

Studio Ghibli Feature Films and Japanese Artistic Tradition

Roslyn McDonald

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Summary.

The animated feature films of Studio Ghibli are contemporary works of art which also incorporate Japanese artistic and cultural traditions.

Human's relationship with nature and the gods of nature (*kami*), continuity and change, the bitter-sweet awareness of the transience of beauty, life and love (*mono no aware*) and the struggle between and accommodation of old and new, good and bad are recurring themes in Japanese art and literature.

This essay examines how these artistic traditions are expressed through stories, themes, characters and imagery in four of Studio Ghibli films: *Tombstone for Fireflies* directed by Isao Takahata and *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* directed by Hayao Miyazaki.

Note:

As a Western, non-Japanese speaker, I cannot hope to identify all the traditional artistic and literary influences and allusions in the films.

There is not scope in this essay to discuss comprehensively even those I have identified.

Nor have I attempted to demonstrate the reflexive processes by which contemporary Japanese animation and the films of Studio Ghibli are both influenced by other countries' art and literature, particularly film, and in turn influence those.

Introduction

All art is a product of both its history and its time.

Napier (2001) has described anime as "a richly fascinating contemporary Japanese art form that both harks back to traditional Japanese culture and moves forward to the cutting edge of art and media".

Japanese artistic evolution has been driven by internal factors and by the appropriation and adaptation of outside influences initially primarily from China and then later Europe. Indeed it could be argued that the popularity and success of anime, and the manga – comic book stories - from which it derives, resides in its combination of the old and the new, the east and the west.

Wells (1997) suggests that the history of Japanese art is not one of succession but of superimposing new influences on the old and is characterised by the free mixing of indigenous culture with adapted forms. This is certainly true of anime generally and that of Studio Ghibli, particularly the work of that studio's leading Director, Hayao

Miyazaki. He draws on western sources and settings as well as Japanese history and traditions.

This essay discusses a selection of the animated feature films of Studio Ghibli in the context of this aesthetic continuity, adaptation and change.

Studio Ghibli

Hayao Miyazaki, a manga and anime artist, is principal writer, artist and director of Studio Ghibli. Miyazaki's successful translation into anime of his own manga, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds*, in 1984 led to the establishment of Studio Ghibli in 1985 with his friend and collaborator, Isao Takahata.

The studio was established to produce high quality animated feature films rather than TV series or OVAs (original video animation) on which most Japanese anime studios depend for their economic survival. In this it has been wonderfully successful artistically and economically, producing world box office successes that are indeed works of art.

The Tradition

While the films can be appreciated with no prior knowledge of Japanese art and culture, like any works of art they gain from the viewer or reader's awareness of and response to the emotional resonances of cultural allusion in the stories, characters imagery and technique of a work.

Levi (1998) in her exposition of the difficulties in appreciating Japanese anime for American otaku (anime fans), examines Japanese cultural traditions that inform story, meaning and mood in much TV anime.

She includes Shinto and kami (spirit gods of the animate and inanimate world), stories such as Tale of Genji and the aesthetic of *mono no aware* (the sadness of the transience of life and beauty) as continuing cultural influences on this most modern and mass produced of genres.

The traditional artistic, cultural and philosophical influences which I observe as impacting on Studio Ghibli's contemporary anime's themes, motifs and techniques can be summarised as:

- Japan's pictographic culture, including calligraphy and the combination of poetry and painting, in which story, emotion and meaning are conveyed through pictures, images and text.
- Scrolls and screen paintings telling stories and depicting the flow of human activity in the context of a changing natural environment.
- The journey as a basis for narrative
- The animism, anthropomorphism and metamorphosis inherent in Shinto with its 800 myriad gods and spirits.
- Buddhism's concept of the one-ness of all things.
- Humans' relationship with the seasons, landscape, places and nature as a source of aesthetic pleasure and symbolic of change in human life.

- The aesthetic philosophy of mono no aware – the bitter-sweet transience of life, love and beauty.
- Ambivalence deriving from lack of clear cut moral division of the world into good or bad.
- Stylisation rather than naturalism to heighten emotional realism.
- Use of repetition and allusion in words and imagery to trigger emotion
- Kabuki, Noh and Bunraku theatrical stories and conventions
- Androgenous characters from the Japanese onnagata (female impersonator) tradition.
- Strong female role models in Japanese myths and history.
- Popularity of mass produced Ukiyo-e hanga (woodblock prints of the floating world)
- Eclectic accommodation and adaptation of diverse internal and external influences
- The collaboration of artisans in the time consuming production of traditional art works (prints, swords and lacquer work) that don't separate art and craft.

There is not scope in this essay to elaborate on these, but any of the StudioGhibli works could be chosen to exemplify at least some of the elements of continuity with Japanese cultural and artistic traditions I have listed above. In all the films, the visual narration conveys themes of humans' relationship with nature, the struggle between and accommodation of the old and the new, ambivalence derived from an appreciation of the inevitability change and its consequent loss yet its simultaneous possibilities for the future.

Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds (1984), a story of toxic jungles and a world healing after technological catastrophe; *Laputa Castle in the Sky* (1986) from its opening scene of abandoned mines and machinery to its final scene of the great tree island's protective roots hanging in space; a young girl's striving for independence in *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) or the elegiac mood of *Porco Rosso* (1992) all take up these themes.

I have chosen however to focus on four films which are set in Japan itself: *Tombstone for Fireflies* (also known as *Grave of the Fireflies*) (1988), *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), *Princess Mononoke*(1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001).

All four focus on the themes of loss and human's relationship with nature and its spirits in a way that reflects on the history of modern Japan including war and urban development.

In all of these films, the narrative impetus is a journey both real and emotional/psychological undertaken by the young protagonists at a time of stress in their lives. It's a journey that puts them in touch with powerful spirits that enable them to develop responsibility, self reliance and to make sense of their world.

The Films

Tombstone for Fireflies, (1988), differs from the other three anime discussed here in that it is directed by Isao Takahata and based on the semi-autobiographical novel by

Nosaka Akiyuki whose sister died of hunger in second world wartime Japan. Roger Ebert the movie critic has said the film *belongs on any list of the greatest war films ever made* (Ebert 2000).

The story is one of tragedy and loss, imbued with the aesthetic of *mono no aware*. In the opening scene in the railway station Seita relates his own death from starvation, his younger sister Setsuko having already died of hunger after their mother's death from firebombs and their father's disappearance in the war.

Seita's ghost spirit journeys back to relive the events that led to their deaths, culminating in their last lone attempts to survive in a cave by the river.

The spirit motif relates to Shinto kami and the story is reminiscent of Japanese classical theatre. Nosaka said in an interview that *Tombstone for Fireflies* is basically a double suicide story based on the Bunraku tradition (Fukushima 1997). The protagonists in stylised Noh drama, an integral part of Samurai culture, are also spirits of dead people and the stories are imbued with intense sad emotion.

The elegiac mood of *mono no aware* is reinforced by nature imagery in the film that emphasises the theme of impermanence of life. The eponymous fireflies are symbolic of summer and of the brevity of life and beauty. They are simultaneously a counterpoint to and mirror of the firebombs raining down. Takahata creates evocative landscapes and backgrounds in which careful details heighten the emotion. e.g. the scene in which Setsuko buries the dead fireflies and reveals to her brother she knows her mother is dead – a fact he has tried to keep from her.

While the cave may be seen as a sheltering haven, Fukushima (1995) relates it to the tomb culture of pre-Heian Japan and observes that Setsuko dies in the typical burial position with hands folded on her chest. In such an interpretation, the river can be related to Shinto rites of purification.

There are also resonances with the Sun Goddess creation story in which the goddess, after a quarrel with her brother, withdrew into a cave, thereby plunging the world into darkness. (Kennedy 1964)

Even death is ambivalent as the story is not without hope. Just as the Sun Goddess's exit from the cave restored light to the world, Seita's spirit is reunited with his sister's and in the last scene the two of them look out over a peaceful city glowing with lights as bright as fireflies.

The 3 other films discussed here are imaginative works directed by Hayao Miyazaki:

My Neighbour Totoro was released as the second half of a double bill with *Tombstone for Fireflies* in 1998, but its story and mood are quite different.

In *Totoro*, the hope for a brighter future has been realised. This film is a delightful reassuring return from wartime disaster to family life in 1950s Japan.

Two young children, Mei and Satsuki, are coping with the temporary loss of their mother, who is ill in hospital, and the consequent move to a new home to be close to

her. With the support of a loving father, friendly neighbours and the comfort and support of the spirits of the neighbouring forest, they develop independence and resilience to cope with these stresses. At the end of the film they look forward to the safe, if delayed return of their mother.

The film is imbued with benign spirits, the magic and mystery of life and nature. As the children and their father approach the family's new home, they pass Shinto shrines, paddies of rice culture, over a bridge and through the tunnel of trees, to a house on the edge of the forest. With its high pitched roof and finials, the house is reminiscent of a temple - and of Totoro's ears! This "crossing over" motif using similar images is repeated in *Spirited Away*.

The neglected house, overshadowed by the great camphor tree, is haunted by friendly soot spirits who leave when they hear the family's laughter in the bath and know the house has good new owners. The children's father and mother, the old granny and boy, Kanta, their neighbours, all accept without alarm that the house is haunted just as later their father later accepts that Mei has met a totoro. "You probably met the king of this forest," he says, "We should go to the shrine and pay our respects." He also explains that "trees and people used to be good friends. I saw that tree and decided to buy this house."

There is a gentle playful mood in *My Neighbour Totoro* that is expressed both visually and linguistically: The scene in which Mei, Satsuki and Totoro wait for the bus in the rain is one delightful example of the former; the destination signs on the cat bus, and Miyazaki's play on names examples of the latter: Both Mei and Satsuki mean "May" - Mei is a homophone for May in English and Satsuki is the name for the month of May in classical Japanese. "Mei mei" also means little sister in Mandarin Chinese May is also synonymous with Spring, a season of renewal. The word play also indicates Miyazaki's eclectic appropriation of other cultural influences. *My Neighbour Totoro* has inevitably been compared to *Alice in Wonderland*.

The scene in which the totoros dance by the light of the moon, joined by the girls, to make the seeds the girls have planted sprout in the garden is a delightful magical moment. Wells (1997) suggests that the scene is a moment of transcendence: The giant sprouting tree visually echoes the mushroom cloud of the atom bomb but reworks it into a harmless alternative image rooted in the natural world. The fact that the camphor tree is the official tree of many Japanese cities including Hiroshima lends added credence to this interpretation (www.totoro.org). The image therefore can evoke emotional ambiguity - intrinsic to the aesthetic of *mono no aware*.

In the morning the tree has vanished although the seeds are indeed sprouting. "It was a dream, but it wasn't a dream," says Satsuki. This ambiguity permeates the film - does the totoro and its world really exist or is it a figment of the girls' imagination?

The totoro and the cat bus come to the rescue when Mei runs away after the girls learn that their mother's expected return home is delayed. Symbolically and psychologically, the spirits again reassure the stressed girls.

The father's statement to his wife at the end of the film sums up the inner strength that they have all learnt as a result of their experiences: "We've all learnt to cope. This

[your delayed return] will just postpone the enjoyment.” This ambivalence is an expression of *mono no aware* - sadness will heighten pleasure.

The world depicted *My Neighbour Totoro* is one in which wild nature and its spirits, the cultivated landscape and humans all live in harmony with one another. The forests, totoros and Shinto shrines and spirit statues, rice fields and abundant vegetable gardens are all images used to convey this harmonious juxtaposition.

Other images in the film, though, are intimations of the dangers humans pose to nature – a bottle carelessly thrown into a pure stream, electricity pylons overshadowing a row of spirit statues, the sprouting tree in the form of a mushroom cloud.

In *Princess Mononoke*, the clash of humans and nature is played out. This film takes us back to a time before the forests, their wild gods and nature spirits had been reduced to a remnant on the edge of an industrialised, urbanised, intensively cultivated landscape. But the violent clash between nature and humans has already started.

McCarthy (1999) describes it as “an epic movie about ordinary people adrift in confusing times with a core of power and passion rarely seen in modern works of art.”

Set in Muromachi (medieval period) Japan, its story is the journey of Ashitaka, youthful leader heir to a remnant Emishi (Indigenous) clan, to seek reprieve from the death curse put on him by the raging god, *tatari gami*, whom he killed to save his village. “Know my pain and hatred,” says *tatari gami* before he metamorphoses into a giant boar and dies.

Before he leaves, Ashitaka cuts his hair, a gesture that indicates to his people he no longer belongs to the world. His journey takes him to the forests in the land of the west, home to the all-powerful Shishigami, giver of life and death, who may be able to lift the curse.

Ashitaka’s mount and companion on the journey is his red elk, Yakkul. Together they encounter Moro the wolf goddess and her adopted human daughter, San, known as *Princess Mononoke*; Lady Eboshi, director of the Tatara Ba iron works which is producing the Ishibaya, a weapon to destroy the forests; a monk; samurai; boar and ape gods; kodomas (tree spirits) and the great god, shishigami, giver of life and death.

All these characters are participants in the great battle taking place between nature, its gods and spirits on one side and humans, their industrialisation and political structures on the other.

In an ending redolent with *mono no aware* neither humans nor nature are winners, Ashitaka has lifted the curse and found love, but not a permanent life with San. But the shishigami lives, giving hope to the world.

Nature provides the setting and characters of the film. Along with the scenes of the forest as battlefield are images of great beauty – the kodomas leading Ashitaka through the magical forest; plants and flowers sprouting at the feet of shishigami as he

walks; the repetition of the healing/purification image of water at shishigami's pool deep in the forest where both Ashitaka and San are healed from the boar god's curse and Ashtaka is brought back to life.

Ambiguity characterises the film: There is no happy ending, just a precarious balance between worlds, which Ashitaka and San attempt to reconcile through love. There are no completely good or bad characters. Lady Eboshi stole the forest for her iron works and gun making but she is not the evil incarnation of progress. Her ironworks provide employment and companionship for the lepers and outcast women of society who love her for it. Indeed Ashitaka chooses to stay at Tatara Ba while San remains in the forest with the wolves.

The monk, Jiko Bou, helps Ashitaka, but he is an agent for the emperor and the samurai, intent on killing shishigami. The shishigami "is life itself. It has both life and death", says Ashitaka. At night the shishigami metamorphoses into didarabocchi, spirit of death. When Eboshi shoots his head off, his mutilated body kills everything it touches.

Throughout the film, images of the ironworks and the forest are juxtaposed. At the end, both the ironworks and the forest are renewing themselves, each led by two strong but compassionate women, Eboshi and San.

Ashitaka's words sum up the ambivalent mood and message of the film: "That's all right San, you in the forest and me in Tatara Ba. We shall live on together. I will go to see you with Yakkul."

Miyazaki himself wrote "There cannot be a happy ending to the fight between the raging gods and humans. However, even in the middle of hatred and killings there are things worth living for. A wonderful meeting or a beautiful thing can exist" (Miyazaki 1995).

In *Spirited Away*, nature and its gods have been driven back by ever-encroaching urban development. But there is still a bridge to a magical parallel spirit world for a stressed young girl who is moving house and school - if she has the courage to make the journey.

A sulky reluctant Chihiro is driving with her parents to their new home in a housing development. She and the flowers her former classmates have farewelled her with are wilting on the back seat. When her father takes a wrong turn, they end up on an unpaved road. They pass a Shinto gate by a tree, some spirit shrines and come to a dead end at a red entrance gate to a tunnel where a wind pulls them in.

On the other side they cross a dry river bed to discover themselves in a deserted theme park where Chihiro's parents turn into pigs after eating loaded plates of the food mysteriously left in one of the restaurants. Chihiro, now on her own, rushes through the ghost-filled streets in panic to the now flowing river. A boy she has encountered leads her safely over the bridge, avoiding the spirits who are also crossing, to a high gabled building - a huge traditional bathhouse - where, we discover, the gods come to relax.

Chihiro has crossed over to the spirit world where she encounters numerous gods and spirits, where her name is taken away from her and she is renamed “Sen,” and where she must work for the bathhouse owner Yubaba, to save herself from being turned into an animal like her parents.

She experiences amazing and mystical adventures through which she learns courage and independence. Finally, with the help of the boy, Haku, Chihiro regains her name, saves her parents and re-enters the “real” world, having acquired the strength and ability to cope with life’s inevitable changes.

This action and character - packed story reprises many of the themes and images of the other films discussed above: nature; loss; Shinto tradition, with its myriad animistic gods; metamorphosis; strong female characters; and characters’ moral ambivalence (represented by the good and evil twin sisters, yet by the end, Chihiro is calling Yubaba “granny”!).

There are specific similarities with some of the images in *My Neighbour Totoro* e.g. the bridge representing crossing over to the world where spirits dwell and the sootballs in the boiler room.

Water imagery is particularly strong in *Spirited Away*. In one scene, a “stink god” visits the bathhouse, symbol of cleansing and purification, for whom Sen must prepare a bath. No amount of washing removes the disgusting slime until Sen pulls a thorn from his side. This releases an avalanche of debris that pours out of him - the detritus of modern living. Now cleansed, he is revealed as a river god who metamorphoses into a serpent and flies back to his home. The scene is a comment on humans’ pollution of nature.

Haku, too, who also transmutes into a flying dragon in the film, is revealed to be a river god. We are given a clue early on when he helps Chihiro stand up “in the name of the wind and the water in me.”

He is the spirit of the Kohaku River who can’t find his way home because his river is now filled in and covered with apartments. The spell Yubaba put on him is broken when Sen remembers falling into the Kohaku River as a child when she tried to retrieve her pink shoe (reminiscent of the pink shoe found in the river in *Totoro* when Mei is lost). The river god saved her from drowning and carried her safely to shore.

Although he can’t regain his river, Kohaku has his real name back and is free to escape his enslavement to Yubaba, just as Chihiro is now free to return to her world. Chihiro and Kohaku have saved one another through love, friendship and sacrifice.

Loss and retrieval of names play an important part in the story. “Words are our will, ourselves and our power,” says Miyazaki (*Spirited Away* Production Information) Osmond (1998) speculates that Miyazaki borrowed the naming motif from Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea books. But it may also relate to the Japanese tradition in which the upper classes changed their names according to life’s changes and circumstances – they had birth names, adolescent names, coming of age names and head of family names. This adaptation and accommodation of imagination, tradition and outside influences is characteristic of Miyazaki’s work.

Conclusion

Miyazaki himself explains his general intent in *Spirited Away*: “We are often not aware of the richness and uniqueness of our cultural heritage – from stories, traditions, rites, designs and tales of the gods. Surrounded by high technology and its flimsy devices, children are more and more losing their roots. We must inform them of the richness of our traditions” (*Spirited Away* Production Information)

His comments apply to other films of Studio Ghibli and certainly to those discussed here. They exhibit continuity with the past and the transformation of artistic tradition into contemporary works of art that are relevant and meaningful.

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