow a massive tree to grow from the seeds. When

they wake in the morning, they are shocked to find out that there is no tree in the garden but overjoyed when they see their seeds have sprouted. This small detail highlights *Kami Kakushi* as the ritual and tree growth happened in the spirit world and time yet had effects on the human world. These small green sprouts are vital in portraying furthering the supernatural power of Totoro and the other forest spirits and the impact the spirits have on the girls (Rowland, 51)

Purity is a crucial aspect to Shinto practice. Achieving purity is beyond physical cleansing as it includes purity of one's soul. The idea behind purity in Shinto is when you are pure the higher your connection to the spirit world will be. This is carried out through *Harae*. *Harae,* the act of ritual purification, is essential to shrine worship and requires sprinkling water on one's face and hands. This is believed to purify the body before entering a sacred place. Waterless purification is called *Shide,* which is discussed above, and is used as ceremonial decoration for sacred objects and buildings (Garza, 19) (Rowland, 43). The concept of *harae* is believed to be formed from the mythological story of the creator of Japan *Izanami* and her brother and husband *Izanagi*. When *Izanami* dies during childbirth to a fire deity she is sent to the underworld. *Izanagi* is deeply saddened and travels to free her and bring her back. Unfortunately, *Izanami* had eaten the food of the underworld making it difficult for her to return. *Izanagi* arriving back from the underworld, unclean and polluted by death, purifies himself in the salty water of the sea ridding him of his impurities (Rowland, 43).

In *My Neighbour Totoro,* the concept of purity is portrayed through Mei and Satsuki. Mei and Satsuki are the only characters in the film to see the spirits and can interact with them (Garza, 19). This is identified through the character, Granny. The girls discover the *Susuwatari* or *Soot Sprites,* small black creatures, also portrayed in *Spirited Away* as helpers to Kamiji, living in the house and Granny explains to them what they are. While identifying these creatures to the girls she explains "I could see them when I was little" highlighting the connection the girls have to the spirit world. This also suggests that with age and the experiences of life Granny has lost her innocence in the world. The connection to the spirits is due to their age and this purity of their souls allows them to have these interactions to the spirit realm.

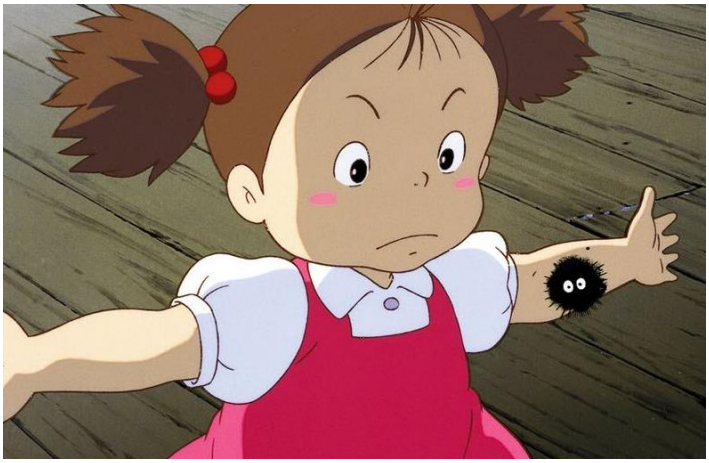


Fig. 9 and 10: Soot sprites in *My Neighbour Totoro* (1987) and Soot Sprites in *Spirited Away* (2001)

Conclusion

There are many Shinto symbols throughout Miyazaki's work. The use of statues, shrines and decorations associated with Shinto allows audiences foresight on spiritual activity and to be able to recognise the spiritual significance of a place or object. The use of roadside shrines, as in *My Neighbour Totoro,* creates a familiarity to a Japanese audience and to a global audience the impact that spiritual symbols and activity has on characters highlights the importance of Shinto. While symbols of religion don't equate to concluding a film as religious, they do help create a world where religion plays an active role and supports characters intent throughout their narratives.

Miyazaki creates films with a beautiful blend of various cultural and mythological elements involving Shinto and Japan. The Shinto symbolism he has adopted for his storytelling benefits his unique style and the universal themes rooted in Shinto ideologies. Miyazaki's messages regarding Environmentalism, Self-Growth and Community can be universally recognised across the world. His subtle and obvert use of Shinto is a vehicle for portraying these messages and with Shinto influencing his characters, all to be discussed in the next chapter, we will see how spirituality is alive and well throughout his films.

Chapter Three: Miyazaki's Characters Interacting with Spirituality

Miyazaki's films are renowned for his captivating character designs that are beloved by Studio Ghibli's global audience. This chapter will be discussing how Miyazaki's films can be interpreted as spiritual through the characters he designed and the themes they influence. Themes in Miyazaki's films that are in conjunction with Shinto beliefs are the need for coexistence of humans with nature and spirits, community, and the idea of self-growth. In the journal, "Hayao Miyazaki and Shinto: A Spiritual Connection," Oscar Garza suggests how these themes are universally recognised, and with visual references to everyday life incorporated with references to a particular faith, in this case Shinto, is how Miyazaki's films obtain a spiritually endearing quality with respect to the Shinto religion (Garza, 21 - 22).

In most of Miyazaki's films, interactions between humans and spirits are essential in the narrative and development of character growth. Okuyama suggests that Miyazaki uses a motif called "iruikon (love and attraction between humans and nature spirits)" (122). This motif is seen in many folktales and myths, from multiple cultures, and intersects with pop culture as this is believed to be an unconscious interest to people. The motif of Iruikon is a fundamental part of the Shinto faith with the biggest aspect to Shinto being the belief that everything in the universe has its own spirit or Kami (Yamanaka, 251).

My Neighbour Totoro

My Neighbour Totoro is regarded as a cult classic, especially for its character Totoro. Totoro is the largest of the spirits and is illustrated as a giant cuddly bear like creature with features of an owl, cat, and raccoon (Garza, 21). As aforementioned in the previous chapter, Totoro is a representative of forest deity attached to the giant camphor tree in the forest. Totoro is no way fearsome but is a friendly, lovable creature. When we first see Totoro, he is sleeping and allows Mei to climb on top of him to fall asleep (Thomas, 114). Totoro is a portrayed as a protecter to the girls and helps them adjust to their new home and develop a connection to the natural world around them. Totoro comes to help Satsuki and Mei in the rain to protect them while they wait for their father to come off a bus. When Mei disappears to see her mother,

Totoro summons the Catbus for Satsuki to travel in to get to her safely. The final scene is Totoro and the other spirits sitting on top of the tallest tree to be perceived as a guardian watching over the girls from afar (Garza, 22).

Fig. 11: Totoro and other tree spirits sitting on top of camphor tree. (*My Neighbour Totoro*, 1988)

Totoro and the other spirits are not all-powerful being's unseen to humans, they are witnessed by the young girls and part of the girl's lives. Purity is an aspect to Shinto of high importance, as with the Bathhouse and cleansing to be discussed in the previous chapter, the idea of being pure allows one to be more connected to the spiritual and natural world we live in. The depiction of youth and innocence with the girls being the only characters that witness Totoro promoting the idea that they are still pure and unharmed by the modern world. Aspects of a spiritual realm, visuals of everyday life and the natural environment promotes viewers to see *"My Neighbour Totoro"* as a portrayal of everyday life. This has promoted viewers to see spirits and interactions with spirits as a natural human experience and allows an audience to establish their own opinions on the existence of spirits (Garza, 22).

Princess Mononoke

Princess Mononoke is a masterpiece filled with uniquely recognisable characters. The most prevalent of Miyazaki's character designs being the *Shishigami* or The Great Forest Spirit (Garza, 25). The *Shishigami* is the God to the forest surrounding the Ironworks town, run by Lady Eboshi, and is seen as the protecter of the land. The Great Forest Spirit first appears to the audience with ray of yellow light illuminating

the silhouette of its deer like form. The Great Forest Spirit peacefully stops to stare at Ashitaka, we see this from his perspective thus Miyazaki makes the God simultaneously stare at the audience.

Fig. 12: The Great Forest Spirit in his Nightwalker form. (*Princess Mononoke*, 1997)

Shishigami, means Deer God, and takes on two different forms in the film. During the day, the *Shishigami* appears in deer like form with a mix of other animals, extended antlers, and a red human like face. At nightfall, the *Shishigami* transforms into a giant, two-legged figure, translucent in appearance, which moves through the forest "taller than the tallest tree." The Shishigami was inspired by the Japanese legends of giants. These Japanese giants called *Deidarabocchi* or *Dadabocchi* were believed to create lakes from their footprints, mountains from their droppings and create landscapes by pulling islands together (Okuyama, 112-113).

Fig. 13: The Great Forest Spirits humanoid face during the day. (*Princess Mononoke*, 1997)

Other spiritual characters, quintessential to the film, are the Kodama. The Kodama are small tree spirits believed to be the signs of "a healthy forest" as said by Ashitaka. They are pale, humanoid in appearance with shaky heads, their design was based off a manga called *Mudmen* and Miyazaki himself admits to the manga being a huge inspiration for his films (Wilson, "The little-known inspiration for Princess Mononoke: A manga about a tribe in Papua New Guinea"). The Kodama, like the forest spirits in the *My Neighbour Totoro,* are helpful and guide Ashitaka and a couple of injured soldiers to the sacred lake to be healed. They do not cause harm to anyone and are representing the spirits to the trees of the forest. It is believed in Shinto that at night is the time when spirits are more active. The transformation of the Forest spirit at night and the activity of the Kodama adds to the spiritual quality of these characters (Okuyama, 101).

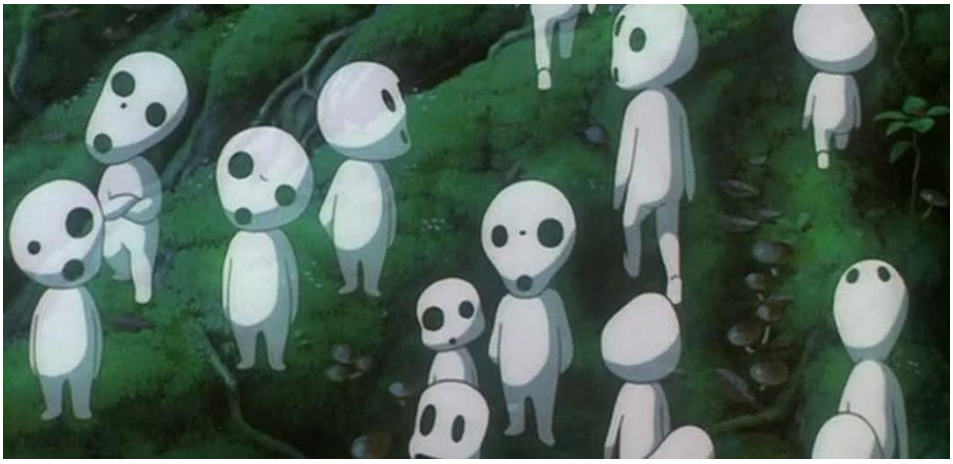

Fig. 14: Kodama looking at the transformation of the Shishigami. (*Princess Mononoke*, 1997)

Princess Mononoke is one of two Miyazaki's films to be rated PG13 for its adult depiction of the world and human behaviour to our environment. Miyazaki portrays the environment brutally in how life and death must co-exist. We see the true extreme power of the God when Lady Eboshi shoots it, decapitating its head sending the God into a destructive rage. the God transformers into the Nightwalker, headless, taking the lives of the soldiers and destroying the forest area until reconnected with its head (Garza, 24).

Miyazaki's characters reflect the brutality of nature however none of his characters are depicted as strictly good or bad as they do what they believe to be right for their communities to survive. The Great Forest Spirit can end lives but heals Ashitaka's bullet wound with one touch when he is in the sacred lake. Lady Eboshi takes care of the sick, the women and men of her town but wants to further destroy the natural environment around her. San has a hatred for the humans and, with the Wolf Gods, kills humans to protect her community and the natural environment. *Princess Mononoke* is a story of beauty and suffering but encourages an audience to appreciate nature and desire for environmental change (Garza, 25).

Spirited Away

As the name suggests, *Spirited Away* is one of Miyazaki most spirit driven films as the world of the film are set in the spirit realm and contains multiple and diverse characters representing Kami. Haku is the first Kami or spirit that Chihiro encountered, and he becomes a staple character in Chihiro's journey. Haku is an apprentice to the witch and owner of the bathhouse, Yubaba. He tells Chihiro she must work to stay in the world, so she goes to Yubaba to be employed. Yubaba is holding Chihiro's parent's hostage and takes Chihiro for employment, magically taking her name giving her the new identity of Sen. Chihiro now employed works with the other workers of the bathhouse and learns how to help others and work as a community (Thomas, 117).

The spirits and workers of the Bathhouse assistant in Chihiro's personal growth throughout the film but the characters that directly aid in her personal growth are Haku, Koanashi (No Face) and the Stink/River Spirit. Chihiro's self-growth and ability to help her community is seen most evidently through the character, the Stink Spirit. The Stink Spirit, as the name suggests, is given its name due to its foul odour it admits. The Stink Spirit is portrayed as a large pile of sludge, slugging his way through the streets and into the Bathhouse looking to be cleaned (Garza, 22). The activity of cleansing, as discussed previously, is essential to connecting to the spirit realm and in *Spirited Away* the Bathhouse is the spirits place of cleansing for renewal.

The Stink Spirit proceeds into the bathhouse where Chihiro is ordered to help him. Chihiro washes the Stink Spirit, and the visibly dark, thick sludge fills the bathing space. Chihiro feels a thorn in the Spirits side and with aid from the workers pulls out a bicycle. Once the bicycle is removed a hideous about of human garbage follows and falls out onto the floor. Chihiro is then encapsulated in water by the Spirit where we are presented with the Spirits true form. A mask like face that of an old man appears from the steam, the mask design based on the Noh Okina masks used in Japanese theatre (Rowland, 48). The Spirit tells Chihiro "Well done" freeing him of the pollution and flies into the air as a dragon and out of the bathhouse window. Chihiro is rewarded for her excellent work with a round object, we learn through Haku and No Face by ingesting it that it has medicinal effects and celebrated by all the spirits in the bathhouse (Garza, 23).

Fig. 15: Stink Spirit in the bath looking for Chihiro to pour in the hot water. (*Spirited Away*, 2001)

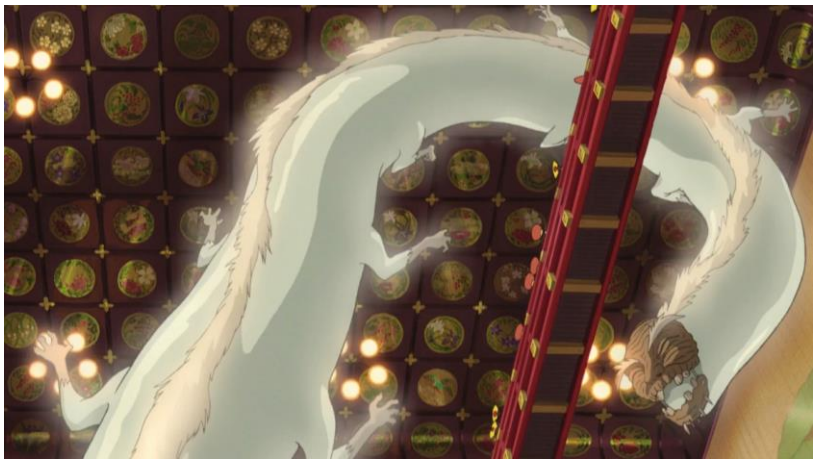

Fig. 16: The Stink Spirit transformed in the Noble River Spirit after cleaning (*Spirited Away,* 2001)

The River Spirits character, compared with the *Shishigame* in *Princess Mononoke*, is Miyazaki's commentary on human mistreatment of the environment. The Stink Spirit, filled with human waste, to be revealed as the Noble River Spirit is Miyazaki showing how humans are destroying the natural world and that the impact goes beyond human level, infecting the spirit realm. Chihiro helping to remove the waste and cleanse the spirit is Miyazaki highlighting how as humans we still too can cleanse what we have done to the environment to bring a balance to the human and spirit realm (Yamanaka, 242).

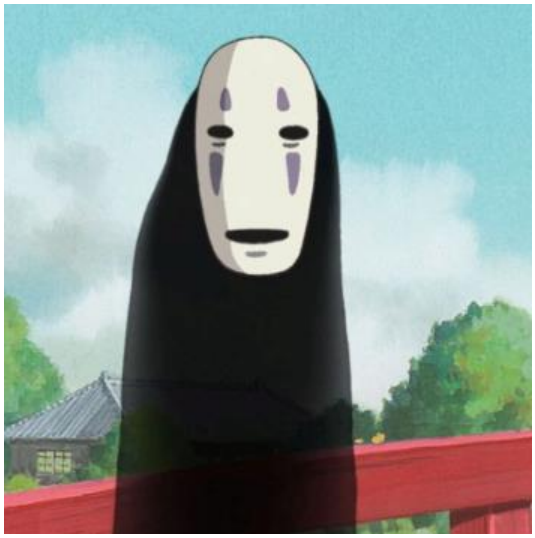

Fig. 17: "No Face" (*Spirited Away* 2001)

Fig. 18: Noh mask (*Ko-omote Noh Mask*. 1800's. The MET)

"No Face" is a favourite character in the world of Ghibli. He is a mysterious cloaked figure with a simple mask for a face we first meet standing on the bridge to the bathhouse. Chihiro lets "No Face" into the bathhouse out of kindness but we learn this is an accidental error on her part. "No Face" is controlled by the incessant need for over consumption and is a representation of modern human greed and gluttony (Iles, 210). "No Faces" mask face is designed, like the Noble River Spirit, by the Japanese theatre Noh mask. The simple, stylised version of a human face reflects the character as he is expressionless, void of identity which emphasises his greed and gluttony. He uses money to get the admiration of the Bathhouse workers and consumes a grotesque about of food as he can before moving onto the workers in his rage (Rowland, 49).

While Chihiro is on a journey of self-growth we also see this in “No Face.” He follows Chihiro on the train to Zenibas where on his own journey develops an identity becoming Zenibas helper. Again, as with Chihiro’s parents, Miyazaki’s opinions on the state of humanity are evident in *Spirited Away*. Miyazaki represents how humans have become infected with overconsumption and how we have lost our true identities. Only by letting go of our greed and look at what we genuinely enjoy in life will we be at peace in our selves (Iles, 210).

Finally, through the connection of Haku and Chihiro we see how beneficial the relationship between spirits and humans can be. Haku consistently helps Chihiro in her journey to save her parents and she returns the favour by freeing Haku from Yubabas Power. Haku is ordered to steal from Yubaba’s sister Zeniba. Zeniba attacks Haku, while he is in his dragon form, with magic and follows him back to the Bathhouse where Chihiro sees him bleeding and injured. Chihiro uses half of the gifted medicine to help him vomit up the item he stole from Zeniba that was hurting him from the inside. The medicine also makes Haku throw up a black slug and Chihiro squishes it. Later in the film, Zeniba informs them that the slug was a spell Yubaba had put on Haku to control him, this begins Haku’s freedom.

We learn early on that Haku is under the same spell as Chihiro and has forgotten his identity (Thomas, 118). In a scene where Haku is flying Chihiro back to the bathhouse she recalls a memory from her younger self on a dragon surrounded by water. Haku is the river spirit of the Kohaku River and had rescued Chihiro when she was younger from drowning. Chihiro and Haku have been connected to each other by their past and with the recalled memory, Haku gains his identity back and is fully released from Yubaba’s powers (Iles, 211). Chihiro becomes more assured in herself, and her personal growth is palpable by the end of the film when she frees her parents trusting in her final decision making. Her growth and journey, while assisted by the spirits around her, also aids others in their own individual growth and discovery of their true selves. *Spirited Away* highlights the need for connection to the spirit world and how overcoming one’s fear can allow growth to change one’s life for a new and better on (Yamanaka, 243).

Conclusion

Themes likes of the importance of nature, community between humans and spirits and personal self-growth are prevalent in the films *My Neighbour Totoro, Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*. These themes are affiliated with the Shinto religion and are exemplified through the characters of Miyazaki's films in the design and narrative (Garza, 25). Miyazaki's films highlight his views on human behaviour. In *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* the violent portrayal of human's impact on the environment is overwhelming but Miyazaki equally illustrates the need for an audience to change and undo the damage humans have caused to our modern world. He highlights the flaws of humanity while equally portraying the ability for growth and change (Rowland, 52). In *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbour Totoro* we see this growth and change in humans aided by the assistance of spirits. Chihiro becomes a strong individual by the end of Spirited Away rather than the stubborn nervous young girl we meet at the beginning (Yamanaka, 243). Totoro protects Mei and Satsuki and helps them become more comfortable with their new home, and their mother's illness (Garza, 21).

Spirits and humans help each other in their journeys and self-growth. It is essential for his characters to have relationships with the environment and the spirits that occupy Miyazaki's imagined worlds. The everyday depictions of life intertwined with spiritual world allows for audiences to perceive his films as the ideal of life. Even though Miyazaki's films are inherently Japanese with the settings, culture, and religion, the themes, and messages he presents in his films are widely universal. This universal aspect, with the influence of the Shinto, has allowed for audiences to adapt their own spiritual response to his films (Garza, 25-26).

Conclusion

The power of film and response to a film is in the hands of an audience, an important consideration in the discussion of spirituality. Spirituality is a personal experience and an audience exposed to the ideologies of Shinto can only but formalise their own opinions and, as proposed in this discussion, their own spiritualities. Miyazaki's opinions as vital in the argument on religious determination, in a discussion of spiritually they become irrelevant as spirituality can only be obtained through an individual's own perception. Miyazaki's own spirituality that he portrays in his films, that contradicts to the reality of the material he includes in his films, allows audiences to further reestablish their own spiritualities based out of his films (Thomas, 110)

In Chapter 1, we examined the power that Miyazaki's films have on his audience. The use of filmic components like his portrayal of landscape, use of music and ability to evoke nostalgia establishes a universality in his films and makes them accessible to his global audience. We also see how Miyazaki while not intending on a religious interpretation of his work, has used Shinto religious elements in a way that makes religious imagery more palatable and perhaps then, inducive of a spiritual response. The term coined by J.B Thomas "playful religion" is the perfect way to describe Miyazaki's use of Shinto in his film (Thomas, 104).

In Chapter 2, considering symbols of Shinto and Japanese folklore, it is important to acknowledge the elements of Shinto and folklore that Miyazaki cleverly inserts into his narratives. These overt references to the Shinto religion are apparent to an audience familiar or not to the religion that it can only but incite a religious gaze upon his films. Miyazaki is a skilled animator that puts immense time and care into his work that if he didn't want Shinto in his films, he simply could not have included them. The visibly Shinto content would through exposure cause an audience to at the very least, acknowledge Japanese spirituality and by extension look at their own. The impact of these Shinto elements has had a clear impact on an audience that has induced by some a spiritual response to his films.

Chapter 3 highlights how the themes of Miyazaki's films are also heavily influenced by Shinto and while examining how characters interacted with Shinto ideologies, we witness the active role Shinto plays in his films. We see this through characters interactions with Kami, the characters personal self-growth and messages of improvement to the environment. Miyazaki messages of environmentalism and character growth are brutally portrayed in *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke* while witnessing the peaceful benefits of spirits and community in *My Neighbour Totoro*. Miyazaki's films all include elements or concepts experienced in modern times and while his work is quintessentially Japanese, they are universally received and understood.

Miyazaki's most recent film, *The Boy and The Heron*, like most of Miyazaki's films, contains numerous references to Shinto and material analysed throughout this thesis. The story follows Mahito, the young protagonist, dealing with the grief of his mother's death and struggling to adapt to his new life in his new home in the countryside with his father's new wife, Natsuko, Mahito's mothers sister. Mahito follows the Grey Heron into a magical, spirit world with promises to see his mother again. Intense adventures into a spirit world, meeting many different forms of spirits and subtle references to Shinto and Japanese folklore are see throughout the film (Mass, "The Ending of The Boy and The Heron, Explained").

The Boy and the Heron is set during World War II in the landscape of the Japanese countryside, and, like *My Neighbour Totoro*, paired with the beautiful scoring of Joe Hisashi an audience feels safe and peaceful removed from the situation of war. Nostalgia can be experienced, not for the time of war, but for a place removed from reality and destructive power of human forces, similarly conveyed in *Princess Mononoke*. The landscape of the spirit world, colourful and expressive, is separate from the real world and allows an audience the space to imagine fantasy that's not completely removed from reality. As in *Spirited Away,* Mahito experiences the spirit world witnessing spirits that aid in his journey and self-growth. The audience witnesses powerful moments creatively woven into these various worlds that have elements of real life preventing complete detachment and ability to receive the themes and messages Miyazaki apprises.

The concept of *Kami Kakushi*, as discussed in Chapter 2, is in front and centre of *The Boy and The Heron*. Mahito is taken to the beautifully captivating spirit world where he undergoes deep personal growth and comes back to his life with a connection and love for Natsuko and processed the death of his mother with an understanding for the kind of malice in the world. He is taken to the spirit world where an audience experiences concepts of life, death, and the afterlife, that are roots for religious ideologies and can be opportunity for provoking spirituality. When he is guided back to his normal life, he is warned by the heron to forget what he witnessed in the world they visited while he holds objects from there, parallel to Chihiro's with her bracelet, suggesting the reality of the spirit realm is a part of the real world (Mass, "The Ending of The Boy and The Heron, Explained").

One of the Shinto elements as discussed in Chapter 2, *Shide* (rice paper streamers) that are used on sacred objects to be marked as shrine and used as a form of spiritual protection is seen in a pivotal scene of the film (Schied, 79). When Mahito discovers Natsuko in the delivery room where she is asleep under two giant rings of hanging *Shide* gently spinning around her creating a sense of peace while it also creates a striking image of the frailness of Natsuko under these protective rings. These *Shide* show the audience that she is being protected even with no one around and when they fight back to remove Mahito from the room we see the power of this important spiritually protective decoration.

Fig. 19: Natsuko asleep in the delivery room under the rings of *Shide* (*The Boy and The Heron*, *2023)*

A character trope that is seen throughout Studio Ghibli and Miyazaki's films is the use of "cute lil' guys" and in *The Boy and The Heron* we see this in the lovable white blob characters, the Warawara. The Warawara like the Soot Sprites, seen in *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Spirited Away*, and the Kodama, seen in *Princess Mononoke*, the Warawara are perfectly marketable additions to the Studio Ghibli franchise. They are representative of the souls of unborn people and in a beautiful scene of life and death we see them float into the sky to be born while simultaneously eating mid-flight by the Pelicans also trapped in this magical realm. This scene followed by a scene where Mahito talks to a dying Pelican about their existence in this world incites an audience to response to questions of life and death and an audiences own existence and purpose, concepts indicative to religion and spirituality (Mass, "The Boy and The Heron: What Are the Warawara?").

Over twenty years on from *Spirited Away*, arguably Miyazaki's most spirituality driven film, Miyazaki's continues to use the same concepts in actualising his narratives. As this thesis has emphasised, spirituality can be experience in Miyazaki's films through his use of filmic elements that allow universal understanding, his implantation of Shinto symbolism and how his characters participate with themes fundamental to Shinto. Miyazaki has attested that he didn't not intend for his films to be interpretated as religious and we can see that his films are not religious in the formal sense or fit into a genre of religion but, considering the amount of Shinto referencing, a spiritual response to his films has been argued as an obvious response through this examination and by the interpretation of his work by a critical audience. Given his seniority and wish for retirement, Miyazaki's work may conclude with *The Boy and The Heron* but his legacy and gifted talent that he has graced the art of animation with is unforgettable and his stories are forever encapsulated in the art of animated film.

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